

DH - 11
Memories of Dakar

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Collioure, France

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

When a family of four lives for the better part of a year in an African city, its members are bound to accumulate observations that do not fit neatly into an intellectual framework. Here are some selections from our bag of memories of Dakar:

AT THE LYCEE DELAFOSSE

My wife's sons, 16-year-old twins, attended the Lycee Delafosse for the school year. They were the first Americans ever to go there, and they stood out like polar bears in the Congo. Delafosse, one of three lycees in Dakar, is a technical school; its status rating is the lowest of the three. Of its 2,700 students, the great majority belong to the Senegalese Moslem majority races; about twenty percent are French, from the "petit blanc" class; the rest belong to other minorities: Lebanese, non-Senegalese Africans ("native foreigners", as they are called in the ex-British colonies), Senegalese from non-Moslem minority races, and metis (mulatto, but the French word covers all degrees of mixture and is more acceptable in usage). The Delafosse faculty is almost entirely French, and is better paid (by France) than are teachers in France.

The boys found adjustment to Delafosse fairly easy after the first few days, when they were somewhat bewildered by repeated demands for gifts of their American clothing. They were quickly accepted by all groups, in part perhaps because they belonged to none. In time they had friends in all the school groupings, but they noticed that the various groups did not mix. There was the usual amount of scrapping among the students, particularly between Africans and French; but there was no ganging up on the part of the bystanders at a scrap, even if one race was in the overwhelming majority. The African boys had a glamorous view of America, glamorous at least in teenage terms: popular music, movie stars, clothing, automobiles, sports were the usual subjects of conversation. The Delafosse students I talked to had plans for the future that reflected their personal situations: the dominant Moslems talked of going into the government; the French were going back to France eventually; the metis, discriminated against but having no place to go, talked of going into private enterprise of one kind or another.

The general atmosphere at Delafosse was relaxed, particularly in comparison to the pressures of a French lycee. Even a basketball game was slow and carefree; no one got very excited about it. French administrators would say that academic standards were the same as those in France, but this is a half-truth at best. The curriculum is the same, but the Afri-

can students are on the average two years older than their French counterparts. Examinations are standard, but in practice the school tends to shade the grades to prevent the majority of a class from failing. According to the Director of the technical section of the lycee, the Africans tend to do better than the French in subjects requiring memorization, less well in the mechanical trades (which have low status). The drop-out rate in the upper grades is very high. The quality of the teaching our boys received was varied. Mathematics was excellent: it included the "new mathematics", which apparently is not so new in France. English, on the other hand, was taught by rote and produced few results. There were, of course, exceptions, such as the author of the following note received by one of the boys: "You are a long necked monkey with large ears, red eyes, an a round big head covered by short yellow hairs. If you don't lend me a book to read English or American Aventure I fight you by battle. One day I had seen one adventury book about 'Etats Unis' the revolte of metis girl against U-S.A Man. The Fight is shown on the coverture of the book. Is it important before all - ?"

LIFE IN SICAP

The SICAP housing development on the outskirts of Dakar is the home of the middle class. Most of the people of Dakar live in the shanties of the Medina. The upper class - high-level government officials, French businessmen and, of course, most diplomats - live in villas along the ocean. In SICAP one finds men from the middle ranks of the government, metis who are usually office employes, "petits blancs". You can buy a SICAP house for \$400 down and \$40 a month for ten years. This is a good investment, since the same house can be rented to transients for up to \$200 a month; many SICAP houses are owned by government officials who live in government-supplied housing uptown. The homes are row houses, each with a yard enclosed by a hedge.

SICAP is not well suited to African family life, which requires space for the married children to cluster around their parents' dwelling. A Senegalese living in SICAP used to complain that he had to spend all day Sunday traveling around Dakar to visit all the many members of his family. But living in SICAP does not prevent "family parasitism" - people from the bush coming in to live off their city relatives. Up the street from us there was a bus driver who earned \$80 a month. His one-room house sheltered, in addition to his own wife and three children, fourteen relatives from the bush. If more relatives came, he said, he would have to take them in; he did not dare turn them away. To this man, a raise in pay means more rice for his relatives, and probably more relatives. Even an unemployed shoemaker - he and his wife were both crippled - had relatives living off him. We took them for a ride in the car once. The wife had never seen the ocean drive around Dakar, nor the University, less than half a mile from her home.

Our next door neighbors were a young metis couple from Mar-

tinique. They had an active social life, but none of their friends were African; they were West Indian, "petit blanc", or metis. The couple quarreled frequently. The husband would announce to us that next time he was going to marry a white because all Martiniquans were impossible to live with. The wife would make a gesture of rubbing her brown skin and would say: "You have a complex". "It's not the color of your skin, it's your black soul," the husband would answer.

During most of our stay in SICAP, Soulayemane Ba worked for us. Soulayemane was a 25-year-old Guinean, cheerful and good-natured, with a quick intuitive understanding that transcended cultural barriers. He worked steadily without direction, learned the strange ways of foreigners rapidly (he was a good cook of French-style dishes that he would never want to eat), his intelligence was far above the requirements of his job - yet his productivity was surprisingly low. Why? We were never certain, but it seemed to come from his attitude toward work. Soulayemane did not seem to seek out the small time-saving, or effort-saving, techniques that would have been adopted by a Westerner of far lesser intelligence.

Soulayemane's friend, Soulayemane Diallo, also from Guinea, had worked for us briefly before Soulayemane, then left for a full-time job which he later lost. He used to drop in occasionally and would tell us about his job-seeking efforts. At one time he was thinking about renting a stall to sell bananas in the main market. I asked about his experience in this trade. He said he could pick bananas because he had once worked on the docks in Conakry with a European selecting bananas for export. I asked what he could do to promote his sales of bananas. Diallo smiled and said: "I know every gris-gris (charm) for that." Did this superstition reduce his initiative? Diallo did not depend on a gris-gris to get his job with us: he was at the door, with his papers all in order and a convincing sales talk, the day after we moved in.

No day passed without half a dozen callers at the gate. Some were seeking work, some asked for old rags or bottles (and foraged alongside dogs in the garbage cans across the street); three little girls stopped to sass us on their way to and from school. The "vegetable lady" came three times a week. She was about sixty and carried on her head a basket that I could barely lift. Prices were negotiated on each vegetable, each time. If there were more than two or three items in our day's purchases, the vegetable lady, who could not read numbers, was unable to add them up; she depended on us to tell her the total. (The same was true of the women vendors in the market; how easy it would be to cheat them!)

A couple of afternoons a week Mamadou Ka would stop in. Mamadou, who was about 25, was an unemployed auto mechanic whom we had met on a nearby beach. He had had some schooling and could read and write French. Mamadou said he could not get a job because he had no political or family connections with anyone who employed mechanics; he seemed to accept this

state of affairs without great resentment. When we left, he had started a bootleg repair business with a friend while awaiting the results of a roundabout approach to a local politician. Why did Mamadou visit us so often, after he knew we could not help him get a job? He showed a mild curiosity about our foreign ways. He particularly enjoyed our visits to the compound of shanties where he lived with an older brother. One day he took us to visit his relatives in the village where he was born. In the family compound, Mamadou made the rounds greeting his relatives in the order of their age, starting with the grandmother whom he claimed was 100 and coming at last to his fiancée; Mamadou always spoke of going to his village as going to see "la vieille". We sent the grandmother photos of herself, and she sent us a chicken. On the way home that day, we commented on the beauty of Mamadou's fiancée. "I don't think about whether she's pretty or not because I don't have the money to get married," he answered.

In the evening "the boys" might drop in. The boys were three, all in their early twenties. What they had in common was that they were "out" in the Senegalese system. Their education had been interrupted shortly before the baccalaureat - and the "bac" is indispensable for entry into the Senegalese Establishment. Victor and Jean-Paul were also "out" because they were metis and non-Moslem and had their roots in other countries, though born in Senegal; Moktar had rebelled against his aristocratic Moslem background. All three knew that despite their abilities, which were considerable, the lack of the "bac" placed a low ceiling on their futures. (All their friends were in the same situation.) They rejected the rules of Senegalese society, unlike Mamadou, who was faithful to his marabout. But they did not join, nor indeed show any interest in, any opposition movement - perhaps because the opposition parties implicitly accept the rules of the present Establishment. Jean-Paul talked about going to France to finish his "bac", though he could do it more cheaply and easily in Dakar; the trip was clearly the object, not the "bac". Moktar, who had a restless curiosity which we rarely saw among Senegalese, was fascinated by the business machines he operated in a bank. Victor had the most interesting job - organizing cooperatives in the bush - but he had soured on it, partly because of the discrimination against government employees who are not in Dakar.

The boys liked dancing, and sometimes we would go to Niane's, a nightclub overlooking the Atlantic. Niane's excellent collection of records included no African music; it was all American jazz or Latin American. It was ironic, we reflected, that all Niane's music, though non-African, was of partly African ancestry; more ironic that no one to whom we mentioned this seemed aware of it, nor indeed did they seem to care.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood