NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 9
Peanuts and Marabouts - I

June 15, 1962
22, rue de l'Universite
Paris, 7e

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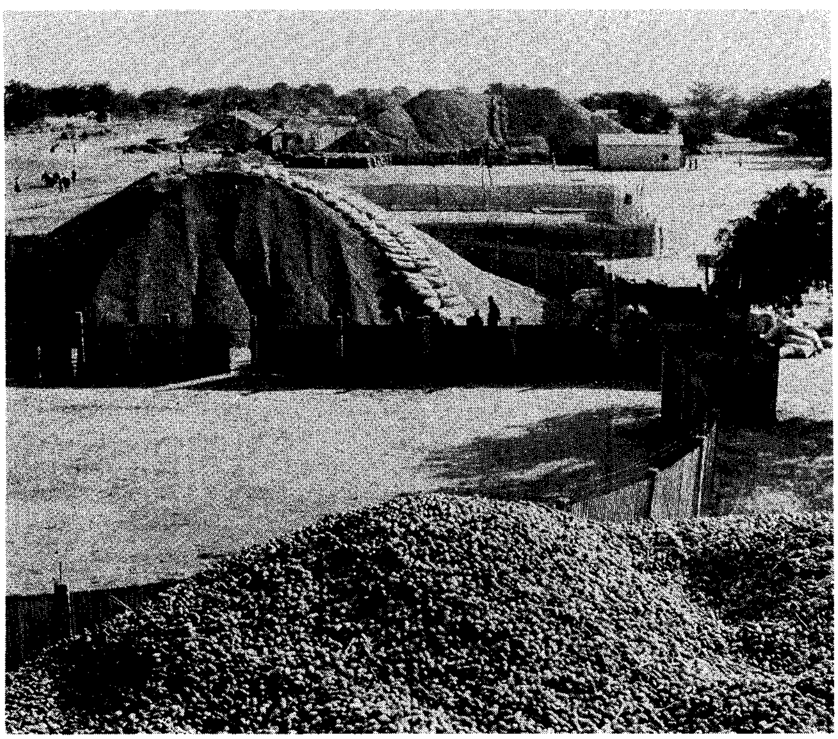
Dear Mr. Nolte:

In the year 1840 an African chief in Dakar offered some slaves for sale to a French chemist named Rousseau. "Keep your captives," said Rousseau, "but for peanuts I'll give you anything you want from Europe." The chief decided it was more profitable to put the slaves to growing peanuts than to sell them. The next day, according to a contemporary account, "the marabouts (Moslem religious leaders) were gathered together, they buried gris-gris (amulets) and promised to propagate the growing of peanuts." Today the course of events in Senegal is largely determined by peanuts and marabouts. This and two succeeding newsletters will be devoted to the place of peanuts and marabouts in the future of Senegal.

Peanuts originally came from South America. Slave traders brought them over to feed the slaves on the voyage to America, and there was small-scale growing of peanuts in Africa long before Rousseau. Despite the abolition of the slave trade, peanut production increased rapidly after it was found that edible oil could be made from peanuts. Rousseau himself planted six hectares, a nd by 1850 his crop alone filled a three-masted ship, which took it to an oil plant in France. Not long after that Governor Protet of Senegal concluded that "peanuts will save the colony." Protet added, rather gratuitously, that the Wolofs of Senegal were taking to raising peanuts because it was an easy crop "that suits their tendency toward laziness." In the late Nineteenth Century peanuts made up half of Senegal's exports by value; by 1900, it was 73 percent, and in 1961 82 percent. Today about half the cultivated land in Senegal is planted in peanuts. This crop year Senegal produced 970,000 metric tons of peanuts; of this 863,000 tons were exported, either as nuts or oil. More than 95 percent of the exports went to France.



PEANUTS BEING PUT IN SACKS AFTER DRYING DURING THE DRY SEASON.

Peanuts are grown by Africans on a family basis. The French tried at various times to start peanut plantations, but they proved unprofitable; and so far no one has succeeded in making mechanized peanut farming pay. The great expansion of peanut production was carried out, not by the French or on French orders, but by Africans responding to market opportunities: growing peanuts was virtually the only way to earn money to buy imported goods. The speed with which the Africans moved into peanuts might be noted by those who say that African peasants do not adapt to new crops or methods.

The peanut plant is a small crawling annual bush, and the peanut itself is a tuber, attached to the roots like a potato. Just before the rainy season starts in June, the Senegalese peasant clears the land by burning off the brush or by cutting it down with a rudimentary scythe. After the second rain of the season, the farmer pokes holes in the soil, softened by the rain, and plants his seed. The field is weeded twice after the young plants have appeared. From 115 to 128 days after planting the peanuts are ready to be harvested; ideally the peanuts are harvested right after the last rain of the season, so they can be stored outside (see photo on page one), but sometimes a late rain spoils some of the crop. The whole process is done by hand, plows and draft animals being seldom used, and it takes 213 hours of labor per hectare, all within the five months from June to October that make up the rainy season. Because peanut farming requires much labor in short periods of time, the peanut areas of Senegal attract migrant labor from neighboring countries; but the supply of migrant labor has been reduced by the hardening of political frontiers since independence. The peasants sell their crop during the sales period fixed by law, from December to April, with most of the sales coming at the beginning. The peasants' average per capita cash income is about $80.

