

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 4
Touring The Bush

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366 Madison Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

From Dakar to Fongolimbi is 435 miles in space, but it seems like several generations in time. Fongolimbi is a village in a remote corner of the region of Senegal Oriental (see map on back page). When we heard recently that the newly appointed Governor of Senegal Oriental was going to tour his region, we decided to go along - banking, successfully as it turned out, on African hospitality to make up for our lack of an invitation.

Senegal Oriental is known as the "disinherited" part of the nation, a poor relation in a poor land. It includes one-third of the land area of Senegal, but only five percent of the population - about 150,000 people (a figure that is as much guess as estimate). But a dozen languages and races are found among these few people, for Senegal Oriental lies on the ethnic border between the forest people to the south and the people of the Sudanese plains to the north. The people of the south are largely settled farmers and pagan by religion; those from the north are mainly Moslem and pastoral or nomadic. The people of the south got there first, but they have gotten the worst of it over centuries of struggle; and today they are once again ruled by Moslems from the north. The 18th and 19th Centuries were filled with obscure wars staged by petty Moslem rulers, none of whom was able to dominate any great area. Mungo Park, the British explorer, came through the area in 1795 and again in 1805. On the second trip he found that many villages flourishing a decade earlier had been abandoned. The French completed their conquest shortly after 1900; in this case



GATEWAY TO A BUSH VILLAGE

the imperial euphemism "pacification" was an accurate description. French administrators considered Senegal Oriental to be a place of exile, and Senegalese administrators, who are mostly city people, do not like to be sent there either.

The people of Senegal Oriental live in a largely closed economy; necessarily so, since there are few means of transport. The staple of their diet is millet. They raise some cattle (resistant to the tsetse fly-carried sleeping sickness), but most of their meat comes from hunting. Enough cotton is grown to supply them with clothing. In the more accessible areas, they grow peanuts for export. They of course lose both ways on trade with the outside world. Rice, which sells for 32 francs a kilo in Dakar, is 50 francs in Kedougou; when they sell peanuts to the government, the cost of transport is deducted from the fixed price. With wells and technical aid, this poor and arid land might produce an agricultural surplus, but it would require a lot of money. And, if Senegal Oriental is in the main self-sufficient, it is at a very low level of subsistence, a level that may decline as population increases.



GOVERNOR DIOUF (center) WITH ENGINEER (left) AND COMMANDANT OF KEDOUGOU

The gateway to Senegal Oriental is Tambacounda, the capital and the place where the good road ends. The 5,000 residents of the town are divided in classic fashion by the tracks of the Dakar-Niger Railroad. On one side the houses are large and have plenty of space around them; on the other are shacks huddled together. The two biggest buildings in town are the Governor's Palace and the hotel, built as an overnight stopping place for the railroad. Both buildings date from colonial times. Now that the railroad is virtually closed down, the hotel is a dirty Victorian wreck.

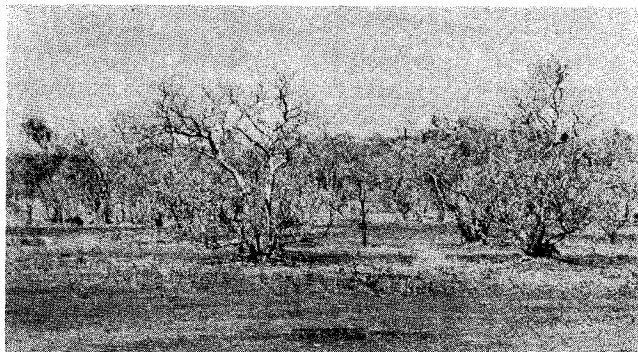
We presented ourselves to the Governor. and, as we had hoped, he agreed to having uninvited guests on his tour. M'Baye Diouf, 38, is from Rufisque, near Dakar, one of the four towns whose residents received French citizenship in the last century. Diouf is a Moslem Wolof who was educated in France. Until his appointment a month earlier, he had never been in Senegal Oriental; he commented that we would be discovering Africa together. He did not pretend that Tamba, as it is generally called, was the place he would have chosen to make his home, but he was well informed about his region and seemed genuinely interested in its problems. He told us to set out for Kedougou the next morning.

Tamba to Kedougou is only 117 miles, but it is a nine-hour drive, even by Land Rover. This is in the dry season; in the rainy season,

June to November, the road is all but impassible. On the way, we forded four small streams and took one 'bac' (pontoon ferry) over the Gambia River where the bridge had been washed out. Everywhere the road had been deeply rutted by trucks during the rains. Its condition had a drastic effect on trucking rates. The cost of shipping goods the 294 miles from Dakar to Tamba is 5 francs per kilo. From Tamba to Kedougou, less than half as far, the rate is 7 francs in the dry season and 10 francs during the rains.

