

Notes from West African Trip, Jan-March 1999

Bonjour from West Africa (1)

North, east and southern Africa weren't really enough for me; they only whetted my appetite to find out exactly how the continent ticked. My trip last year, starting in Cairo, down the east coast, across the center, down the west coast with a departure from Capetown, was just enough to get a flavor for what Africa could be like, if as a tourist I wanted to give it more time. Last year's trip, if you recall my e-mail (which if you didn't get, I can send) was a bit discouraging, for I mostly saw only problems, not solutions. Problems I hadn't anticipated; solutions which I had figured must exist, but did not seem apparent. Yet I still could not figure out what exactly was wrong.

I left Africa last year a bit confused (confusion is my life's normal condition, so I should say I was only a bit more confused than usual). Last year I felt I had gotten a taste of most of the continent, with the exception of West Africa, an area which has commonly come to mean fifteen or so countries, two-thirds officially French-speaking. They cover the region south of the Sahara, bordered by the Atlantic on the west and the Gulf of Guinea on the south. I figured, just maybe, West Africa would give me the insight I felt lacking at the end of last year's two-month trip.

I am happy to report that I have somehow survived eight weeks in West Africa. And I think I figured out what's wrong with the continent. West Africa was more colorful, brilliant, interesting and certainly more difficult to traverse than what I had experienced on last year's trip, but it also left me more saddened, for I now am more convinced than ever that sub-Saharan Africa is a dying continent. In voodoo, which was transported to the Americas with some of the slaves from West Africa, there are three states of being. There are the living, and there are the dead. Between them is, naturally enough, an in-between state, where the spirit is neither alive or dead. That's where black Africa is today. I see no way it can return to a living state; it can only die. I'll talk about this in subsequent e-mail.

I didn't visit all of West Africa. Sierra Leone was in the midst of a big civil war. Guinea-Bissau was starting up a little civil war; bullets, stray and directed, were mostly confined to the capital, Bissau. Liberia was in the aftermath of a protracted civil war, and security was rumored to be weak. Nigeria was not in civil war; it was in fact venturing out of military rule and groping with "democratic" elections, but the absence of public security and the prevalence of intense corruption, even by African standards, dissuades most tourists from traveling there. The rest of the countries were on the surface at least at peace with themselves, most settling back in post-despotic eras, establishing new despots. The Africans often welcome these periods as times of calm, progress and growth; I see them rather as periods of continued and increasing decay, as new leaders establish themselves and their cronies, stealing what hasn't yet been stolen. New crap in old toilets.

I flew in and out of Abidjan, the capital of Cote d'Ivoire, which is the official English name for the Ivory Coast. (The official name in German is also Cote d'Ivoire). I didn't have an exact itinerary; I knew only that I wanted to stay on the ground. I was guided largely by what visas I could conveniently obtain. Graphically speaking my trip took the form of a prostrate figure 8. From Abidjan I headed north to Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), then west through Mali to the coast, down through Senegal, across The Gambia, down through Guinea and back to Abidjan, to complete the left loop of the figure 8. Then I proceeded northeast to Kumasi, Ghana, through to Togo and Benin (formerly Dahomey), returning to Abidjan along the Voodoo coast, completing the right figure 8 loop. I did not have time to pass through either Niger or Cameroon, which are at the north- and south-eastern corners of West Africa, respectively.

In the next few e-mail, I'll go through my trip. Traveling was nightmarishly exciting, as West Africa has what must be the world's most oppressive tourist culture. Travel is arduous; finally arriving at a destination was almost always more rewarding than the sights themselves or the trip itself (which is to say I did not find being one of 12 persons sardined into a Peugeot 505 taxi for 300 kilometers to be a fun time) . I'll explain why I think sub-Saharan Africa is dying, how it can never recover from the negative changes brought by centuries of colonialization, why there's little chance for it to be pulled into the global economy and modernize along the Asian model. I will argue that West Africa SHOULD NOT modernize; that foreign aid in aggregate does more harm than good, that rural pre-colonial West Africa, which still exists for at least half the population, is much more desirable than the alternative, which is urban development supported by today's colonizers from the North/West, who bring with them bags of money, political advice, well-meaning volunteers and loads of unnecessary infrastructure, often disguising themselves as altruistic NGOs and multi-nationals. With the choice of giving Africa back to the Africans or continuing the status quo which has made these countries permanently dependent on North America, Western Europe and Asia, I would opt for the former. Or at least moving in that direction on the continuum. I am perhaps the only person who thinks that the more money we pour in, the bleaker the situation will inevitably become; this seems so obvious to me. About the only reason to continue gushing in funds is that it makes us in the wealthy North/West feel a bit less guilty. Guilty for being rich. Guilty for being largely responsible for Africa's problems (I will argue), and it is important to us to feel like we are doing something positive. Anything is deemed positive. I don't think we realize how much damage we continue to do.

Next: the trains from hell

Bonjour from West Africa (2)

2. The trains from hell

I love trains. One of the reasons is that, when growing up in isolated rural Virginia, my two best friends were a stamp collection and a train set. Now, two-score years later, I get

to visit some of the exotic places (most of the country names have changed) that were pictured on my stamps, and I get to take contraptions that sort of resemble my Lionels. Except that my toy train's roadbed was as smooth as plywood, the trains themselves were well serviced and in almost mint condition, the countryside was 1950s Americana - a pristinely clean green, the miniature livestock were plentiful and healthy, all the miniature people were white, and the environment was as perfect as one's youth could make it. Trains (and environment) in West Africa are a bit different.

Trains tell you a lot about a country. Take the USA, for instance. When I visit the US every year or so, I usually take a train out of the nation's capital (where the train service one would figure would be about the best the States has to offer). I go to either Virginia Beach (the train doesn't reach that far but there's a connecting bus) or to Charlottesville, Virginia, usually around a peak period, some sort of holiday. Even then the train is never crowded, maybe a quarter filled with passengers. The fare comes out to about \$10 per hour, a lot cheaper than an airplane and probably competitive with a privately-owned car, given the latter's operating cost, insurance and maintenance. The train passes through sparsely-populated countryside, because (from the Chinese point of view which is more or less my point of view nowadays) all the USA is sparsely-populated. I am not sure if Amtrak is self-supporting or whether it still receives some sort of government subsidy. If it can't make it on its own, it should get help from the state; it would be a shame to lose the last few trains that exist in a country whose very history was shaped by the railroad. As for safety, well, American travelers are well advised to bring up to date their life insurance policies before stepping on board. For having such a small number of per capita passenger miles traveled by rail, the USA must have about the highest accident rate and fatality rate of anywhere in the world. To sum up, train travel in the USA is relatively cheap, not crowded and not all that safe. Sort of like the country in general.

Now take trains in China. They cost about \$3 per passenger hour, there's never an empty seat, the aisles are efficiently filled with bodies too, the trains themselves are very safe (given such a huge population per capita figures for safety or anything else in China are always at an extreme), and they traverse a countryside that is utilized about as much as it can be. The country's farmland, as seen from the train, is not very rich; peasants slave to make ends meet. In a few decades China will have to be importing a lot of food (lucky for American agri-business). Trains in China always leave on time, and more often than not arrive punctually, too. Not so with trains in India. They don't even leave on time; they are crowded, but the nice thing is that tickets are easy to purchase. Indians stand in orderly queues, an acquired British trait. If you want a train ticket in China, however, you better first go to the black market, which is run much more efficiently than the railways monopoly. Mark-up is about 100%. In India you have to tip everyone for just about anything; not the case in post-socialist China. In the US, no unnecessary tips, no black market.

