

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Ndanka, ndanka

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Dear Peter,

"Ndanka, ndanka moy japa golo": "Softly, softly catches the monkey." The words are Wolof, the thought is typically African. The Madinkas, another of the dominant peoples in the Senegambian region, have the same saying in their language, and I have encountered a similar expression in East Africa. The sense of the proverb is more subtle than it appears to be at first. The attitude recommended lies somewhere between patience and languor. For the Westerner analyzing the problems Africans face in creating modern societies, it is important to understand this attitude.

By and large, Africans, or at least those I see here in The Gambia, are not patient people. They do not like to wait. Standing behind someone buying stamps at the post office, I am often angered by the constant attempts of those coming after me to intrude at the clerk's window. Getting on a bus with a crowd of Gambians is hazardous, for they will throng into the door as if the city were being evacuated. Despite the admiration for and imitation of British ways in Banjul, the habit of queuing has not caught on. Nor do Gambians suffer stoically the harshness of the climate. Temperatures inland rise daily over 100 degrees Fahrenheit and have for two months; still the Gambians complain about the heat as if it were an uncommon phenomenon. In January, when the harmattan blows clouds of sand and dust off the Sahara, blocking the sun's rays and dropping temperatures into the sixties, the Gambians curse the cold. All of which is to say that Africans are not too different from Caucasians. It is a prevarication, resorted to by Westerners living here in air-conditioned comfort to rationalize the inequity of housing, that the Africans are used to the heat. No one gets used to temperatures of 115 degrees.

These examples are trivial, but the attitude they portray must be reckoned with by foreigners and Africans alike. The people on this continent may seem long-suffering because their hopes and expectations have been suppressed for so long. Raise those expectations, and restraint is thrown to the winds, as witnessed in Zimbabwe. Despite the faith in Robert Mugabe shown by the election results, Zimbabwean workers have gone on strike for more pay in defiance of the government. I would bet

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that Mugabe's men are reciting a Shona equivalent of the Wolof saying above, explaining that if they creep up on it, they can catch the monkey of prosperity, but a headlong rush will scare the monkey away and Zimbabweans will go hungry.

Unfortunately, the proverb can also be used as an excuse for inactivity, which we Westerners call laziness. This insidious problem is recognized by many Africans. The Western critic, however, should be aware of a cultural difference regarding work before he condemns the slothful African. The African does not share that ingrained code of conduct known as the Protestant ethic, which supports denial of immediate benefits in expectation of greater rewards later. This has led to the apotheosis of work as a form of asceticism that not only entitles one to the pleasures of Heaven but is an investment which increases material gains later in life. Most Africans, even those in the Christian minority, don't cherish this ideal. One must pay heed to this cultural difference when criticizing the flagrant abuse of wealth or the indolence of bureaucratic and white-collar workers in modern African societies, which is not to say that either should be condoned. (I am indebted to P.C. Lloyd's introduction to The New Elites of Tropical Africa, Oxford University Press, 1966, for this observation.)

On a recent trip I took in the Gambian interior, the problem of African idleness cropped up again and again. My first stop was in Kerewan, a town of about 2,000 inhabitants, which is gradually being made the administrative center of the North Bank, one of the country's six administrative divisions. I visited the local office for community development, a program that provides government assistance for village self-help projects. The Kerewan office is responsible for almost 300 villages, with sixteen field workers who, among them, are supposed to visit each village at least once a month.

Work in the office is less demanding. I sat with the director and his assistant on a morning in which they had three visitors: an imam who wanted to know why work had stopped on a dispensary in his village, a headteacher who was angry about the lack of construction materials for a new building at his school, and a reporter for the government radio station who wanted to know what the program had accomplished in the area. The director said the office had about fifty-five project requests last year of which a dozen were approved, but only a few had been completed. When we left for lunch, the director told me I had caught him on a slow day. Sometimes he'll work for eight hours straight on paperwork, he said. With the number of projects he handles, those days cannot be too frequent. His assistant brings books and magazines to the office and spends most of his time reading, if he's not sent on an overnight errand to pick up supplies.

