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A Last Look at The Gambia

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Is there something about a river that soothes the soul? Does moving water nurture a meditative mind, inducing one, in Dylan's words, to sit back and watch the river flow? How else to explain the imperturbability of the Gambian?

The Gambia isn't a nation, it's just a riparian enclave whose borders are a figment of the British imagination. Yet Gambians are plainly unlike their Senegalese neighbors in ways unattributable to their different colonial backgrounds.

I attended a soccer game in Ziguinchor with a Gambian friend who extolled the way that southern Senegalese town supported its club. Gambian fans never root for their teams with such zeal, he complained. The town did seem to have football fever. People sported green caps with "Allez Casa" on them, and the same exhortation was scrawled on buildings and vehicles. An hour before game time, despite the broiling sun, the field was surrounded by a mass of humanity, including a solid line along the top of the stadium walls. Many of these fence sitters held leafy branches as a substitute for pennants to wave their heroes to victory.

Yet there is something to be said for detachment if the conclusion of the game was a corollary to such fan enthusiasm. Casa lost 3-2 in a mild upset. The winners, instead of leaping about in excitement, clustered in the middle of the field with the referees. A squad of helmeted policemen encircled them and the group trotted off the field under a shower of stones. The visitors had to be loaded into a police wagon and driven through the belligerent crowd to safety. The crowd's reaction was routine, I was told; indeed, my friend had predicted it as soon as the game started to go against Casa. No wonder they were league champions last year. They have a significant home field advantage.

Another Gambian oddity is the frequency of the epithet "toubab" that you were wondering about. The etymology of the word is uncertain, but it is used by all the peoples of the Senegambian region to refer to a white man, a Westerner, or in some cases an African who has adopted Western ways. One hears it upon occasion in Senegal; one hears it all the time in The Gambia. In Banjul, small children chant it, women lilt it, street toughs mutter it. Only in the last case is it

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute, studying colonial influences on West African nations. He has just concluded research on education in Senegal and The Gambia.

intended as an insult. I am at a loss to explain its popularity.

I heard another distinction made about Gambians by a European disc jockey who traveled quite a bit in West Africa. Like my friend at the soccer game, the deejay complained about the Gambians' lack of enthusiasm. He said that although the country has good bands, people don't get as excited by the music as in, for example, Nigeria.

Unexcitable—that's the word for Gambians. Their favorite expression is "no problem." If you want something done, it's "no problem"; whether it gets done or not is another matter. Break down in a taxi in the middle of nowhere and the driver shrugs, "No problem." That doesn't mean you won't be sitting there for hours. Petty annoyances, big frustrations and overwhelming adversity are all "no problem."

This attitude makes Gambians easy to govern. How many capital cities can go for months without electricity with hardly a peep from the populace? Banjul power supplies have long been erratic, but about a month after my arrival two of the three generators broke down and much of the city was blacked out for three months. The government provided little explanation or information about the power cuts. Areas outside the city where the wealthier people live received some hours of electricity throughout the period. Anywhere else, I would have expected riots. I heard rumors about a protest once, but apparently not enough people were interested.

On the other hand, the government seems to know when not to push too hard. An edict banning the use of charcoal was repeatedly deferred to give people time to get used to the idea. As of July 1, it is illegal to produce charcoal, but dealers have until September to get rid of their stocks. From what I've heard, I don't think the last charcoal fire will be lit for many years to come. My landlord, Uncle Joe, bought 14 bags to store in back of the guest house. Knowing Uncle Joe, I don't think it will all go for his personal use; not if the price goes up in September.

The Gambia would be a good area for one of the Institute's Forest and Man fellows to study. The deforestation that prompted the charcoal ban has been severe. If I recall the figures correctly, the country was 65 percent forested 30 years ago; today, only 8 percent of the land is forested. The price of charcoal has gone up from 17 bututs (9 cents) for 1,000 grams in May 1979 to 20 bututs in May of this year, according to official statistics. In the same period, the price of 500 grams of kerosene has risen from 45 bututs to 61 bututs.

The Gambian government claims the country had only a 5 percent inflation rate in 1979. Finding that hard to believe, I took down some average retail commodity prices compiled by the national statistics bureau for May of this year and compared them with the same list from a year before. Here are the prices for Banjul and for Georgetown, about 150 miles upriver. Figures in parentheses next to the 1980 prices show the percentage change. Prices are in dalasis and bututs: 100 bututs to the dalasi, which is worth about 58 cents. Measured units are 500 grams unless otherwise noted.

