

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 16

How Are Things in Nzérékoré?

December 4, 1962
Nzérékoré, Guinea

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Half a century ago, it took 15 to 20 days on foot to go from Kankan to Nzérékoré (see map on page 3) and the trail wound through rain forest most of the way. Today you drive the 236 miles in a day; the road was recently scraped for the Houphouët-Boigny tour. Today, also, the rain forest is giving way, destroyed by wasteful cultivation and fire, to scrubby savannah. Near Nzérékoré you reach the dividing line between the Moslems of the open country and the pagans of the forest. Nature imitates the map: we see our first rain forest in a thousand miles, followed within moments by the first pig and the first palm-wine drunkard.

Nzérékoré - population 30,000, center of a region with about 250,000 inhabitants - is in the side pocket of Guinea, a few miles from Liberia and the Ivory Coast. Its people, the Guerzé, are pagans, related to the people of Liberia rather than to the Moslem races that dominate in Guinea. The Guerzés have been gradually pushed south by the Malinkés from the north. The process was interrupted when the French defeated the Malinké conqueror, Samory, and conquered Nzérékoré in 1910. The Moslem conquest of the Guerzé was completed in 1958 by the man who claims to be the grandson of Samory: Sekou Touré. Nzérékoré is administered by Moslems alien to the Guerzés. One of their first acts after independence was to send the police into the bush to seize or burn the pagan objects of worship; some are now on display at a tiny museum in Nzérékoré. (The African Moslem, with his gris-gris, and the Christian, with his medal, agree in condemning the pagan who "worships inanimate objects".) The Moslem rulers also banned the initiation rites in which Guerzé youths were taken into the bush to learn the duties of adult life in their society. But the rites were dying out anyhow: the period of initiation had been reduced from seven years to four and finally to a single year.

The Guerzés grow subsistence crops - upland rice, manioc, millet - and sell some kola nuts, oil palm kernels, coffee. They cut down and burn off the forest, plant a crop of rice, followed by a couple of years of millet or manioc. The land is then exhausted and must be abandoned for at least ten years before it partially regains its fertility. These practices are of course extremely wasteful - three acres idle for each acre in production - and Guinea's agricultural capital is gradually being consumed. But attempts at conservation, such as a ban on brush fires, always meet with failure: why, say the peasants, conserve the land when there is plenty of unused land around? Similarly, there is no property right in land because land has no value in itself. The land belongs to the person using it as long as he continues to work it. Sometime in the not-too-distant future all this will change. The upward curve of population - the population of

Nzérékoré seems to have almost doubled in ten years - will meet the downward curve of productivity. But that time has not yet come.

On our arrival in Nzérékoré, we call on the acting Commandant, the chief administrator of the region. The acting Commandant, Ibrahima Diallo, makes some helpful arrangements for us and graciously offers to take us on a tour of the town. These are the accomplishments that the Commandant showed us - we made no requests to see anything in particular:

The mansion built for the Commandant. Except for the Commandant's office building, it is the largest building we saw in Nzérékoré.

The presidential villa, on a hill overlooking the town, built for Sekou Touré to occupy when he is here. When he is not here, it is empty. Two six-room guest houses - two bathrooms in each - are provided for the President's guests. Above the villa the Commandant is laying out a park - "for tourists" - with little gravel paths bearing such names as "Boulevard du Peuple" and "Avenue P. Lumumba".

The new hotel that is under construction (see page 3). Nzérékoré's existing hotel is pretty awful, but presumably it could be cleaned up. Each of twenty rooms will have a bath; there will be a park in front; behind the hotel will be motel-style cabins "for couples who want privacy".

Housing for the Garde Republicaine that patrols the borders. "Since September, 1961, we have built 36 units," says the Commandant.

Toward the end of the tour, the Commandant pulls up in front of a building to speak to a pedestrian. "What is that building?" we ask. "The hospital." "Was it built since independence?" "Yes." Apparently the Commandant did not intend to show it to us. I mention the incident to a Bulgarian doctor who staffs the hospital with another Bulgarian and an Italian. "Perhaps he was ashamed of the hospital - as he should be," the doctor says. All three doctors are bitter about the local administration. The hospital has no running water and until recently had no electricity, though there is electricity in town. "The hospital is the last of the Commandant's interests," says the Italian doctor.

Questions about the people's attitude toward the administration produce no useful information. "They are happy to see that handsome buildings are being built," says a Greek merchant who has been here 20 years. The local party organization - whose leaders cannot hold government jobs - has been at odds with the administration recently. The issues seem to have been mainly ethnic; the Guerzés have just gained control of the local party.