After Tamba, you are in the bush. The land is flat and sun-scorched; small trees and red termite hills stand out above tall yellowed grass. Soon you slap the first tsetse fly. Occasionally you pass a village of half a dozen thatched huts, but the soil is too poor to support many people: the population density is only five persons per square kilometer. Frequently you pass by brush fires. The peasants burn the brush to clear it for planting and so that they can see and kill animals. The brush fires burn only the grass, leaving the trees alive, but the soil is impoverished in the long run - though the next crop may be better - and the land after a fire looks as barren as the moon.

The road passes through the National Park of Niokolo-Koba, a game preserve that the Senegalese Government hopes will become a tourist attraction. There are big animals in the park - lions, leopards and a few elephants - but to see them you must stop at the park camp and haunt the watering-places. Still, we saw an occasional wart hog

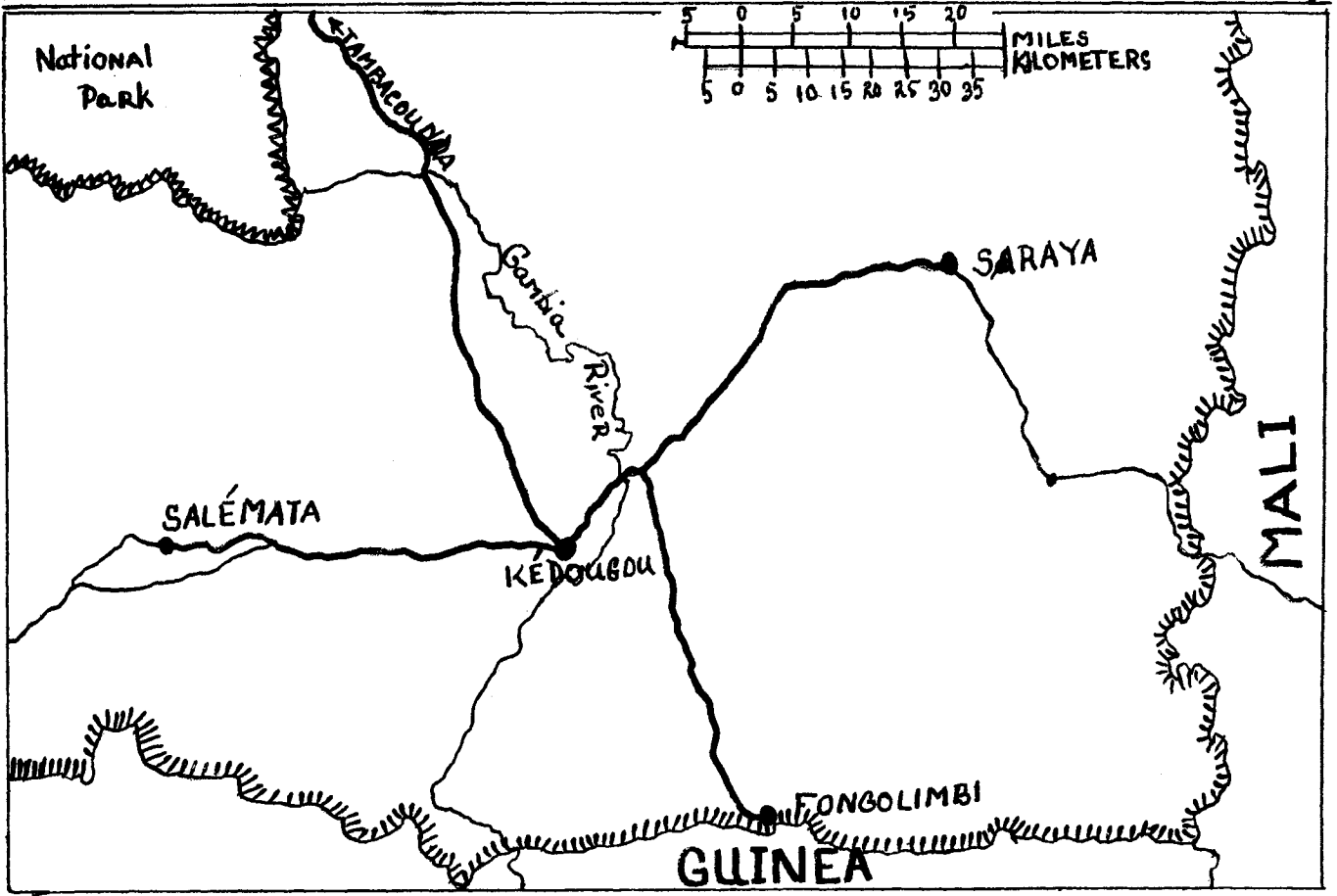
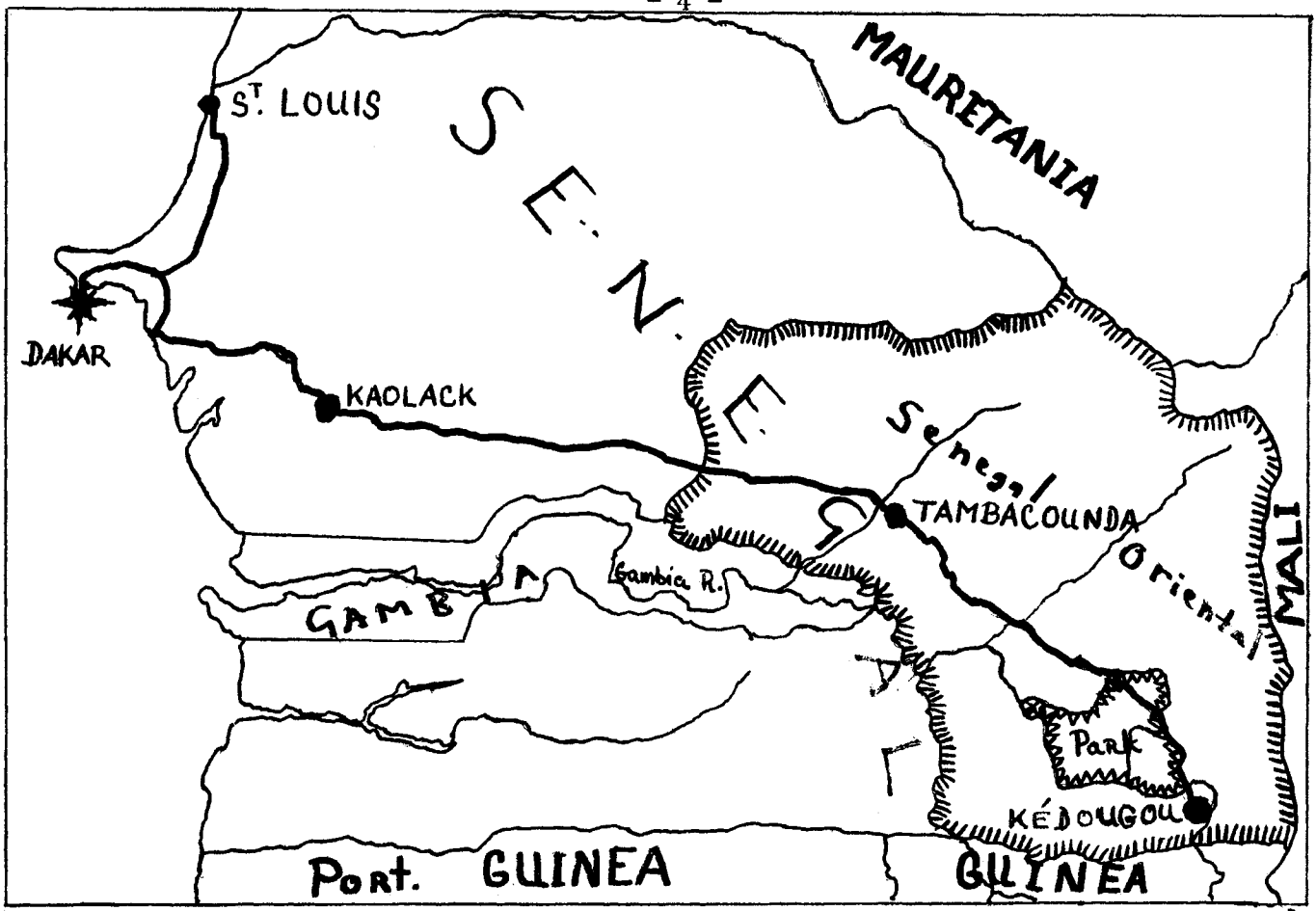


BUSH IN THE DRY SEASON

and many monkeys, including a herd of about a hundred surly baboons. Hunting and setting fires in the park are forbidden, but we saw several hunters, half a dozen fires - and no wardens.

