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DH - 13
Peanuts and Marabouts - III

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Dakar, Senegal

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Two earlier newsletters, DH - 9 and DH - 10, outlined this situation: Senegal's economy is dependent on peanuts; marabouts dominate the rural society that produces the peanuts.

No panacea exists for Senegal's dependence on peanuts. The peanut areas of this land, a desert for half the year, do not lend themselves readily to other crops. Production could be increased, but it is doubtful whether the increase would be absorbed by the world market. Unlike two of its neighbors, Mauritania and Guinea, Senegal is not rich in minerals. And it will probably be a long time before industry plays an important part in the economy. But, within the limits set by an ungenerous nature, there is room for progress. According to the Rapport General sur les Perspectives de Developpement du Senegal, 90 percent of the Senegalese peasantry uses tools more primitive than those of ancient Egypt. (A line that is less spectacular than it sounds to those of us born with the idea that progress is inevitable. For how many of the people of the world, including the present-day Egyptians, would the use of the tools of ancient Egypt be a distinct step forward?) If the price Senegal gets for its peanuts cannot be increased - and indeed should be reduced for political reasons - the peasants' income need not be reduced. Their income can be increased simply by eliminating the parasites that have preyed on the peasants. Useful work might be found for peanut growers who are now unemployed for half the year. With some relatively simple changes in methods, fewer peasants can grow more peanuts on less land, freeing land and labor for other crops. Then Senegal could grow all its own food - a long step toward the true independence of paying its own way in the world.

To accomplish all this, Senegal, like most African countries, has a Plan. The Plan is generally said to be reasonable and well-drawn, and its goals, if optimistic, not impossible. Of course, in a nation where the quality of public administration is uncertain at best, the real question is whether the government is capable of carrying out any plan. In the Plan as plan, what is omitted is as important as what is included. For the rural economy, the Plan proposes no vast enterprises demanding lots of capital and administration and technicians; major irrigation works are put off for the future. The authors of the Plan believe that progress in Senegal is more likely to be achieved through many tiny improvements. In reaching these decisions, the planners (who were both Senegalese and French) drew lessons from the recent past. Two big irrigated rice projects proved far too expensive for what they produced. Tractors that used to work the

land at the "Modernisation Agricole" farm at Boulel have been replaced by animal-drawn equipment; the experts are unanimous in saying that the tractor is not economic in Senegal. (It is a measure of the alienation of some Senegalese elites that the banned Parti Africain de l'Indépendance, which has a strong following among university students, is still calling for the "total mechanization" of agriculture. See also DH - 12, on Morocco, for what happens when the tractor is viewed as status symbol instead of tool.) The Rapport General offered three possible levels of peanut production. The highest would have implied greater dependence on the French market; it was also the easiest way to raise export earnings. The Senegalese chose the lowest level: less income, less dependence.

In the first eighteen months of the Plan - it was adopted in April, 1961 - the state's main effort has been directed to creating the structures necessary to carry it out. First the government created the Office de Commercialisation Agricole, similar to the marketing boards in ex-British Africa, to buy the peanut crop. The aim of the OCA is to give the peasant a larger slice of the same pie by reducing the slice of the middlemen, mostly French and Lebanese. In the 1961-2 crop year, the OCA handled just under 50 percent of Senegal's peanuts. The OCA claims that the peasant got 22 francs a kilo from the OCA, whereas under the old system, though the price was in theory 22, the peasant - because of usury and cheating - got only half that. At the same time, the government is organizing peasant producer cooperatives. In the first two years (the cooperatives started before the Plan) the cooperative is run pretty much by the government agent; after that it is turned over to officers elected annually by the members. The government claims that 1,500,000 of Senegal's 2,500,000 peasants now belong to cooperatives, of which about one-third are on their own. The cooperative is responsible for weighing its members' produce, though the government agent is supposed to check the scales. Through the cooperative, the government lends the peasant millet during the rainy season, when he has the most work and the least food. It is also a means of introducing technical change: the peasant who wants to buy an ox-drawn plow can get it on credit through his cooperative.

All this sounds fine on paper. In practice the OCA and the cooperatives have had their troubles. Is the peasant really getting those 22 francs? Some peasants are still being cheated by the man who weighs their peanuts; sometimes he is the same man who cheated them before. Many peasants prefer to deal with the Lebanese. "The peasant may have to sell to you, but his heart is with me," a Lebanese buyer said to an OCA man, and there is a measure of truth in that. The peasant could count on the Lebanese to see him through the bad time of the "soudure"; but the Lebanese will not lend food to a peasant who sells his peanuts to the OCA. In theory, the peasant borrows food from the government, but all too often the new administrative machinery jams, or someone along the way is stealing, and the food never comes - and the peasant is in trouble.

Foremost among the peasant's exploiters under the old system

was the marabout, and he has hardly been touched by the reforms of the Plan. Among the Murids, the best organized of the Moslem sects, the marabout's position is unchanged. The Murids have no objection to the OCA and the cooperatives: the marabout is president of the cooperative, his man does the weighing, and the amount of peanuts registered on the books as being produced from the marabout's field is remarkable. If, as is the case generally among the Murids, the peasant voluntarily gives his money to the marabout, there is little the state can do about it. Outside the Murid areas the effect of the cooperatives seems to be uneven. In some cases the marabout, or the other exploiters under the old system, maintain their position through corrupt alliances with local administrators. But in others the cooperatives are honest, and one hears occasionally that a marabout has been voted out as president by the membership. Often one finds that government agents, organizing cooperatives or introducing new techniques, prefer to deal with the marabouts: it is much easier to convince one marabout than 1,000 peasants.

Attitudes toward the marabouts within the ruling class are ambiguous. The present government's alliance with most (not all) of the major marabouts seems as solid as ever, and the state keeps pouring out money for building mosques and for "social work". Nor does the opposition BMS, has close family ties with the Murids. The supposedly leftist PRA-Senegal talks vaguely of "negotiating with the marabouts". It is true that Valdiodio Ndiaye, the Minister of the Interior, talks bravely of smashing the marabouts if they do not accept rural reform. But in the Kaolack area, where Valdiodio is powerful, rural reform has made little headway - because politicians and administrators have helped the marabouts and traders preserve the essence of the old system. The marabouts seem happy these days. When Cheikh Anta Diop was arrested last month over a run-in with a local mayor, the Caliph of the Murids, Falilou Mbake, passed the word that he counted on the government "to do the right thing". Diop was released, and President Senghor made the pilgrimage to Touba to pay his respects to Falilou Mbake and his half million disciplined followers.

Still, the ruling urban elite is not entirely happy with the marabouts. The marabouts are considered backward, not "evolved", and somewhat embarrassing: it is hard to fit them into the picture of "African Socialism". The elite would like to run the country without the marabouts (whether this would be an improvement for the peasants is not clear). But few members of the ruling class seem anxious for a showdown. Even some who denounce the marabouts will express the vague opinion that the only solution is "education" of an unspecified kind. For many Moslems, the issue of the marabouts raises inner conflicts (expressed in L'Aventure Ambigue, an autobiographical novel by Cheikh Amidou Kane, Commissioner of the Plan).

A clear-cut anti-marabout position is taken by the Union Culturele Mussulemane, a group of Moslem reformers who are active also in Mali and Guinea. The UCM opposes subsidies for building mosques and for pilgrimages to Mecca. It believes that a reformed Islam can be a force for progress instead of a brake. The UCM relies mainly on education, but it has specific proposals. It wants to integrate European and Koranic

schools; teach Arabic so the Koran can be understood; and replace memorization of the Koran with study of its content. (UCM members draw an analogy with the use of the Bible by Protestant reformers in Medieval Europe.) At the Maisons des Jeunes, the UCM sometimes sponsors little plays in which a peasant refuses the marabout's demands for money. Most of the UCM's support comes from teachers of Arabic. Its president, Cheikh Toure (in case anyone out there is wondering about it, Cheikh here can be either title or first name), says the UCM has met increasing opposition since independence from the governments of the three countries in which it is most active. In an interview, President Senghor dodged a question on the UCM by reading the part of the constitution that guarantees freedom of religion. Certainly there is no evidence of government support for the aims of the UCM.

During the same interview, Senghor waved a hand toward the main administration building across the street from the presidential palace. "All the loafers and the thieves are over there," he said; "the peasants are the progressive force in this country." But the peasants are silent, and Senghor's "loafers and thieves" are running the country - with Senghor. In this context, an organization like the OCA represents a potential danger to the Senegalese peasant: it could provide the tool for diverting the peasants' income to the uses of the ruling elite. At present, fortunately for the peasant, most of the money wasted by and on the elite in Dakar is supplied by France. Who will supply the cash if the French withdraw their support some day?

The hope of preventing the OCA from becoming a tool of exploitation, the hope of breathing life into the new cooperatives, the hope of making the peasants a "progressive force", the hope of breaking the grip of the marabouts and the Dakar elite on this country - these hopes lie mainly in an inexpensive and relatively minor part of the Senegalese Plan. This is the "animation rurale" movement. It is based on the methods pioneered in Morocco by the IRAM (see DH - 12). Unlike the Moroccan experience of IRAM, animation rurale here has - so far, at least - the support of Senghor and Prime Minister Mamadou Dia.

The next newsletter will take up animation rurale in detail.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood

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