Which brings me to trains in West Africa. First of all, there are not so many trains still in service; the colonial transportation infrastructure built by the French and British has been largely abandoned, replaced with roads and busses and trucks. My guide book (Rough

Guide, West Africa, 2nd ed.) identifies only three trains that it figures the rational foreign traveler (as opposed to the train fanatic) would be interested in taking or able to tolerate. One of these goes from Abidjan, through Cote d'Ivoire and across Burkina Faso. That's more or less how I wanted to effect my figure 8 route, so I needed to buy a ticket. I was staying in a guidebook-recommended hotel (\$12 for a single, with shower and fan) in a low-income section of Abidjan called Treichville (the real Abidjan, according to the guide books, a section so real that the Lonely Planet travel guide recommends not venturing out at night there, and another book warns tourists not even to walk around during the day; taxicab is okay, it says), which was a convenient (and safe) walk to the train station.

Purchasing a ticket is easy, too easy. No hell there. There is a queue for tickets, but since I want first class (actually I wanted a couchette but sleepers had been discontinued sometime within the last 6 years - information in the guidebook is about 6 years old) I am told to go somewhere else. The appropriate clerk is eventually found and we go to another building where I am sold a ticket (which costs about \$1.00 per travel hour, if the train runs according to schedule). So I go off to get a visa for Mali (the country I want to visit after Burkina - I had obtained my \$20 Burkina visa in London, on-the-spot service), since I have a day to kill in Abidjan, but am told by Mali that I will have to leave my passport overnight and come back the following day to pick it up with the visa. I can't do that. Flashing my newly purchased train ticket for tomorrow, and after I have just paid \$20 for the visa, I implore the consular official for same day service. There is absolutely no reason these things have to take two days. Perhaps since giving me back my money would be more nuisance than desired, he makes an exception for me, at no extra cost. So I walk around Abidjan for the day. There's a nice cathedral which John Paul II had dedicated (during my eight weeks in West Africa I will find a dozen eglises that had papal visitations), and after I run out of things to do (the museum is closed and I couldn't find much Paris in this 'African Paris'), I retrieve my passport with its new visa, go back to the hotel (by cab since everyone seems to agree that crossing the bridge that separates Treichville from Abidjan proper is extremely unsafe for pedestrians), find a restaurant, have a good meal (\$3, French food, African prices), and call it an early night.

The train departs the next morning on schedule. The first-class section is only about one-quarter filled. There is plenty of leg room; the seat is comfortable as a seat, but the armrest is not retractable and the seat not adjustable so it proves quite uncomfortable for sleeping (but I can't sleep sitting up anyway so it shouldn't make much difference). About five minutes out of the station, the train comes to a full stop and rests for about 15 minutes. The Abidjan - Ouagadougou train has a reputation for often being stressed out and delayed; I am not sure whether this just-out-of-the-station rest stop is planned. All along the route, the train seemingly recuperates at odd places for a few minutes at a time. Perhaps the crew is worried the engine will overheat; perhaps a crew person needs to defecate (the train's toilets have become a bit ripe early on). The part of the journey I am covering (just to Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina) is supposed to take 27 hours; given the distance and about twenty intermediate stations, the speed averages out at about 25 mph, although when the train is cruising it tops twice that velocity. Later during my West Africa trip I will talk with a Japanese traveler who has taken this same trip and the ride

took him an excruciating 60 hours - or twice what it should have taken. (The toilet, he said, literally overflowed with solid waste). I am indeed fortunate.

During the night, I notice the landscape is aglow. We are midway through the dry season, and peasants are burning the savannah or their aftercrops, I don't know which, preparing their fields for cultivation during the rainy season. I start to notice my skin bespeckled with soot. As the night wears on, I become dirtier and dirtier, probably the dirtiest I have ever been (I have 7 weeks and 5 days more in Africa; I am sure to get dirtier). A few hours before, I had wondered why the locals were wearing masks or bandannas. Now I know.