Though the French did not succeed in making money on the actual growing of peanuts, the peanut trade was another matter: this was the "economie de traite" in which everything was rigged against the peanut producer. The big French trading companies and their agents in the villages, usually small Lebanese traders, found they could profit at every stage of the trade. Since the peanut farmer's cash was usually gone soon after he got it, he was often hungry by the time the hardest work of the season came around in June and July. The storekeeper would advance him food and seed - to be repaid, in peanuts, four or five months later, at interest rates as high as 100 percent. Then the peasant was induced to spend whatever cash he collected on (often worthless) baubles or overpriced clothes in the company or Lebanese store - and he would be hungry again by the next planting season. It was common practice to rig the scales on which the peanuts were weighed. In these ways the peasants were deprived of a large part - half, by some estimates - of their income.

Most of the side effects of the introduction of peanuts to Senegal have been bad. The peanut is a soil-exhausting crop, particularly when it is planted year after year in the same soil, without rotation, fertilizer or lying fallow. Before the Europeans brought the peanut, man and nature were in a harmonious balance achieved over the millenia since man first began cultivating the soil of West Africa, a balance which even the peasants' brush fires did not upset. Before peanuts, the Senegalese peasants - most of them, at least - rotated their food crops and regularly let their fields lie fallow. (This too should be noted by those who judge traditional African farming methods by what they see today.) What upset this balance was the introduction of a cash crop worth more to the peasant than his food crops. So the land was planted year after year with peanuts, and when it was exhausted the peasants packed up and moved on, leaving a desert behind. The result is declining productivity: newly-opened peanut zones produce 1,000 kilos to the hectare, the older zones about 700.

Peanuts also upset Senegal's subsistence economy. So many peasants stopped planting the staple food crops, rice and millet, that this agricultural nation no longer grows its own food. Both rice and millet are imported; in the case of rice, imports supply two-thirds of the nation's consumption. Thus the Senegalese peasant, no longer self-sufficient, is at the mercy of international commodity markets over which his country has no control. And over the years the terms of trade have turned against the peanut producer. From 1913 to 1930, the price of peanuts multiplied by 3.5, while the price of imported cloth (the peasants' main purchase) rose by 7.7 times. In 1936, the peasant who sold 100 kilos of peanuts could buy 100 kilos of rice with the proceeds. In 1940 he had to sell 250 kilos of peanuts to buy the same 100 kilos of rice. Today, with the price of rice fixed by the government, it takes 145 kilos of peanuts to buy 100 kilos of rice. This is not as good as 1936, and there has been no compensating rise in productivity.

In human terms, the concentration on peanuts has bad effects. The peasant is idle during the seven months of the dry season. Since it is all hand work, there is a discouragingly low ceiling on what he can earn. So many peasants migrate to Dakar during the dry season; there they will live off a relative and try to get a job. Many go back to the bush in the rainy season, but many stay on; they float around Dakar, unemployed and often unemployable, peddling

LOADING PEANUTS ON THE TRAIN

cigarettes or fake works of art, living in the shantytowns that spread like sores on the outskirts of the city. And the city-dweller who has a job finds he cannot get ahead: a rise in income will be eaten up by relatives coming in from the bush.

In politics, the peanut trade has made Senegal unhealthily dependent on France. France takes almost the entire crop and pays 10 to 15 percent over the world market price; the reasons for continuing this subsidy after independence are political rather than economic. "Senegal lives on the French housewife's preference for the salad oil made from peanuts," is a common remark in Dakar. It is indeed the best salad oil, but the French are not dependent on it: there are other, and cheaper, sources of edible oil that is almost as good. Senegal can have no hope of finding other and truly commercial outlets for her peanuts at (or even close to) the price they are bringing in France. With abundant other sources of oil, France is immune to economic pressure from Senegal: if Senegal cut off its trade with France, France would save money and Senegal would go bankrupt or become dependent on some other power, doubtless the United States or the Soviet Union. Russia has just agreed to take Senegalese peanuts in exchange for machinery, but this, like the French subsidy, is essentially a political act: the Russians need Senegal's peanuts even less than the French do. Senegal now gets much of its rice from the United States under a surplus-food deal that was also politically motivated: two years ago Senegal was buying most of its rice from Communist China.

This is a true case of "neo-colonialism" (that much-abused word). In urban circles, "neo-colonialism" is much discussed by opponents of the present Senegalese regime; they object to the Senghor government's obvious political reliance on France, to the French military base in Dakar, to the remaining French officials in the government, to the French-staffed and -financed university, to the French trading companies' continuing control of trade in Dakar. But if all this should pass, Senegal would remain dependent on France as long as the peanut trade, relatively unimportant to France, is vital to Senegal. This was the rationale behind President Senghor's recent remark, in answer to his critics, that he saw no advantage in exchanging French neo-colonialism for the Russian or American brands. For, in the present state of the Senegalese economy and the world market, any conceivable pattern of trade would cast Senegal in its present role: a client-state at the mercy of its customers.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood

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Received in New York June 27, 1962