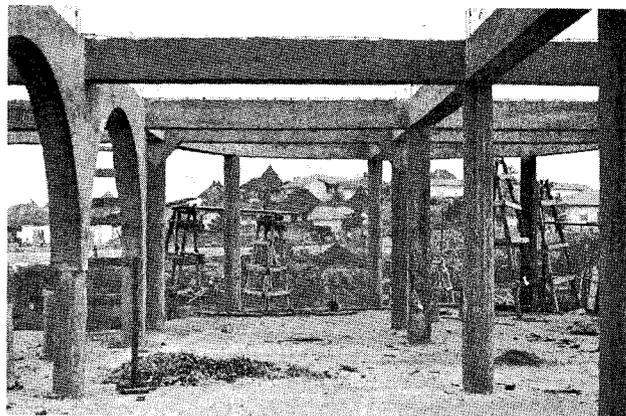
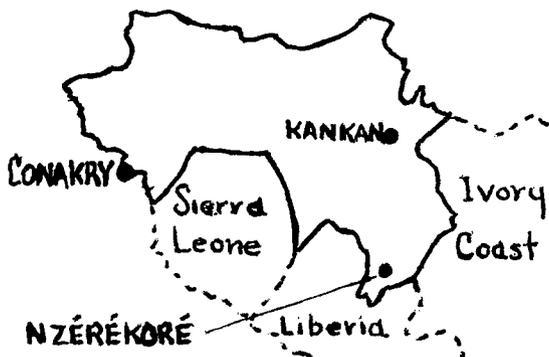
Nzérékoré's Director of Production, Mori Magassouba, welcomes the opportunity to tell an outsider about his problems and projects. His main obstacle is that the peasants, after centuries of insecurity, have no desire to produce beyond their immediate needs and feel few desires that require savings. Government employes moving out to the villages tend to arouse economic desires: the peasant whose wife leaves him for the new

school teacher, because the teacher has more money, is motivated to earn some money himself. Traders coming to the remote villages help arouse desires that cause added production. But Magassouba says that production per capita has, if anything, declined since independence; "the economic is lagging behind the political," he says. No new crops, techniques or tools have been introduced, with the exception of the tractors belonging to the state's Centre de Modernization Rurale. (A dozen Russians have been in Nzérékoré for two years building a sawmill. The hangars for the sawmill are down in Conakry, but no one as yet has found a way to get them to Nzérékoré. Meanwhile Nzérékoré buys lumber from a mill operated by the Catholic Mission.) Magassouba has no figures on how much work the state's eight tractors have accomplished, but he says they are under-employed. The tractor is not economically feasible here anyhow, he says, and it is a hazard to the soil - but later he says that the state plans to sell tractors on credit to the cooperatives that are just beginning to be formed. The recent administrative decentralization may change the region's attitude towards its expensive tractors: Nzérékoré now must pay Conakry \$120,000 over the next five years for its agricultural machinery, out of its local budget. Magassouba already has a project that may win the region's approval because of decentralization. Coffee shipped to Conakry by truck and rail arrives in such poor condition that it must be reprocessed in Conakry, at great loss. Magassouba advocates proper processing in Nzérékoré and shipping out the shorter route through Liberia; the savings, he says, would pay for better quality control and provide more money for the region.

The trade which Magassouba says stimulates desires has been declining here since independence. The price of rice was set last year well below the prices prevailing in the neigh-



BRIDGE OF VINES



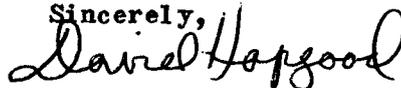
HOTEL UNDER CONSTRUCTION

boring countries, with the result that the peasants smuggled their rice across the porous frontiers and there was a severe shortage in Nzérékoré. This year Guinea has brought its prices into line with those of its neighbors. Merchants still smuggle goods across the border in order to get foreign currency, since the Guinean franc has little value outside the country. And, since the state import monopoly is often out of goods wanted in Nzérékoré - and available across the border - people smuggle produce out and barter it for what they need. Shortages lead to black marketing by the officials in the state stores (some of them are in jail at present): the result is higher prices to the consumer. With prices higher, and with productivity stagnating, it seems certain that the standard of living in Nzérékoré has fallen since 1958.

Nzérékoré has opened two secondary schools since independence. The teachers are from everywhere except Guinea: an American, a few Frenchmen, Russians, South Vietnamese, Yugoslavs - each with his own teaching methods. The American, with whom we find shelter, is in his third year in Guinea. He likes the country, but, judging from the class we attend, he is easily exasperated by his students, and indeed they do not seem to have learned much. "They are very nice but they don't want to do any work," he complains. "And the school administration doesn't care; they pass all the students I flunk." A French teacher observes that the older students seem greatly "politicized": if she rebukes them for laziness, they blame everything on "colonialism".

The opening of the secondary schools was delayed for two weeks this year, because members of the Houphouët-Boigny party were lodged in the teachers' quarters. The lodgings were decorated and stocked with furniture and whiskey for the occasion. Meanwhile, the teachers, already on salary, were moved around Guinea at the state's expense. The Houphouët party spent one night in Nzérékoré. (At least the merchants profited from the visit. The party ordered everyone to wear white for the parade, and the merchants sold thousands of yards of material.)

The road west from Nzérékoré crosses a river, the Diani. Three means of crossing the river can be seen, and two are in use. One is a bridge made of vines, which dates from before the French conquest. (see page 3). A second is a small old ferry, also in use. The third is a larger ferry, which has been lying unused on the river bank since the French brought it out just before independence. All it needed, before it began to rust away, to be put into operation was a few parts. The inhabitants of the nearby villages, who built the bridge of vines, repair it after every rainy season. Nobody has been interested enough in the new ferry to make the effort necessary to put it into operation.

Sincerely,

David Hapgood