I start to speculate whether this trip deserves a place on my list of life's twenty worst travel days (arrest in the USSR tops the list; bicycling one day against rain, hills, cold and headwind in New Zealand is also included). There is no dining car on this train; I have not had much to eat, a dozen bananas bought from a hawker out the window, so I am sure my blood sugar is plummeting. The three things I look forward to at a travel day's end (a wash, a meal and a sleep) are not forthcoming. I am so tired that sleep sitting up might even be possible if we did not have several hours of border crossings. Actually, only one border. First, the train stops seemingly in the middle of nowhere. We all climb out, walk 500 meters to get out passports stamped. We should have our visa's checked, of course, but no one seems to bother much with this detail. Then we reboard the train, and a few kilometers down the track it stops again for another hour, this time at the Burkina border. The two border stations are not located next to one another. Again, dismount for stamping, but no checking. Back on board I close my eyes only to be awakened when the train police bring in several prisoners and then handcuff them to the overhead luggage rack. As I look at their anguish, my seat begins to feel less uncomfortable. All in all, this second day in West Africa has been quite unforgettable, and I look forward to having more forgettable days. Tentatively, I include today on my "twenty worst" list.

Next: the real train from hell

Bonjour from West Africa (3)

3. The real train from hell

In hindsight I realize that it was a bit premature and unfair of me to label the Abidjan - Burkina train the train from hell. That distinction belongs to the one I am now taking (about a week later) from Bamako, Mali's capital, to Dakar, Senegal's capital. Two different trains run between these capital cities, each wholly owned and operated by either Mali or Senegal (e.g., Mali engine and carriages, Mali crew, Mali food, Mali maintenance versus Senegal engine, etc.). The trains are not equal, just like the two countries are not equal. Mali is considerably poorer and less developed than Senegal. The former is landlocked and has a little tourism (the famous Dogon region which I will have to save for another trip) but not much to connect it with the global economy. Senegal, in sharp contrast, is the so-called gateway to West Africa, through which European funds and

trade flow. (Cotton is the big cash crop for export). The two countries could not be more different in terms of development. Take banking, for instance.

I am carrying traveler's checks denominated in Euro, the paper currency of the European Community which came into existence about a month ago (January 1, 1999). When I asked Thomas Cook for checks in French francs, their Washington office told me they no longer issued them, having replaced them with Euro denomination checks. So I have brought Euro checks to Africa. In Bamako I went to the premier bank in Mali. It was a bit dingy, lit with a few naked night bulbs, no air conditioning, the staff dressed like custodians, not a computer in sight. I was told at the International Operations (IO) counter (a lot of staff, a lot of counters though) that I needed simply to go to Cashier #5. Cashier #5 gave the Euro check a puzzled scrutiny and sent me back to the IO. Together the IO and I went back to see #5, who had vanished from his cage. IO went into the bowels of the bank to search for #5; he emerged ten minutes later with no #5. Meanwhile a long line had formed at the IO counter. I felt guilty about monopolizing IO's time, so I waited for #5 alone (that is, without IO but with a dozen citizens holding foreign exchange and also waiting for #5, because #1-#4 and #6-#9 did not deal in foreign exchange) for #5 to reemerge. When he materialized (perhaps well-rested or well-fed or sexually relieved, I am not sure which), he saw me and together we went back to IO, leaving the rest of the line to continue to wait. Soon there is a backroom conference, with hoards of bank staff leaving their positions to ogle my Euro check as if it were money from another planet (perhaps not an unfair characterization of the European union). For a minute or so Mali's entire banking system comes to a halt. After the powwow it is decided that since the bank has not been formally notified by the European Community about Euro, it cannot handle the check. Never mind (as I point out) that the relevant exchange rates are constant, thus making it incredibly simple to figure out what my check is worth. The exchange rate between the local currency, the CFA (the African franc used in almost all the Francophone countries) and the French franc is constant, at a fixed value of 100:1 against the French franc; the rate between the Euro and franc is constant, too. Thus, the value of my check in African francs is constant, not subject to any fluctuation. Never mind the logic; the bureaucracy has spoken. Euros are no good in Mali. I am told to try another country. Which is exactly what I do. A few days later, in Dakar (after recuperating from this train from hell) I will walk into the Bank of Senegal (well-lit, air conditioned, uniformed personnel, computers), and the teller will take no more than 45 seconds to cash my Euro check, give me a receipt, and send me on my way. The contrast in banking systems is about the same degree as the difference between the nation's trains.