Kedougou has a population of 2,000, and is by far the biggest town in southeastern Senegal. Electricity came to Kedougou just a few months ago, though not for private homes as yet, and street lights shine for four hours a night. The biggest house in town is that of the Commandant de Cercle (1); it has a generator.

(1) Senegal has retained the highly centralized French system of administration. The nation is divided into seven regions, the regions into cercles, the cercles into arrondissements. The administrators are all appointed by the government in Dakar; the majority of them in Senegal Oriental are not natives of the region. In power and status, they far outweigh the local elected officials.



The Governor reached Kedougou later the same day, and the next morning he set out on a tour to the east. His party included the engineer in charge of public works for the region, the Commandant of Kedougou, a few local officials and half a dozen soldiers. We reached the Gambia again, at another crossing, only to find that this bridge was out, too; but there were a truck and two jeeps on the other side. We took to pirogues (dugout canoes) to cross the river. The first pirogue was upset after launching, dumping overboard half a dozen notables (fortunately not including the Governor, nor, equally fortunately, his American visitors). This event was greeted with general laughter, even by the officials who were swimming ashore, and everyone speculated on the whereabouts of the local crocodiles. "This is what makes traveling in the bush picturesque," said the Governor, who was clearly having a lark.

The road on the other side proved to be even worse than the Tamba-Kedougou road. Here the land becomes hilly, and to the right you can see the Fouta Djallon mountains of Guinea, only a few miles away. We reached our destination, the village of Fongolimbi, at one o'clock, having covered twenty-four miles in four hours. For the people of this area, there is no way to travel except on foot: since it is tsetse fly country, there are no horses. And since Fongolimbi is so hard to reach or to leave, it is correspondingly easy to forget.

For Fongolimbi, Diouf's visit was an historic occasion, for never before had a Governor of Senegal Oriental penetrated this far into his region, and the Governor is the living embodiment of the distant state. So the people of Fongolimbi (population 634) and the country around had all turned out to celebrate. As we arrived, we saw the people lining a path that led uphill to the tree that marks the center of Fongolimbi. It was an unforgettable sight: masked dancers whirled around the Governor to the intricate beat of tom-toms, bare feet kicking up red dust in the sunlight; the people clapped and cheered and sang as the Governor's party passed; everyone shook hands with everyone; and this visitor has seldom felt sillier, or more touched, than he did when he accepted by proxy the cheers and handshakes for the Governor. At the top of the hill, by the tiny schoolhouse - for there is a school, even in Fongolimbi - the school children sang the Senegalese national anthem (words by President Senghor). The Governor's party sat inside a circle formed by the village notables, with the crowd pressing behind, and ev-



ON THE TAMBA-KEDOUGOU ROAD

ents proceeded in a pattern that was to become familiar over the next two days.

First the Chef d'Arrondissement, who is the administrator for Fongolimbi, made a little speech, in French, telling the Governor the "doleances", the problems and needs, of the village: "We have only three classes in the school... We have only a male nurse for this whole area, and he can't get enough medical supplies... Last year the crop failed, we asked for help, but Dakar didn't send anything... You yourself have experienced the condition of our road..."

The Governor spoke in reply. He spoke in French, which none of the villagers understands, but he and they have no language in common. As he spoke the speech was interpreted into Malinke and Peuhl. When he finished, it was pointed out that there was a group of people who still had not understood. So the speech was interpreted once again, into Djallonke - three languages for about one thousand people, almost all of whom were born and will die within twenty miles of Fongolimbi.

This was the gist of the Governor's speech in Fongolimbi and every other village: "Colonial times are over... I am black like you... Now it is up to us... Independence is meaningless unless we show that we can improve ourselves. We here must do the best we can with the little we have... We can't expect much help from Dakar... We are all Senegalese together... Vive Senegal..." But it is the Governor's presence, not his words, that matters.



SINGING THE GOVERNOR'S PRAISES

The traditional chiefs, elderly men in flowing robes, listened, motionless and impassive. Then they spoke, through an interpreter. Their concerns were not quite those of the alien administrator who spoke in the name of Fongolimbi. The chiefs were worried about the border with Guinea, four miles away, a border that follows no geographic or ethnic frontier. For generations, their people have moved back and forth across that border, sometimes with their cattle, sometimes living on one side and farming on the other. The French let them cross freely.

