

Report on the West Africa Seminar,  
May 30 - June 20, 1992,  
from S. Carapico

In trying to sort out the explosion of sights, sounds, smells, and experiences of our trip for purposes of a report, I will try to separate features that seem to typify the "Third World," elements that seem particular to Africa, and, finally, characteristics that seem uniquely Ghanaian or Senegalese.

In general, the term "Third World" applies to societies and politics struggling to "develop" in the wake of European colonial rule that superimposed Western economic and political institutions on non-European indigenous cultures of Africa, Asia, and "Latin" America. One feature of this world is contrast: between natural and built environments, native and imported, customary and modern, rural and urban, poverty and wealth. "Dualism" is often said to be a distinguishing feature of the Third World.

Like most Western visitors, I am especially fascinated by the things that one doesn't see so much of in the West but which I've also observed in the Arab World, East Africa, and Nicaragua: open-air markets, recycling for novel purposes, livestock in the open, and unpaved villages of seemingly interlocking family compounds.

The open-air markets, such as the 13th of December Women's Market (initiated by Rawlings' wife in commemoration of his coup), the Kumasi central market, and to a lesser extent portions of the Dakar and Ziguinchor market districts, are among the most colorful and exhilarating sights. They seem the epitome of petty entrepreneurship: large numbers of small traders of primary goods with small, limited stocks which they or their families have often (but not always) produced themselves, operating at a very small margin of profit and open to bargaining over price and/or quantity. Shoppers, who typically (stereo-typically?) also earn money in daily or weekly increments, purchase in small quantities, and, frequently, seem acquainted with the traders. Food, household items, and clothes are the main items, arranged, often redundantly, in rows and rows of stalls or spaces of a square meter or two. Excellent photo opportunities. These markets are for locals; those specializing in native crafts catering to tourists are separate.

Things are used and reused in ways that strike us as novel. Kids craft push-toys and miniature cars from old cans and wires, playthings (apart from soccer balls) not being much bought or sold. Sandals made from old "rubber" tires are another example. In Africa, we also saw a lot of "dead people's clothes" resold in open markets after being donated to charity by Western middle class people.

Livestock, especially sheep and goats ("small ruminants") and chickens, which graze or scratch and therefore cost very little to feed but provide fairly regular milk or eggs as well as occasional meat, are evident not only in villages and along country roads but also in urban neighborhoods. These markets, re-used goods, and animals are mostly part of an "underground" economy that does not show up on national accounts or GNP/capita figures.

The same seems to be true of village economic life - villages built in "traditional" style and usually lacking modern services like electricity and running water. Although some people, especially men, presumably have jobs or businesses elsewhere, livestock and small-scale farming produce food for either direct consumption or direct sale. The level of material comfort is very rudimentary by our standards, and has a slightly romantic quality because despite their poverty folks live very close to nature.

On the other hand, there's also plenty that is modern - the luxury air-conditioned hotels we stayed in, cars and service stations, universities, international banks and businesses, medical facilities, airports, etc. Except when catering to foreigners, even the modern sector - say, colleges, branch banks, and hospitals - are a rather shabby imitation of Euro-American institutions. They lack glamour.

[And a personal note - although filth and parasites lurk in the more rustic environments, my own mishaps just beyond the Labadi Beach and Teranga Hotels make these seductively luxurious havens seem to represent a special danger located at their periphery, at the juncture of the most modern and comfortable facilities with raw nature and poverty.]

The two most significant things that seemed particularly African, or say West African, are first, a multicultural society unified by colonial experience, and, second, the trans-Atlantic slave trade. A third striking feature of West Africa is dress, especially women's fashion.

On one level, West Africa is not a culture but a diversity of historically and geographically related yet still quite unique cultures each with identifiable languages, customs, institutions, and consciousness. I will say a bit more about this in discussing Ghana and Senegal separately, but for the most part I think I developed more of an appreciation for the fact of African cultural diversity rather than for the unique cultural attributes of the various sub-groups we encountered. The partial exception here is the Asante, Ghana's strongest and most politically viable and visible sub-culture, revealed to us through some lectures, performances, and tours, including sessions at Lagon and Kumasi universities; and Senegalese Islamic culture, which is for me a variation on a familiar theme.

The colonial experience is significant in that it created "nation-states" out of diverse polyglot cultures and, particularly striking to our group, gave each new state a European "lingua franca." Some of our most poignant discussions with local intellectuals concerned the role of English or French, respectively, as the language of "high" culture and politics - especially, the language for writing and for formal education. This struck me as one of the most critical differences between West Africa and the Arab countries (although, upon reflection, Francophone North Africa provides a midpoint on what turns out to be a spectrum): for although most Arab states are also arbitrary, even artificial creations of colonial (Ottoman & European) conquest, a common language with a proud literary tradition offers a unity and continuity of civilization that seems absent in West Africa. The questions of national, cultural, and even (for the educated) personal identity remain to be resolved.

One very visible aspect of West African cultural identity, perhaps strongest in Francophone Senegal and the Ivory Coast, is fashion. None of us tired of admiring what women (and men) were wearing - fine damask cloths in brilliant yet tastefully matched colors, cut and designed in updated versions of African styles, sometimes with Parisian flourishes or flounces: thoroughly African yet also modern and fashionable, worn with great panache and equally striking haute couture African hairstyles and, often, real gold (or silver) jewelry. Like all fashion, African clothes reflect social class - the well-to-do sport the finest fabrics and embroidery. Uniquely African are the matching baby wrap and the custom of all women attending a wedding or other ceremony to dress in the same fabric (which may be of European or local manufacture). Since our return I read an article on Senegalese fashion (Deborah Heath, American Ethnologist 19:1:92) that confirmed my suspicion that women's (and, one suspects, men's) dress styles have become more African since independence.

Then there's the slave trade. The most noteworthy piece of architecture we encountered was the Portuguese-built seaside fortress at El Mina, Ghana, a slave-trading post. Although its authenticity is in question, the slave-house of Goree Island off Dakar is also probably the best-known tourist attraction in Senegal. Despite - or, perhaps, because of - the fact that most of us had visited the "import" stations in Jamestown, both sites were ghoulish and disturbing in the historical memories they conjure up. Still, several of our group, learning of internal West-African slavery before Europeans began exporting Africans to the Americas, wondered why there was such focus on trans-Atlantic slave trade. I offer three comments on this issue. First, though scarcely justifiable, intra-African slave trade was part of a local military history that was less racist and, especially, less stable and hierarchical than the American trade: different groups conquered and enslaved each other, and at least a couple of times slaves revolted and formed dynasties that ruled former masters. Secondly, whereas slavery was a conduit for intra-

regional population and labor exchange, the Atlantic slave trade represented large-scale depopulation of the able-bodied youth of West Africa. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the Atlantic slave trade is a major phenomena in American history, the key to African-American history, and the only thing most Americans know about African history. These sites, therefore, are of extraordinary significance to tourists. Although there were also local visitors to these sites, we did not discover whether or how they were important in African history. By analogy, Britain, Spain, and France are more important to American history than the US is to theirs.

Finally, Ghana and Senegal are different places. The four most visible contrasts are the natural environment, the colonial legacy, urban culture, and religion. Ghana is closer to jungle, and Senegal to desert. Therefore animal husbandry is limited in Ghana, and farming combats forest to produce tropical crops - cassava and plantain - whereas Senegalese farmers are herders and millet-growers facing encroachment of the desert. This has other implications for material culture, including thatched huts as opposed to mud brick construction. I was also very struck by the odd planting patterns along Ghanaian highways: fields were rarely cleared and plowed, but rather broadcast and planted helter-skelter among wild growth and along the shoulder of the road. (perhaps because of land tenure problems?) English influence in Ghana and French influence in Senegal permeate modern culture with respect to language, literature, education, consumer tastes, currency (the cidi, tied to sterling, versus the CFA or Central African Franc), military and bureaucratic organization, etc.

Accra and Dakar, both seaside cities, are very different. Accra is spread out in circles, with few structures over two floors, somewhat village-like, whereas Dakar has a central high-rise section laid out in a grid and surrounded by suburbs. Dakar, with a larger resident expatriate and second-or-third-generation community of Europeans and Arabs, is far more cosmopolitan. This implies Western-style consumer satisfaction - like ice cream parlors - but also brings urban pathos in the form of beggars, hawkers, and thieves. Ironically, or at least inversely, of the two provincial towns we visited, Kumasi, the old capital of the Asante kingdom, in Ghana's mountain interior, was more urban and urbane than Ziguinchor, center of the coastal Casamance region of southern Senegal, which was like a giant village of long, wide, dusty streets not unlike Red Sea towns.

Ghana is largely Christian, with a minority of animists who revere nature and the forest, and many of the same sects we have in the U.S. - Methodist, Presbyterian, Mormon, Catholic, Baptist, Episcopal, etc. There is a Muslim majority in Senegal. Various differences flow from this: churches as opposed to mosques in the built environment, Sunday vs. Friday as the day off, Christian holidays and services in contrast to Islamic daily prayers, preachers and priests rather than "brotherhoods." But each religion is also indigenized, with animist traditions in

Ghanaian Christianity and Senegalese interpretations of Islam. We arrived in Dakar during the feast of Tabaski. The city seemed too big for its inhabitants, many of whom were presumably in their ancestral villages for the festivities. Rather stupidly, I initially failed to recognize Tabaski as 'Id al-Adha, though I ought to have recognized because it coincides with the hajj (and we had encountered Pakistani hajjis going from Mauritania to Mecca at the airport). I was confused by the name and by the emphasis on slaughter as sacrifice rather than feast, and the on-the-street drying of bloody skins, both very un-Yemeni. Most Senegalese women wear something on their heads, but so do Ghanaians, and if anything the Senegalese are sexier. Many Senegalese can read or recite Quranic passages, and use Islamic greetings and blessings, but cannot speak or understand Arabic.

Our two women guides, Anna and Mammie, were my most memorable acquaintances. Although neither was typical, each helped form the images we brought from their countries. Anna, 23, a native Twi (Asante) speaker officially secretary to Sunseeker Tours/Ghana but assigned to us virtually round-the-clock, is bright, pretty, slightly plump, eager to please, dresses in heels and either a skirt-and-blouse or fitted and flounced dress out of locally manufactured African cloth, lives alone in a small employer-supplied flat. She prefers white to black Americans. She gave me a carved statue of a woman, a miniature Asante stool, and local fabric to make a dress from, and the other women shifts of Ghanaian material. I gave her earrings and a silk shirt. Mammie, 25, was the most beautiful woman Ephraim ever saw open a soda bottle with her teeth, from Ziguinchor but actually raised in the Arab World where her brother and/or uncle had been Mauritanian ambassador to Morocco, Egypt, Kuwait, etc. and whose best language seemed to be modern standard Arabic but who also spoke Wolof, French, English, and her mother's tribe's language. Her mother was a radio translator of Saudi programming into Wolof, who spoke like Saudi for-export religious propaganda (stilted classical Arabic) and was raising funds to found an Islamic school. Mammie invited us for beer and Youssou N'Dour videos at her brother's and a large rice pilaf lunch at her mother's, and gave me a cast-off Casamance outfit. When we met her she was wearing leggings, a tank top, and a gold jacket; when we left she was wearing a midnight blue embossed linen men's style full-length Senegalese grande boubou, rather Arab in cut and embroidery, with matching pants. Her good clothes were in Kuwait, where she is studying translation at K.U. She thinks African men are "like animals." I gave her my sunglasses.

This is more than I intended to write, yet excludes interesting, exciting, important interviews, art and dance exhibitions, the traditional medicine laboratory, the Rennie sisters' contributions, and so much more. Others, I hope, will have recorded details of these memorable events and observations.

Brief Answers To Big Questions:

1. Ghana and Senegal were great, I can't know anything about others except that they too would be different. Togo shows one can't fully anticipate. Lagon is the obvious target for affiliation.
2. Since I've been on two seminars abroad I think the criteria are great, but others less spoiled might feel otherwise, even assuming I "repay" the university during the Middle East seminar. If the criteria are publicized as characterizing the group (or "mix") rather than the individual it should alleviate hurt feelings.
3. Yes
4. It's useful, if difficult, to avoid major family-type holidays.
5. You've got me. Maybe make reports available, say to departments?
6. Dr. Gabara did a good job. Also, great group dynamic.

I did not fulfill my implicit responsibility to put Uliana in touch with the newly founded West African Research Association for contacts in Dakar. In the future, I will provide contacts when and if an American overseas research center is available to help - as for the Middle East.