

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-29

c/o Tourist Mail  
U.S. Embassy  
01 BP 1712  
Abidjan, Ivory Coast  
March 29, 1981

In Search of a Middle Class

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Dear Peter,

I went hunting last weekend for what seems to me to be a rare species, the classicus-medius Africanus ruralis, or middle-class rural African. Africa is a land of extremes, and this is evident in its principal fauna, which appears to be divided into two groups, the rich and the poor, each with a subspecies, the very rich and the very poor.

African cities, however, do seem to have spawned a new breed, the classicus-medius Africanus urbanis. Where and how this urban middle-class evolved, I don't know. Since, by definition, interbreeding between the rich and the poor species is impossible, the middle-class African must be a mutation of one or the other, though it seems to share some of the characteristics of both. One specimen I have examined closely is a hairdresser, a trade he learned by becoming an apprentice after leaving school at 14. He originated in Benin, about 375 miles to the east, migrating here in 1975. He is married to an Ivorian female of the species, who is going to school to learn to be a dressmaker. They live in a six-room apartment in Abidjan, for which they pay \$260 a month, plus utilities. He earns about \$1,000 a month as a manager of a beauty salon. He spends most of his free time watching a black-and-white television set that he bought in 1979 for \$345. He especially likes to watch European club football matches. He doesn't own a car or motorcycle, and commutes to work by bus. He hopes to open a shop of his own someday, but utters the distinctive cry of the middle-class species, a complaint about not being able to save any money.

This species appears fairly numerous in Abidjan and can be observed in other African cities. I wondered whether it has a rural cousin with similar, but distinguishable, traits. Teachers are a genus of the species found in small towns and villages, but they are usually transient and show signs of being displaced members of the urban stock. I wanted to find out if other types exist that are more closely associated with the region they occupy. The Ivory Coast seemed to be a good locale in which to search, since the World Bank has found indications of ample dispersion of the country's wealth.

Hunting the rural African middle-class is not as arduous as

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tracking leopards or rhinoceroses, but it can be dangerous. My journey began in the front seat of a Peugeot 504 station wagon, the kind of car that serves as fast transit between cities in every West African country I've visited. The attitudes of drivers and passengers in these vehicles toward the police and soldiers at control points along the road reveals much about a country's political state. In the Ivory Coast, travelers are wary of the men in uniform. For the passage out of Abidjan, the driver made me and my companion in the front seat fasten the safety strap around us. The front seat passengers observed the same precaution entering the city on my return. Apparently, the men in uniform at the outskirts of town are sticklers about the law.

In other countries I've visited, the police don't have so much respect. At road barriers in Sierra Leone, drivers pay them off almost automatically, like a toll. The vehicle and its occupants may be in compliance with the law, but if payment is not made the police may take hours carrying out their inspection. Since the payments have to be made anyway, drivers have little respect for the law. Vehicles are often in unsafe condition and overloaded, resulting in frequent accidents and horrendous death tolls. Twenty-six people were crushed in one pick-up that was rammed by a truck in Sierra Leone last year.

The greater strictness of the Ivory Coast police avoids such traffic holocausts and diminishes the risk of accident from poor car maintenance. Little can be done to protect the passengers from the drivers, who throughout West Africa show a malign indifference to their and others' safety. I wished the roads in the Ivory Coast weren't as good as they are. A few deep pot-holes in the asphalt or, better yet, the corrugation of an unpaved laterite road would slow our driver down. We were traveling at night, which is especially risky because of the number of heavy trucks on the road. We passed two accidents, but ran into a third. Two trucks had collided and lay overturned in the road. We bounced off one of the trucks and came to a halt in the brush. We were doubly fortunate in that no one was hurt and our car was put out of commission. I finished the trip in the back of a slow bus.

My journey ended in Daloa, the Ivory Coast's third largest city, with 60,000 inhabitants in 1975. It is in the west-central part of the country, a coffee- and cocoa-growing area. A coffee mill, about eight stories high, towers over the city. Most of the buildings are concrete bungalows with corrugated zinc roofs, stained yellow-brown from the clouds of laterite dust raised by every passing vehicle on the unpaved side roads. Many of the houses have television antennas. Drab houses furnished with creature comforts—sign of a colony of the middle-class? Something is different about the place, for Daloa is the quietest, indeed the dullest, African town I've visited. The streets I walked at night were practically empty, whereas in most African towns the outdoors after dark is full of people who don't have enough money to do anything more than walk and talk and enjoy the cool air. Do the Daloans spend the night drinking? Apparently not, for I saw few bars, and the one I entered wasn't crowded. I was told of three nightclubs in town; the one I went to was almost empty on two consecutive nights. It seemed the Daloans were all home watching TV.

During the day as well, the city looked different from the other West African towns I've seen. It had a workmanlike grime to it, rather than the litter-and-garbage filth of poverty. Tractor-trailers roared through the streets, bulldozers and other heavy construction equipment pawed at pieces of earth, workyards hummed with the sound of small motors. The sidewalks weren't cluttered with street vendors' stalls, all selling the same cheap goods, as in so many West African cities. Perhaps Dalaoans don't need to scrounge a living in this way, nor have to buy such inferior products. The places to buy one's daily needs are the Pac and Chaine Avion shops. These are grocery store chains that offer basically the same goods at the same prices. Pac is a public company set up by the government; Chaine Avion is run by a private French trading firm. They have outlets all over the country, selling canned food, dairy products, household items, cosmetics, hardware, dry goods and beverages, including wine, beer and liquors. In Dalao, the two chains seem to have a store on every alternate block, reminding me of 7-Eleven and Cumberland Farm stores back in Connecticut. Very middle-class.

Such signs of an existence different from what I've been used to seeing in West Africa were exactly what I was looking for, but they didn't extend to the villages around Dalao. I was surprised by how poor the villages looked. Most of the houses were mud-and-wattle with thatched roofs, the weakest type of earthen home. I expected to see more metal roofs. In The Gambia, almost every village has at least one or two houses with such covering, and in many communities only the homes of the poorest people are thatched. Although they make buildings hotter, they last far longer than palm leaves or dry grass. In the Ivory Coast, cooler and rainier than The Gambia, they would seem to make sense, but few homes in the villages I visited had them.

I had hoped to find some indication that enough money was coming into the villages to be spent on extras—an addition to a house, a bit of ornamentation, a little finery in someone's dress, a few motorbikes. I talked briefly with two cocoa farmers in one village. They had no complaints about their livelihoods and said they were getting along fine, but they were dressed as simply as the other villagers. I didn't get a chance to visit their homes, but I didn't see any houses different from the usual one- or two-room structures that most villagers live in. I saw no sign that they had proceeded beyond the first three steps of materialism in the Third World, the acquisition of a watch, a transistor radio and a bicycle.

I talked with a missionary who has been in the Ivory Coast for twelve years and in Dalao for two. He thinks the government has done little to improve village life. None of the villages around Dalao have a dispensary or other medical facility, he said. The missionary believes the Ivory Coast displays a gross disparity in levels of wealth. He said the government encouraged its wealthy citizens to contribute to the development of their home areas. Even village schools were paid for by successful native sons, usually working in Abidjan.

I accompanied him on a visit to two villages. The first looked frightfully poor. Many huts were in disrepair. One large, cement-brick house was being built in the middle of the village. The owner was a mason, who benefited from the leftover

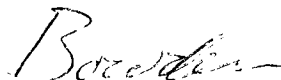
materials as well as the skills of his trade. The villagers, especially the children, were dressed in rags. They seemed healthy for the most part. Malnutrition isn't a problem here because the forest provides a well-balanced diet year round. We visited one middle-aged man who was sick. He had stubbed his toe on a rock a few days before and the wound had apparently become infected, for he was feverish. A petty point, but it contributed to my impression that life in the village wasn't pleasant.

In another village only a few miles up the road, I got a different impression. The homes looked bigger, the people were better dressed. Several villagers, including some children, bought religious pamphlets from the missionary for a few cents each, whereas in the first village only one pamphlet had been sold. I asked an Ivorian lay preacher in our group the reason for the difference. He said the young people of the first village had gone off to find work in the cities, and the elders who remained preferred to stick to the old ways. In the second village, some of the young people had returned, bringing with them modern ways, which the old people had accepted. The two age groups were in harmony over the relative benefits of old and new.

The Ivorian echoed what the missionary had told me about rural development depending on private citizens. He said villages only got electricity when an inhabitant paid for the extension of the power lines. This personal approach to development reaches its zenith at Yamoussoukro. Still referred to as President Felix Houphouet-Boigny's home village, it is the country's seventh largest town, or was in 1975 with 37,000 people. Growing at a 16 percent annual rate over the ten years up to that time, by far the fastest growth of any city in the country, Yamoussoukro may have moved up a notch or two already. The town's popularity is due to its private endowment by the president. It has modern stores, handsome public buildings, rows of modern houses and is ablaze with lights at night. The new housing and the electricity have been extended to nearby villages. All of this development is attributed to the largesse of Houphouet-Boigny. His wealth and generosity are said to be so great that upon occasion he has made loans to the government.

Is this kind of individual development project the way the Ivory Coast shares its wealth? Is Yamoussoukro the stamping-ground of the Ivorian middle-class villager? To find out the answers to these questions, I plan to interview a World Bank official who has spent several years in this country. It's best to have the advice of an expert when one goes hunting for a rare species.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn