

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH - 18

Dahomey: No Room at the Top

February 2, 1963  
Hotel de la Plage  
Cotonou, DahomeyMr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In "L'Agriculture au Dahomey", published in 1906, less than twenty years after the French conquest, N. Savariau wrote:

"Since Dahomey has been part of our colonial domain, it has always been a very prosperous country; it is administered by its own means without financial aid from metropolitan France; from the first years its budget has shown a surplus. This situation is due to the rapid development of commerce and agriculture."

Sad reading, half a century later! For Dahomey is today a very poor country. It is administered, not by its own means, but with the help of an annual French budget subsidy of \$3 million. Its exports cover less than two-thirds of its imports. Dahomeyan exports are becoming less competitive: its oil palms, source of the main export, are less productive than those of neighboring countries. The Dahomeyan peasant scratches a meagre existence from a soil whose productivity is being gradually consumed. His only tools are a primitive hoe and a machete, and he has no draft animals: few farmers in the world get as little feed for as much effort as the Dahomeyan. He suffers from a lifelong shortage of protein in his diet, and he tends therefore to have little physical or mental energy to spare.

Other than agriculture, which occupies more than fourth-fifths of the population, government is the only important source of jobs. It pays much better: the lowest paid government employe earns in a month what the peasant earns in a year. Therefore, here as elsewhere in West Africa, a government job is the goal of a young man with some education. The difference in Dahomey is that there is no more room in the government. Salaries eat up 80 percent of the budget (not counting the French subsidy). Only about 250 Frenchmen remain in the government - less than half the number of Dahomeyan students at the University of Dakar alone. The unemployed young man who offers to watch your car, or wash it, or change money, speaks fluent French and has a degree that would guarantee him a government job in most parts of Africa. An expensive educational system - 29 percent of the budget goes to keeping 20 percent of the school-age population in school - is busily grinding out more young men like this, young men who flee the bush for reasons of money and prestige but

for whom the city has no room. To add to the burden of unemployment, some 50,000 Dahomeyans in other countries of Africa are likely to be forced to come home eventually; 12,000 were driven out of the Ivory Coast in 1958.

Faced with onrushing bankruptcy, the Dahomeyan government suddenly bestirred itself last year. Though Dahomey is conventionally classed as a "conservative" African state, it set out on an agricultural program unparalleled in its rigor. Every village in Dahomey was ordered to start a collective field; village leaders who did not obey were simply tossed in jail. The government had two goals in mind: to increase by 20 percent the land under cultivation, and to teach better farming practices which the peasants would then apply on their own land. The peasants can work both their land and the collective, the government argues, since they now only work 80 to 120 days a year. At first the entire revenue from the collectives was to go to such social projects as schools and dispensaries, but the state quickly backed down and decided to let the peasants themselves have 50 percent of the money earned from the collective crop.

Their first crop has not yet been harvested, so it is too early to pass judgement on the collective fields. Recent reports to the government, written after the fields were well underway, show many failures but also many apparent successes. Most of the collective fields I visited showed the effects of bungling or neglect; but in each case I was told that the yield from the collective, low as it might be in relation to what it should be, would still be higher than the miserable yields on the peasants' own land (for example, 100 kilograms of cotton to the hectare).

However - and leaving aside all ideological preferences - the collectives are open to some serious doubts. The first and simplest is the possibility that added production on the collectives will be balanced by reduced production on individual fields. True, the peasant only works 100 days a year, but the peak season comes at the same time on his field and on the collective, and his stamina is so low that not much more effort can be required of him. Will the peasant gain enough to motivate him to work voluntarily in the collective next year? In theory, yes. But the peasant now is discouraged by an archaic marketing system in which corn, for example, falls to 7 francs a kilo at harvest time and jumps to 50 francs in a couple of months. The government has promised to buy all the collectives produce - but it does not seem to have storage space for the crops. And, in a society where corruption is commonplace, village leaders and government officials are likely to siphon off much of the 50 percent share that is supposed to go to the peasants. But despite these possibilities of failure, the collectives will be worthwhile - this is the reasoning of some dedicated Dahomeyans - if they succeed in spreading better farming methods.

At the same time, Dahomey is trying to settle some of its

unemployed youth on the land. The results of these experiments, which so far have generally failed, show how hard it is to do anything about this basic African problem. The theory is that the young men will stay on the land if the government can help them earn a decent income. This theory gets no encouragement from what happened at a place called Hinvi. There the government settled 40 unemployed youths from the city, many of whom had originally come from the countryside. When the revenue from the first crop was divided, after the state's expenses were deducted, each youth found that he had earned 10,000 francs (\$40) clear, plus his keep. This amount, earned in six months, is more than the average peasant clears in a year. The boys asked for a two-week vacation. After the vacation, the majority failed to return to Hinvi; even after considerable official pressure on their relatives, one-third of the young men refused to go back. And yet 10,000 francs was more than any of them had ever earned, or even seen, in their lives.

In another experiment, the state provided loans and land for 14 families expelled from the Ivory Coast. When I visited them, several men had dropped out, less land had been planted than last year, and the group was deeply in debt to the government. They said: "We need more money from the government... It would be all right for peasants, but not for us..." The records of the technical lycee and the trade school show that only about one-fourth of their graduates are working in the trades they learned; more than one-fourth are unemployed and the rest have jobs that have no relation to their education. "They have exaggerated ideas of the jobs they should have," the Dahomeyan director of the technical lycee said of his graduates.

These "exaggerated ideas" are of course the product of a system in which the minority that goes to school is led to expect the money and prestige of government jobs. For a young man to work as an artisan, much less as a farmer, is to accept lifelong defeat. The young men who refused to return to the farm at Hinvi were, in poker terms, splitting a pair of sixes in order to draw to a straight. They prefer to hang around the city as long as there is any chance, even the faintest, that some relative may help them settle on the state's payroll.

The French-derived system of education, which bears much of the blame for this situation, is supposed to be overhauled in the next few years. The plan is to create combined farm cooperatives and schools. In these the children would learn to read and write and would practice modern agriculture; the school's fields would provide the children with the adequate diet they do not get at home. The plan contains the most searching criticism I have seen of the effects of transplanted French education in Africa, but it has one all-important drawback: it is a French, not a Dahomeyan plan, which Dahomey received from a group of French experts. There does not seem to be much enthusiasm among Dahomeyan officials for discarding the system under which

they were raised. At the moment, the government simply does not seem interested enough to make the effort necessary to put the plan into effect.

In this generally gloomy picture, there is one encouraging sign. This is the growing awareness among younger educated Dahomeyans that their country is in trouble. The conventional opinion is that the Dahomeyans are the quickest and most adaptable of the peoples of former French West Africa; it is the Dahomeyans, more than any others, who leave home to seek their living in a hostile environment. National character is of course a slippery subject, and the observer can find whatever he is looking for. Nonetheless, my impressions accord with the conventional view of Dahomey. Conversations with officials seem to get to the point faster here. Problems are discussed realistically, unclouded by the foggy generalities prevalent elsewhere in West Africa (except in Togo before Olympie's assassination).

Today these Dahomeyans talk in pessimistic terms. You hear remarks like "I came back with lots of ideas, but now I'm ready to give up", and even "If we had a referendum tomorrow, we'd all vote for returning to colonial rule". And as yet there has been little change in attitudes at the top level of the government. No money is available for corn storage, but work proceeds on President Hubert Maga's \$3 million palace, and the city of Cotonou has recently been graced with a set of totally unnecessary traffic lights. Maga himself seems still to believe that his government's financial problems can be solved by making the peasants work harder.

For all these reasons -- a stagnant economy, no more room at the top, an intelligent and realistic people -- it is a fair guess that a profound social upheaval may come some day soon to Dahomey.

Sincerely,  
  
David Haggood