Item.	May 1979		May 1980	
	Banjul	G'town	Banjul	G'town
imported rice	.35	.36	.35 (0)	.36 (0)
bread	.53	.63	.58 (9.4)	.79 (25.4)
imported onions	.65	.83	.78 (20)	1.25 (50.6)
groundnuts	.74	.42	.70 (-5.4)	.48 (14.3)
mango	.17	.31	.18 (5.9)	.36 (16)
beef	1.37	1.10	1.38 (0.7)	1.10 (0)
palm oil	1.49	1.88	1.48 (-0.7)	1.76 (-6.4)
sugar	.50	.50	.74 (48)	.84 (68)
cloth (one meter)	1.64	1.37	1.50 (-8.5)	1.50 (9.5)
transistor radio	65.00	70.00	70.00 (7.7)	75.00 (7.1)
cinema ticket	1.00	.75	1.00 (0)	.75 (0)
tailoring	4.00	3.50	5.00 (25)	3.50 (0)

Government statistics are known to have some inexplicable variations, but if these figures are accepted as representative it is difficult to imagine how the government came up with its 5 percent inflation figure. Adding fuel to such skepticism, the government in July announced an increase in the minimum wage from 3.50 to 4.50 dalasis a day to ease inflation's effect on low-income workers. The government's 1980/81 budget calls for higher duties on beer and petroleum fuels, substantial hikes in telephone and postal charges and the introduction of a road tax.

In its budget message, the government said the level of employment had risen because of construction activity, but it didn't give an unemployment figure. The country's economy was hurt in 1979 by the worst peanut crop in a dozen years. Peanuts and peanut products account for more than 90 percent of The Gambia's exports. The trade deficit increased from D127 million in 1978/79 to about D190 million in the fiscal year just concluded. Another crimp in the economy was made by a 4.2 percent drop in the number of tourists last year.

I found out how shaky the country's financial situation is when I closed out my bank account in preparation for my departure to Sierra Leone. My bank wouldn't give me the full amount (about \$500) in British pounds because the country's reserves are so low, even though the dalasi is officially tied to the pound.

It looks like things are going to get worse. The poor peanut crop last year was blamed on a long dry spell in July and August, which stunted plant growth, and unseasonable rains in November, which spoiled many of the peanuts. This year rain came early to parts of The Gambia and some farmers planted in May. The skies dried up in June and July and the young plants died. Rainfall for the growing season from May 1 to July 10 was 47 percent of normal on a countrywide average.

Other farmers held off planting in May and might be able to bring in a good crop if the rains begin to fall with regularity. However, some families have been forced to eat their seed nuts because of inefficient distribution of emergency food aid. The government reported delivery of shipments of American wheat to the provinces, but one person I know who lives next to a government food warehouse in a remote area said no grain has arrived there.

With the deepening world recession, the tourist trade will probably drop off more this year, while inflation increases the amount of money flowing out of the country for imports. How long can the construction boom go on under these conditions, and when that collapses what will happen to the employment level?

There are already signs that the evils of urban unemployment are seeping into The Gambia. Just before I left I heard of four recent robbery attempts in Banjul, which not too long ago was almost as safe and peaceful as an upcountry village. Only two of the crimes were successful and in only one was the victim injured. The targets were all foreigners. One person I talked with suggested that the perpetrators are young men who have returned to the country after being unable to find or keep jobs in Europe or America and are resentful about it.

The man who must try to find solutions to these problems is President ~~Sard~~ Jawara, and he is another example of the Gambian difference. Jawara is not a charismatic leader like so many of the African rulers who led their countries to independence. He doesn't harangue his populace over the radio the way President Sekou Touré of Guinea does. Nor does he try to impress the citizenry with his erudition like Senegal's Leopold Senghor. Jawara is said to be a gentle man with good intentions but not a strong leader. The charcoal ban and a strict conservation law to protect The Gambia's dwindling wildlife are evidence of the former; repeated instances of corruption by government officials who escape punishment are indications of the latter.

The president appears to have a firm hold on his job. I'm told the farmers dislike the government but trust Jawara completely. Of course, it doesn't hurt when officials of his Progressive People's Party distributing American food aid say it's a gift from the president.

At 56, Jawara is one of the younger of the first generation of African leaders, but he suffered a stroke a few years ago and I've been told he is absent-minded. Barring health problems, he should retain his office after the 1982 elections. In his favor are a democratic system that offers no threat to the PPP's overwhelming popular support, a free press that can't compete with the government-controlled radio and information service and, best of all, the absence of a military that might breed greedy generals or a restless master sergeant.

With Jawara at the helm, The Gambia should drift along making progress when conditions are good and staying upright even when times are troubled. The average Gambian seems content to sit on deck and gaze at the muddy water below.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn