

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 15
The Day Houphouet Came to Town

November 5, 1962
Hotel du Niger
Conakry, Guinea

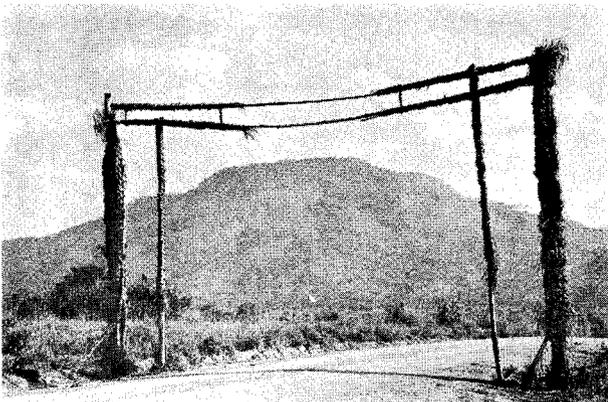
Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

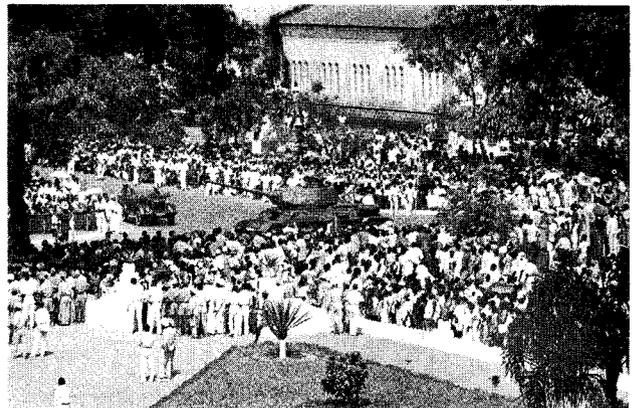
We first saw the preparations in the north of Guinea, at Labé on the road from Dakar. Dozens of men were building triumphal arches along the road; some of them were working under armed guard. The police chief in Labé explained that he had to provide housing for 300 people. He apologized for his close check of our car papers: no vehicles were allowed to leave Labé, without special permission, until the visit was over. On the road to Conakry, villagers were painting the houses that fronted on the highway. These were truly Potemkin villages: most houses were painted only on the front, a few on the sides, none on the rear. From Labé to Conakry, we passed under close to one hundred arches and saw perhaps a thousand people at work - all preparing for the ten-day state visit of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, President of the Ivory Coast, and his eighty-member suite.

Conakry, the shabby and charming capital of Guinea, cleaned itself up for Houphouet. Even the curbs were painted, but it rained the next night, and the paint ran. On the day Houphouet arrived, crowds lined the street leading to the palace of President Sekou Touré. The women, dressed alike according to their party unit, lined one side of the street and danced; the men, all in white, stood quietly on the other side. They waited for hours. At last the two Presidents passed by in an open Cadillac. Everyone cheered and went home.

Later that week, a massive parade was held in the center of Conakry. Floats depicting the oppression of Guinea by France in colonial days



AN ARCH FOR HOUPHOUET



PARADE IN CONAKRY (Note tank)

were followed by four or five big tanks (Russian). It is doubtful that these monsters, so proudly paraded in the streets of Conakry, could ever get to Guinea's borders to fight a hypothetical enemy. This does not mean the tanks are there primarily to protect the government against its people. They may be simply toys - expensive toys, since Guinea must pay for them - whose main purpose is to be used in parades. Later on Touré and Houphouët made speeches. The crowd thinned out as they spoke; many people had been standing in the sun for four hours. Both Presidents harked back to the days before 1958 when they were political comrades. Both spoke of the "misunderstandings" since 1958, in the years when Touré called Houphouët a French puppet, and Houphouët helped France quarantine Touré. Both proclaimed that the misunderstandings were now over, and Horoya, the paper of the ruling Parti Democratique de Guinée, later announced that Guinea and Ivory Coast were now "one country with two capitals". Touré said that African unity will have to be primarily economic, "with respect for the political options of each" - a reversal of his former emphasis on political union. Houphouët in turn dutifully praised the ideal of that unity which he has done so much, successfully, to prevent.

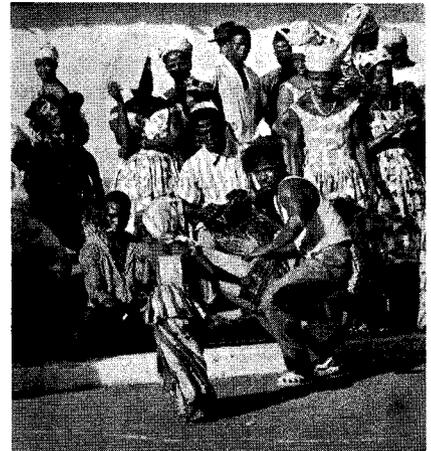
An evening of cultural events was staged for Houphouët at the PDG headquarters. (In tribute to the party's predominant role in Guinea, its building is handsomer than most government offices.) A few songs that sounded remarkably like West Indian Calypso. The songs mentioned Touré occasionally - Houphouët's name was added for the occasion - but they spoke mainly of the party, for there is relatively little cult of personality about Touré. Indeed Touré, who is refreshingly casual at times, is said to discourage too much adulation. A few dances, then a short play. The play was written and staged by the party organization of the region of Mamou, and won the annual dramatic competition against the entries of Guinea's 28 other regions. (There are also dance and song competitions.) It is worth describing in some detail, since it deals with a stock West African theme - rural exodus - and it may offer some insights about Guinea today.

As the curtain goes up, a group of young people sitting around drinking in a (Moslem) village. Two young men are told by their girls that the girls will not marry them unless they go to the city and make some money. The young men say: "Never will we till the soil, never will we join the cooperative". (The second phrase is propaganda, but the first is the creed of any youth who gets through elementary school.) After deciding to go, they consult the marabout for charms, promising him to pay him on their return. No charms on credit, says the marabout, and the youths dig up the cash they claimed not to have. They trek to Conakry, stopping occasionally to offer a slapstick prayer to the "grande ville". The next scene opens in the home of a government official who is a distant relation of one of the youths. The official, vastly self-important, is reading Horoya and listening to the inevitable transistor; his wife is badgering him about money, explaining that they have no cash because "Monsieur" insists on supporting hordes of relatives. The official eases his feelings by ferociously chasing a tattered frightened servant around the room. The two young men creep shyly into the room, and the official gives them a surly greeting. One youth explains that he is Mamadou, son of a cousin of the official. "Each of my cousins has several sons named

Mamadou," says the official, but eventually the relation is established. The wife refuses to take them in, and the official sends them away after he discovers that they have neither jobs nor party cards. The youths end up as "wally-wallys", the ragged men who fight to carry suitcases at the station, or hang around the port in the hope of odd jobs. Things get worse and worse. Mamadou broods: "Once I had a name, Mamadou the Fortunate... Now I'm only Mamadou Wally-wally..." Eventually they are arrested by the party's youth militia and sent home to their village. They appear, hanging their heads, before the clean-cut young men and women of the cooperative. They say they were all wrong, they are forgiven, and the play ends with everyone chanting: "Vive le PDG... Vive la cooperative."

What is worth noting about this play? (It was, incidentally, surprisingly well acted, particularly by the two youths.) It was a morality play that had the party's seal of approval - and a morality play in comic form is unusual in itself. (Down in the front row, Sekou Touré was laughing uproariously.) There were no major heroes or villains. Except for the sacrosanct party and cooperative, everyone was goodhumouredly mocked. The government official on stage was a devastatingly accurate parody of many members of the audience. That this play could be performed, at this point in revolutionary Guinea's brief and troubled history, is a tribute to the realism of the nation's rulers. One may even dare to hope that this capacity for self-mockery - and the play is not the only place I have seen it - will help protect Guinea from the solemn excesses of revolution.

A few days later Houphouet set sail for home, and the grand tour was over. What had been accomplished? For Guinea - and we of course saw it from the Guinean side - it put a ceremonial seal on Touré's efforts to mend relations with his neighbors. Touré, largely isolated a year ago, has been seeking friends all over recently. Last spring he came to



STREET SCENES DURING HOUPHOUET'S VISIT TO CONAKRY

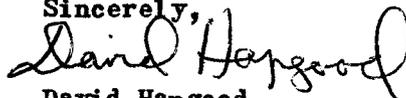
terms with Senegal; that border is now open after being virtually closed for two years. Now he has restored good relations, at least on the surface, with his old leader, Houphouet. Touré has even discreetly tried to mediate the bitterest quarrel in his area: that between Senegal and Mali. Beyond Senegal and Ivory Coast - both of whom are on good terms with France - Touré's major objective seems to be a settlement with the French. For Houphouet, the main value of good relations with Guinea (and, indirectly, of a settlement between Guinea and France) may be to lessen the dissatisfaction of his own young men, who find Touré more dynamic and exciting than Houphouet himself.

None of these considerations made necessary the potentate's welcome extended to Houphouet (which will be reciprocated when Touré visits the Ivory Coast). Such fancy receptions for state visitors are common in Africa these days; two other Presidents were in Conakry shortly before Houphouet. No one seemed to know just how much the Houphouet tour cost Guinea. Rumors ran up to two - or four, or eight - million dollars; commandants of the regions through which the party passed were said to have received \$100,000 each to get things ready. A photographer in Houphouet's eighty-member suite said he received 25,000 Guinean francs (about \$110) from the Guinean government for pocket money and that higher officials received \$500; he said he found a bottle of whiskey, phonograph records and cigarettes in his room at every stop. The government of Guinea was distracted from virtually all other endeavors for at least two weeks - much longer for some officials. And thousands of men spent thousands of hours - free labor for the government, but human effort nonetheless - to build those arches, to paint those house fronts.

"What this shows is our discipline," a party official remarked to me during the festivities. Houphouet was reported to have been impressed by the party's mobilization of the masses. The motto of Guinea, which may sound familiar to some readers, is: "Gouvernement du peuple, par le peuple, pour le peuple". During Houphouet's visit, it seemed to be: mobilization of the people, by the party, and for - what?

Houphouet was also impressed by the style of African house he saw in the Fouta-Djallon, in the north of Guinea. "I want one of those," he said the first time he saw a hut in the Fouta. Later we asked a Guinean official how the house would be gotten to Houphouet. That, the official said, was no problem. "We'll send a few comrades to Abidjan to build it for Houphouet," he said.

In that context, the word 'comrades' had a hollow ring.

Sincerely,

David Haggood