

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-3

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P.O. Box 319
Banjul, The Gambia
February 28, 1980

The Failing System

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Dear Peter,

In the beginning two or three times a day, and still almost daily when I walk in the narrow residential streets of Banjul, a young man or group of young men slumped against a compound wall, slightly shaded from the sun, calls me over. The first question is almost always the same, usually phrased as "From where?". When I answer that I'm from the United States, the faces perk with a mixture of emotions: surprise, because most of the white people here are British expatriates or Scandinavian tourists; friendliness, because the Gambians are warm and hospitable; respect, because the U.S. is thought of as a rich and powerful land of opportunity, and envy, for the same reason. These mingled feelings are expressed in a smile of recognition and a knowing voice. "Ah, America."

If the conversation lasts more than a few moments, my interlocutor often will tell of some connection with the States, usually either a relative attending school in our country or his own plans to study there. I have a young friend, Karamou Sonko, a Mandinka youth from a village ninety miles upriver, intelligent and a gifted writer, who is in the fifth form (what we would call the senior class) of The Gambia's most prestigious secondary school, St. Augustine's High School. His situation is illustrative, if perhaps not typical, of the problems facing The Gambia's educated young people. He has written to several schools in the U.S. asking for information on entrance requirements and financial aid, schools ranging in caliber from Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach to Yale University. As yet, he has been deterred from following up on the schools' replies by their \$15 to \$25 application fees.

Karamou has an uncle, not many years older, who had intended to go to a school in Florida to learn aircraft maintenance, but his father died shortly before he was to leave and the family's fortune shrank too much to send him. He is now a storeroom clerk for a fishing company in Banjul. Another young uncle of Karamou's is luckier. His father is still alive and relatively well-off, and he hopes to leave for Boggs Academy in Georgia next month. He left high school in 1973. It has taken this long to get everything arranged.

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America more than anything else is the land of educational opportunity for Gambians. Its democratic academic offerings, from two-year schools and Negro colleges to the Ivy League and huge state universities, give almost everyone a chance, and its wealth provides not only a multitude of scholarships but boundless employment to work one's way through school, the Gambians believe. The visa process puts an end to such optimism, however. About sixty percent of the Gambians seeking a student visa to the U.S. are rejected because of inadequate financial backing, a consular attaché told me. Last year eighty-eight Gambians received student visas. The attaché estimated that of those who go, 50 percent will return after a four-year undergraduate program, 33 percent will stay longer to get a master's, about 6 to 10 percent will remain up to ten years for higher degrees and only between 1 and 5 percent will stay longer, either because they are too highly skilled for The Gambia, they marry, or they violate their visas and take a job. Even those few will return within twenty years, he added, because they "don't want to be buried in a foreign country."

Readjusting to their homeland is a difficult process, however. A 29-year-old man I met who spent four years in the U.S. and received a master's in journalism from Stanford, said it took him several months to get used to the backwardness of his country, and even now, in his speech, his collection of jazz albums, his leisure pursuits, the traces of American culture are deep in him. He talks of going back for his doctorate in a year.

He is a lucky one. Most Gambians will never make it abroad. The heart-wrenching faith they have in the U.S. is typified by a student, no more than 14, I came upon in the gymnasium of Gambia High School, the other prestigious private secondary school here. He was meticulously copying a schoolmate's letter to a college admission office requesting financial aid. The penmanship of sample and copy was exemplary, but the content was quite ungrammatical.

This unfounded optimism is symbolic of the entire school system. The objective for education set down in 1975 in the government's Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development cannot be faulted:

The primary aim of education is to create in the shortest possible time, and with the available resources, a stock of trained manpower which will be capable of serving the socio-economic needs of the country. First consideration will, therefore, be given to those factors which make education more meaningful to the whole community, the vast majority of which is rural or agricultural.

Unfortunately, viewing the school system as the five-year period of the plan comes to a close, I would say that the structural changes necessary to accomplish the stated goal have not been made or even attempted. The school system remains oriented to academic achievement and promotion to higher levels of education, and only a fraction of those who enter primary school make it to

high school. Even for those fortunate few, expectations usually exceed opportunities. For the others, frustration probably outweighs whatever small benefits they may gain from the imperfect knowledge they acquire at school. The system not only fails to meet the needs of society, it doesn't even replenish itself. Primary school enrollment increased from 32,196 in 1978/79 to 37,644 in 1979/80. At the accepted teacher-student ratio of 1:30, that increase requires the addition of about 180 more teachers, yet the teacher-training program at Gambia College produces only about 50 graduates a year. At the primary level, shortfalls are filled by unqualified teachers, which often means their knowledge of English, math and science is little better than their students'.

The Gambian educational structure replicates the British model, but two English expatriates involved in the system told me it is a model their country abandoned as unworkable some time ago. It works on the principle that students should be sorted at fixed intervals in their education, rather than being allowed to progress in their own way at their own speed as is the basic tenet in the U.S. As I explained in the last letter, students enter a six-year primary school at age 8, at the end of which they take the Common Entrance Examination to determine if their education should continue. Approximately the top 12 percent are admitted to high school. Another 29 percent go to secondary technical schools which in theory are vocational facilities designed to give students the skills needed by commerce and industry, but I am told they do not have the materials or trained manpower to perform this function nor are the students inclined to accept what they consider the inferior status of a tradesman or farmer. Once embarked on a secondary scholastic career, a student's objective is to reach the post-secondary level, and the system provides him every opportunity. At the end of the first year of secondary technical school, the younger students may again take the CEE to try to get into high school, and at the end of the fourth form students with the best grades can be admitted to a high school's third form.

High school intensifies this concept of education as a feat rather than a process. Success is measured not by grades or courses but by another sorting mechanism, more refined than the CEE, the Joint Examinations for the School Certificate and General Certificate of Education, ordinary level and advanced level. As one young Canadian teacher at St. Augustine's complained to me, the entire curriculum in the five-year (six for advanced students) program is geared to the GCE. When I attended her class, she was teaching her students to write a letter in the single style accepted by the West African Examinations Council, the style which will be required in the 45-minute letter-writing section on the compulsory English language GCE (O level) examination almost five years away for them.

The examinations do have some merit. The West African Examinations Council which administers them is about the only remnant of the British West African institutions established by colonial administrations and so forms a slender thread for that unity of African nations which I think is so important. The council also keeps the curriculum pertinent to African needs.

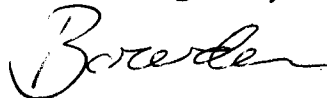
Shakespeare is still required reading and much emphasized on the tests, but apparently the students like the Bard and are willing to struggle through the vocabulary, and requirements like this give the WAEC examinations international recognition, so good marks on the GCE entitle a student to acceptance at a British university. The problem is that the number of Gambian students receiving high grades on the test is depressingly low, and almost nil in the sciences and math. This is at least partially due, especially in the sciences, to a shortage of materials. Almost no laboratory work can be done in the schools because they don't have the money to spend on supplies. The acute shortage of Gambians qualified to teach science and math, and the resulting dependence on expatriates, probably also are factors. From my observations, limited to a few days in three of the seven high schools, the quality of instruction by expatriates is mediocre, tainted by inadequate training, as seemed to be the case with a Peace Corps science teacher whose class I attended, unrealistic expectations of students' abilities, understandable in a teacher raised and trained in a more sophisticated society, or a condescending attitude, much in evidence at exclusive St. Augustine's where almost all of the staff are foreigners. The best teacher I saw of the fifteen whose classes I attended was a Gambian biology teacher. The quality of the three other Gambians I viewed seemed neither much above nor below that of the expatriates.

Another complaint I heard about the GCE is that its uniformity conditions students to memorize and not to think, to accept and not to question. An extreme example of this was the fifth-form African history class I attended, taught by an intelligent but undedicated Ghanaian, whose students had persuaded him to read his lectures slowly enough that they could copy them in their notebooks, even though they have textbooks they can study.

To me, this class not only represents the emphasis on test results instead of learning, which defeats the purpose of education, but also reveals the arrogance and complacency which this system breeds in its students. The government has called for the improvement of the primary-school teaching corps and a revised curriculum to make education more valuable for those children who never get to secondary school, but as long as the system is geared to the advancement of the best students, they will continue to have their eyes set on the United States, or anywhere else they can get university training, and will continue to move further and further from their homes and the people their education is supposed to help. Education has two important functions for society: to provide society with the trained manpower it needs to grow, but also to bind its members together so it remains strong. I think the present system fails completely in the latter function. I think it should be changed so it is plugged back into the community at every level, instead of being a conduit for the removal of the talented and fortunate and a barrier causing a rising pool of frustration for the rest.

I will have more to say on this subject in a later letter.

Best regards,



Bowden Quinn