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BSQ-4

Mean Streets

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Dear Peter,

Nobody speaks worse of Africans than another African. To hear my Gambian friends describe it, I was taking my life into my hands visiting Dakar. They told me not to go out at night, not to trust any Senegalese no matter how friendly he seemed, above all, not to follow anyone who offered to guide me somewhere or to take me to a restaurant, club or his home. The Gambians told me macabre tales of men who collected human skulls which enabled them to find diamonds in the deserts of Mali. Unwary strangers who fell into their hands were never heard from again. I discounted this last dire warning as an example of modern African mythology, until I read several news items from Dakar about the arrests of men charged with murder and the possession of human heads. Apparently, the efficacy of skulls in recovering diamonds is a well credited myth.

It was therefore with some mixed emotions that I went to Dakar two weeks ago. I came back having lost neither my head nor my heart to the city. It is certainly a splendid metropolis when compared with tiny Banjul, where the tallest building is only five stories high. The skyline of Dakar viewed from the island of Gorée off the eastern shore, tall white buildings rising above the trees, with the waves of the Atlantic Ocean crashing at their feet, is probably one of the prettier sights along the West African coast. The difference between Banjul and Dakar, in size and in style, is reflected in the cities' taxis. Here, the cabs are unmarked, and the rides are shared. The route may be circuitous, as the driver takes on and lets off other passengers, but the fare for going anywhere in town is 25 bututs, or about 15 cents. In Dakar, the taxis are painted yellow and black and are fitted with meters, so there is no combining rides. The fare starts at 60 CFA francs (30 cents) and mounts quickly. I paid between \$1.50 and \$3.50 every time I rode in one. There is one similarity with Banjul, however: if the driver knows he has a tourist as a passenger, the ride may still be circuitous.

Dakar is like a made-up woman, beautiful from afar, but whose disfigurements and ugliness show through on closer inspection. It has long lovely beaches, with sandy cliffs overlooking clear green water and foaming surf, but the sand is littered

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with human excrement and huge open sewers drain the filth of the city's one million residents into the sea. The broad downtown avenues are lined with smart shops and canopied by trees. Stylishly dressed persons, black and white, crowd the sidewalks. Many people in The Gambia are scornful of the number of French expatriates in Dakar. They feel it shows that Senegal is still dependent on its former colonial master; one friend told me he was incredulous when told that the Senegalese have a French cabinet officer. However, I fail to see how monochromism in government or economy makes The Gambia more independent when it too has enormous trade deficits and relies upon outside aid for its development. I found Dakar's multiracialism reassuring, much more so than the guards with rifles and automatic weapons posted outside government buildings and on many street corners, and I look forward to the day when I can walk around Banjul, as I did even in the all-black sections of Dakar, without hearing the usually lighthearted but persistent refrain, "Toubab, toubab." (White man, white man.) However, it is much more difficult for an outsider to get a glimpse of Dakar society than Banjul's. Here, as I have related, I rarely go out without having some stranger strike up a conversation. Some want money, but many just want to talk. In Dakar, the only people one is accosted by are those who make at least part of their living at it. These people always have either golden bracelets or pebble necklaces to give you, which they insist is a gift. If you tell them you don't want it they will stick the bracelet in your pocket or loop the necklace over your arm. Then they ask where you're staying and where you come from. Inevitably, they have visited or have a relative living in your country. Then they ask for a little money to buy food or a drink. It is only after you have convinced them with many repetitions that you aren't going to give them anything that they petulantly snatch back their gift and stalk away. I had this scene repeated for me, as if scripted, at least half a dozen times, by youngsters who seemed to range in age from twelve to their early twenties. One older man gave me a more sophisticated, and more successful, version. He gave me a necklace and some bracelets, and invoked Allah to witness that we were brothers under the skin. When I wouldn't give him more than 300 francs for dinner, he politely took back the bracelets, shook my hand and went off into the night. I suppose that left us as half brothers.