The problem in the community development office in Kerewan is more lack of work than lack of initiative. The government doesn't have the money to keep the program going full tilt. The work which is accomplished is valuable. The direc-

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tor and I visited several projects the next day. I saw joyful villagers receiving bags of cement with which to complete a marketplace. Industrious workers in another village were building a dispensary, mixing soil and cement with water and spreading the mixture on the ground inside the building's shell to make an even floor. It was grueling work in the midmorning sun, and I think the laborers had had little to eat. They begged a coin off me to buy cigarettes and kola nuts, the modern and the traditional way to pacify an empty stomach. In a third village, I visited a room where mothers waited patiently to have their babies weighed by a community development field worker. The program, with food and materials supplied by Catholic Relief Services, keeps a record of the infants' weights and instructs the mothers on proper nutrition.

In Kerewan, I also met a Peace Corps volunteer assigned to the public health service, primarily to teach better health practices to the women of the town. At her post only a week, she was discouraged by the lack of help she received from her Gambian counterpart, but she accepted her co-worker's disinclination for work because the Gambian hadn't been paid in four months. Under those conditions, the volunteer said, she wouldn't feel like working either. Another Peace Corps volunteer working in public health in Georgetown, 150 miles upriver from Banjul, had the same complaint about his co-worker but didn't make the same excuses for him. He said the Gambian made sure he got paid regularly, but was less conscientious in seeing that his laborers received their wages. The only part of his job the Gambian health officer did regularly was inspecting the meat in the marketplace every morning so he could be sure of getting a few choice cuts.

Another volunteer, in Farafenni, midway between Georgetown and Banjul, had a similar gripe. He runs an Indigenous Businessman's Advisory Service, a project supported by the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. The volunteer said his job had the dual purpose of providing loans and advice to increase business productivity and employment in the area, and of training Gambians to take over the service. He has two Gambian counterparts, one of whom has a bachelor's degree from a university in the United States, but the volunteer does most of the office work and has to prod the Gambians even to keep them abreast of what he is doing. He said he has no idea what their capabilities are, although he has worked with them for ten months.

My purpose in visiting Farafenni was to talk with the regional education officer there and perhaps to visit some schools in his district. I arrived Friday morning at 8:30, the normal starting hour for government offices. No one was around. After a few minutes, an assistant education officer came out of an adjacent building, apparently his living quarters, and told me the REO was on an inspection tour on the south bank. He was going from there to Banjul for a meeting, and the assistant was leaving for the capital shortly to join his boss. We agreed that I should come back Tuesday. When I

kept that appointment, however, I found that the REO and his two assistants had not returned from Banjul. I sat all morning in the office, which is the administrative headquarters for schools in two divisions of the country, with only the occasional company of a secretary and an attendant, neither of whom did one lick of work that I could detect.

The country's four regional education officers and their assistants are often in Banjul for the weekend, partly out of necessity because much administrative work can only be accomplished in the capital, but mostly out of preference. Twice in Banjul I've met the REO for district four, whose headquarters are 200 miles upriver, a full day's journey away. Both times I met him in a bar, and on the second occasion he admitted, in my hearing though not to me, that he had spent most of that visit to the capital drinking.

I had lunch one afternoon in Kerewan with the district commissioner for the North Bank Division. He said his countrymen's lackadaisical attitude toward work was the greatest obstacle in the path of The Gambia's development. Few persons in government followed his example of diligence, he said, a habit he had acquired while attending Achimota College in Ghana. I don't know whether this boast had any more substance than that of the community development director, but the commissioner was busy in his office at 8:30 the morning I visited him, and he came out after 2 p.m. to take me to his home for lunch. Despite his succinct criticisms of The Gambia and of other West African nations, (Nigeria: everybody wants to be better than his neighbor; Ghana: too many smart people) the commissioner was optimistic about the region's future. Attitudes are slowly changing. Neither he nor I may live to see the fruition of the small steps being made to a better society, but things are improving "bit by bit," he said.

"Ndanka, ndanka?" I asked.

He nodded.

Best regards,



Bowden Quinn