But, since independence, this is no longer possible. Both Guinea and Senegal have diverted men and money to red-taping the border, setting up patrols and customs posts, demanding papers. Both governments are forcing these people to choose between two nations, two nationalisms - neither of which has more than the vaguest meaning to them - at the cost of ripping part of the fabric of their lives.

The chiefs did not understand why this must be done to their people: and who could give them an answer that makes sense? The Governor told the chiefs: "I promise you that you will not regret anything you left on the other side," and he spoke again of being Senegalese. The chiefs listened impassively.

Then came the dancers. Each people's rhythms, dress and instruments were distinctive, and all were as new to the Wolof Governor as they were to us. (Often a question about local customs addressed to one of the Governor's party would bring a dusty answer, and the explanation "I'm a stranger here myself.") The Puhls produced wildly athletic men dancers and an exciting team of drummers. Everyone clapped and shoved, and one of the Governor's bodyguards jumped out, seized a sword and joined the dance. Despite the officials' best efforts, the dancers faced the drummers across the circle from us, instead of the Governor.

After the dances, the Governor's party retreated for lunch to the cool dark interior of the Chef d'Arrondissement's hut. We ate standing around a table: "bush-style", the Governor said. First there was a lamb roasted on a spit, to be torn apart by hand, followed by cous-cous (millet with sauce), chicken and some curdled milk that tasted like watered yogurt. Outside the dancing was getting more informal now that the officials were gone.

Off to another village. After four more hours of bouncing over rocks and ruts, we reached Saraya (population 576) at sunset. The Governor made his speech, with only two interpretations, and visited the green pool where the sacred crocodiles live. The crocodiles did not appear. Another brief stop at a village inhabited by Mandingoes - the girls danced beautifully - and back across the Gambia by moonlight with everyone joking about the hippopotamus that might upset us. Kedougou seems like a metropolis.

The next day Governor Diouf toured to the west of Kedougou. We covered the 52 miles to Salemata in four hours. Salemata (population 333) is inhabited by the now-familiar Puhls and the Bassaris. The Bassaris, who number only about 10,000, in Senegal, Guinea and Portuguese Guinea, are doubtless more interesting than they are important. They are among the early Pagan inhabitants who, under the pressure of alien conquerors, retreated into this remote corner that no one else coveted, and have managed to maintain their way of life virtually unchanged. For clothing they wear metal ornaments and beaded skirts; that day the muscular Bassari men performed a slow dignified dance. Unlike Christians and Moslems, the Bassari do not try to convert others, so they will probably be absorbed by their more aggressive neighbors. When a Bassari marries a Puhl (the Puhls are Moslem), the children are raised as Puhls. The Bassari are considered quaint by other Senegalese.

On the way back to Kedougou, the Governor stopped to see a school built by the people of the village. It was a thatched building so low

you have to stoop everywhere but in the center; it all seems done in miniature. The Governor, visibly angry, was tongue-lashing the regional school official: he pointed out that the children's feet on the bare earth floor stir up clouds of dust that are trapped in the hut. The school official said the school would be replaced eventually. The Governor insisted that they immediately put down some floor covering.

Later that evening Diouf and his engineer, Mansour Gueye, talked about the problems of Senegal Oriental. They both insisted on the primary importance of roads. Gueye pointed out that a decent road to Kedougou would halve the cost of replacing the bridges over the Gambia. But he has neither the money nor the equipment to do more than keep the road barely passable; and - so limited are the means - the Governor did not know how he was going to pay for the gasoline used on his tour. The Governor was concerned with the social effect of roads. The most important task, he said, is to arouse new wants in the people of Senegal Oriental, and the best way to do this is to bring them in touch with the outside world.



GOVERNOR AND CHIEF



PEULH DANCERS

Despite his persuasive reasoning, one can, I believe, be skeptical about the Governor's (and Senegal's) approach to the nation's problems without bogging down in the myth of the Noble Savage. Despite poverty, malnourishment and disease, there is a certain stability in the lives of the people of the bush. Those of their children who get some education, but not enough to join the elite, flee the bush to Dakar, where there are not enough jobs for them; they are trapped between two worlds. On the road back to Dakar, we gave a ride to two youths in this class. As we passed a little bush village, the villagers waved and called greetings to us. One of the youths said with sudden violence: "Look at those people, they're savages - they don't know anything." Gradually it became obvious that the two youths were going to Dakar, not to return to their jobs as they had told us, but to look for work. They had a primary education, no trade, and, in a poor economy, few prospects. With the great increase in primary education in recent years, theirs is the fastest-growing class in the nation.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood

David Hapgood

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