These professional beggars are as numerous as leeches in a swamp and just as difficult to pry off. However, they are not the worst element of Dakar society I encountered in a week's visit. The warnings I was given about being on my guard at all times were well taken. I was the target of at least one robbery attempt. (Another mild assault may just have been an expression of ill-will.) Just before sunset on a crowded sidewalk in the heart of the fashionable downtown area, a number of youths converged on me and tried to divest me of my camera. Though it was easy to shake them off, an American I met told me of an elderly business partner of his who had his handbag lifted in just that way in the middle of the day on a crowded street. According to

West Africa magazine, such crime in the cities has "grown alarmingly" in the last few years, and is accompanied by corruption at every level in the government. The state marketing company has had almost a billion CFA francs siphoned off by employees, officials revealed last year. Still, I saw petite French housewives walking alone through the teeming marketplaces with purses in their hands, so one apparently doesn't need an armed guard to live there. The expatriates obviously have found a modus vivendi. On my last day in town a young Frenchman on his way to Bamako and I puzzled over what enables the beggars, crooks and taxi drivers to distinguish visitors from inhabitants, but we didn't come up with an answer.

In some ways, Dakar seemed like a city suffering not the pangs of development but the debility of age. Senegal is the oldest French colony in Africa, and the inhabitants of Dakar and the other principal cities have had the rights of French nationals since 1916 and always enjoyed a favored status in their colonial rulers' eyes. They were exempt, for example, from the indigenat, a harsh judicial doctrine of summary conviction and punishment which many French administrators used not only as a weapon to dispel the slightest resistance to French authority but also as a means to secure cheap labor for the government and for private French companies. It was many years before the African intelligentsia, pampered by their acceptance in and of French society, bestirred themselves in the legislative assemblies they had participated in since the mid-nineteenth century to remove the burden from the shoulders of their countrymen.

In effect, the French used a divide-and-conquer system to rule their colonies with a minimum of expenditure, which was the primary goal of every colonial regime. This practice was especially evident in the school system the French developed for their West African colonies. In the words of one governor-general, the French educational policy was "instruire la masse et degager l'elite" (to instruct the masses and to release the elite). This resulted in essentially two school systems, one for bright students who were co-opted into French society, and another for the majority of students who were trained to fill those subservient posts which had to be filled by Africans if costs were to be kept down. "Thus the French educated clerks and trained soldiers," in the words of one modern historian. However, even the British admired the efficiency of the system. Lord Hailey, in his ponderous study, An African Survey, comparing the French system in West Africa to that of the British, said it had "a greater precision of objective and unity of method." He summarized the characteristic features of French educational policy as: the exclusive use of French as the teaching language, coordination of advanced educational opportunities with the demand for highly trained workers, a strong emphasis on vocational training and the adoption of the curricula and examination standards used in France. The emphasis on vocational training and the policy of limiting educational opportunity to the needs of the French administration and commercial interests would certainly prevent the rising tide

of frustration of students with too much education and too few opportunities, which I spoke of in my last letter, but it increases the separation between the most talented members of society and those who would most benefit from their skills. An example of this occurred in 1977 when high school and university students boycotted classes in a gesture of solidarity with students of the university's school of science who protested a government attempt to make them sign an agreement to serve ten years in the public service at the end of their studies. The government reacted harshly, claiming student strikes were illegal. Students were arrested, some were forced into the army, others prevented from resuming classes. One would have thought that President Leopold Senghor would have shown more sympathy. In 1934 he was one of several elite students and recent graduates who signed a political letter which, among other educational demands, called for the "freedom for scholarship holders to choose their own careers...."

Senghor is still having problems with the schools. In a speech at the end of January, he claimed that his political adversaries were preparing "to take over power by using political violence" and said that the opposition was using students and teachers to foment trouble. Earlier that month a child was killed during student riots in Zinguinchor, the major city in the Casamance region of Senegal, which lies to the south of The Gambia and has long felt neglected by the government in Dakar. The French press said the students were demonstrating against malpractices by a school principal, but the Senegalese minister of information denied that report. He attributed the disturbances, which included a fire at a hotel in the city, to vandals instigated by a citizen of nearby Guinea-Bissau.

Senegal is in serious trouble economically and politically, according to the West African press and European observers. In 1976 the country returned to a limited multi-party democracy, but the reforms have failed to satisfy opponents of the ruling party. For one thing, the number of opposition parties is restricted to four, and each was forced to accept a label imposed by the government identifying them on the political spectrum from conservative to Marxist-Leninist. Some opposition leaders refused to accept these labels and kept their political parties unofficial. At least two of these unofficial parties appear to be stronger than the official ones. Also in 1976 Senghor changed the laws so he could, in effect, pick his successor. Some observers expected him to resign before his present five-year term expires in 1983, when he will be 76.

Another important change in Senegalese politics is the split which has developed between Senghor's ruling Parti Socialiste and the powerful Mourides, a Muslim sect which had been a strong supporter of the president. These Muslim brotherhoods are a stronger force in Senegalese society than tribal allegiances, and Senghor's ability to cooperate with the previous khalif of the Mourides has been an important factor in his control over the Senegalese electorate over the last twenty years. The present khalif appears less sympathetic to Senghor's

policies and some members of his family oppose the government. Some of the khalif's relatives are associated with opposition parties; another caused a stir by calling for an Islamic republic. There hasn't appeared yet an irreparable rupture between the marabouts (holy men) and Senghor's administration. In the last election, the Mouride leadership called for its followers to abstain from voting, and Senghor still won a commanding majority even in the centers of the Mouride brotherhood.

However, a rift between the religious leaders and the ruling elite may represent the first major change in Senegalese society since the expansion of the French colonialists from their commercial centers on the coast in the second half of the nineteenth century. The European intrusion came at a time of instability in traditional Senegalese societies, and the Mouride sect developed simultaneously with the blossoming of French imperialism. How much either movement contributed to the other is difficult to determine, but it was in the interests of the French colonialists and of the Mouride marabouts to destroy the influence of the feudal warlords who controlled much of the Senegalese hinterland in the nineteenth century. Once these warlords were vanquished and their feudal system of domination over the peasants was eradicated, the Mourides and the French settled into a policy of peaceful coexistence which, based on the peanut export industry, benefited both groups. Under the French administrators there grew that cadre of Europeanized Africans typified by Senghor who replaced the colonialists so gradually and with such little diversion from their dream of French sovereignty that 1960, the year of independence for most of the French African colonies, hardly seems like a watershed. Certainly, Senghor's policies after independence didn't cause the reverberations in Senegalese society the way Nkrumah's did in Ghana or Sekou Toure's in Guinea.

Now, however, after years of drought and mismanagement, the peanut-growing industry, which accounts for almost half of the country's export revenue, is keeping neither the government nor the peasant farmer afloat. Earnings from peanut sales won't meet the bill for petroleum imports this year, which is expected to rise to 44 billion CFA francs. In a good year, peanut production reaches about one million tons. This year the country will be lucky if the crop produces 400,000 tons. Last year the crop amounted to 668,000 tons, producing 44.4 billion CFA francs, and the year before the figures were 315,000 tons and 25.7 billion in revenue. World prices for peanuts and peanut products also are in a general decline and there is little hope for improvement. The deteriorating condition of the agricultural economy has led to murmurings of a rural revolt. In some areas farmers have refused to repay government loans. Some have apparently started cultivating food crops. There has been a breakdown in the traditional system of communal land tenure, with some holdings becoming single family concerns. Where the marabouts stand in relation to these shifts is uncertain. They have benefited enormously

in material wealth as well as political power from their dominance in the peanut-growing area. Some observers see the marabouts as little more than exploiters of the peasants. Others say they provide protection from the ravages of corrupt bureaucrats and, over the longer term, have provided psychological security for the farmer during a time of great social upheaval. Meanwhile, the government has thrown back the clock to the first years of independence to a policy of rural development propounded by Mamadou Dia, a leader in the Senegalese government until 1963 when he was imprisoned for allegedly attempting to overthrow Senghor. Dia is out of jail and a leader of one of the unofficial opposition groups, so he's not getting any credit for the resurrection of his policies, but the government has had to do something to replace its cooperative system which was a model of inefficiency and corruption.

Another problem facing the government is how to correct the failure to develop the outlying regions of Senegal which are wasting through long years of neglect. The situation is ironic because Casamance and Senegal Oriental have plentiful water supplies and great agricultural potential. Experts say that Senegal could be producing enough food to meet its needs, yet the government has asked the world community for emergency food relief, although some observers say there is no crisis because of food stocks kept in peasant households. The government would seem to do well to concentrate its attention on the development of these frontier areas, but the political consequences of taking investment away from the peanut-growing area, where almost half of the country's 5.2 million people live, is unpredictable. The government has already been taken to task for making ethnic appeals to inhabitants of depressed regions when, in December, it brought busloads of Toucouleurs from the Fleuve region to Dakar to participate in the celebration of the start of construction of the Diama Dam, a joint operation with Mali and Mauritania which is supposed to turn the Senegal River basin into the breadbasket of West Africa. More embarrassing for the government, work on Diama Dam and its companion Manantali Dam has halted because of reservations by Arab fund donors.

Instead of trying to resolve its problems, the government is apparently resorting to violence to maintain its authority, violence which is aimed at teachers and students. In his speech following the demonstration in Zinguinchor, Senghor called upon his party members to form "comités de vigilance" to assist the "forces of order" in carrying out their duties. According to West Africa magazine, teachers belonging to the main teachers union are being harassed by the vigilantes. It cites an incident in Kaolack where three teachers were abducted, including a young woman who "suffered particularly unpleasantly at the hands of the thugs."

"When people start to believe that those in power are practicing violence to maintain their positions, it is difficult to believe those who say that the Senegalese will never revert to violence to achieve political ends," the magazine goes on to state.

If political violence does erupt, one would expect, from Senegal's recent history as well as from Senghor's pronouncements, that it would affect the University of Dakar. When I visited the campus, it appeared calm, even though the transfer of the schools of languages, law and human sciences to a new campus in St. Louis, scheduled for October 1979, apparently hadn't taken place yet. As of 1978 there were 8,500 students on a campus designed for 5,000, and a Gambian friend told me that he has heard the students complain about inadequate facilities. Yet when I was there, the students moved quietly between the classroom buildings, lounged on the lawn and played tennis on the courts of the cité universitaire. gathered outside the library waiting for it to reopen in the afternoon and seemed in general more interested in the Dakar jazz festival then in progress than in Senegalese politics.

Such quiescence, however, may just be the only way to get along in a turbulent environment. Government supporters claim that the university is filled with radical academics who preach revolution from their homes and on university steps, but my Gambian friend, who visited Senegal last year and spoke with several university students, said they complained that the ruling party has firm control of the school's administration. Government scholarships disappear if there is any hint of political iconoclasm in a student's background. Advancement hinges on allegiance to the Parti Socialiste. The students claimed that the children of persons close to the seats of power pass through the school without bothering to sit for an examination, while less privileged students find it difficult to live on the aid the government gives them while in school.

It appears, then, that Senegal is at a decisive point in its history and the educational system will be at the center of whatever shake-up occurs. Schools in a stable society are monuments to a country's hope in the future, but in unstable societies they may also be breeding places for present frustrations and reservoirs for past grievances. How much the inherited educational system is responsible for Senegal's current troubles is difficult to say, but it seems contradictory for a school system based on the separation of an elite to spawn a government which claims to be socialist. How much poor conditions in the school have contributed to the unrest I don't know, but undeveloped countries have a tendency to limit their educational spending in the interest of more visible investments and the schools farthest from the capital are usually first to feel the pinch. I will be trying to find out to what extent schools are promoting change in the country as I continue my study of Senegal.

Best wishes,



Bowden Quinn