I share a couchette with a French widow, Ann-Marie, an amazing gal who takes respites from her children and grandchildren with trips to Africa and other exotic places. She travels alone, much more adventurous than I, constantly talking with locals, unfazed by their constant harassment for money or gifts (Maliens are unfailing in their search for a cadeau, like a Bic pen, money, or the shirt off your back). The first problem we encounter in our sleeper is that the window is permanently open. The sashcord is broken. And the door, when fully closed, cannot be opened from the inside. I worry, the threat of fire being omnipresent. It turns out that the burning that I had experienced along the Abidjan

- Burkina route was nothing, a minor brushfire, compared to the conflagrations alongside the Bamako-Dakar route (one could see, if not read, by the light of the fires). Also, the roadbed on the other train was relatively pretty good. On this line the roadbed is so corrugated that not only is it impossible to read Conrad's Nostromo, an appropriate novel for this trip, but it is even difficult to sit in the seat, as the train's motion causes me to bounce continually about 3 inches off the seat. The couchette sleeps six, but we have no roommates (obviously locals know something we don't), so both of us are forced to lie down on our trampolines for most of the ride. The motion is so jerky that I am shocked the train can stay on its tracks. In fact, we learn that derailments are quite common. We were three hours late in departing because a freight train had derailed the night before. When we discuss this with our fellow passengers, well-heeled (or is that healed?) train travelers, their inevitable response is: 'only three hours? How fortunate we are.'

The Bamako-Dakar route is a single track with periodic stretches of a parallel second track to enable trains to pass (and thus avoid collisions). If one of the trains is late, however, the other one is forced to be late and has to wait on the side track to allow the other train to pass. In any case, we arrive, late and dirty and tired, in the middle of the night. At that hour you are at the mercy of Dakar's greedy taxi drivers (it is not unfair to say that taxi driving in West Africa offers on-the-job training for professional thieves). After the usual degree of hassle over fare, we find an open hotel with empty if slightly warm beds, the Auberge Rouge, which as you might guess doubles as a brothel.

All in all, I have decided to remove last week's Abidjan - Burkina train ride from my list of life's twenty worst travel days and replace it with yesterday's Mali-Senegal train ride. And I will start a new list: my twenty worst banking days.

Next: Out the train window - The real Africa

Bonjour from West Africa (4)

4. Out the train window - The real Africa

One my first train ride in West Africa, the one out of Abidjan, the landscape is lush, with vegetation stretching up as high as the top of the train's carriage. Within a hundred kilometers of the coast, however, this lushness gives way to savannah, a mix of sand and grass and village huts. The more we go inland, the drier and less crop-friendly the land becomes. West Africa is very much a divided continent: between the lush coastal region and the dry, arduous interior. The major cities in these countries, with the exception of landlocked Mali and Niger, are all located on the coast. Modernization and administrative requirements have forced the development of some non-coastal cities, but for the most part the interiors of the countries remain rural.

Tribal Africa is still largely traditional, and it's where most of the population reside. Cote d'Ivoire is not densely populated. In both land mass and population, it's a large country by West African standards, but when you remove the dozen cities of any size, it is

composed of remote disconnected villages. All of West Africa is like that. Take out the cities and you have something that closely resembles the Africa of pre-colonial times. Some villages are really traditional: no television, no Coca-Cola, no condoms. But I gather that modernization, with missionaries and aid workers and international bankers as its messengers, has crept into most of the villages. Traditional Africa, in so far as it still exists, is rustic, tribe-oriented, subsistence farming, which requires hard work, off and on during a year. No one has a steady job, because nothing requires steady employment. The chieftain is the authority, the government and bureaucracy; there is someone in charge of religion, but everyone else farms. Trade for sea salt and other necessities is by barter. It is no wonder that sea shells, once a rarity from the hard-to-access coast, were the form of currency in pre-colonial times.

In the real Africa of the past, before the Europeans came, there were only a few small cities (really towns) on the coast. Most interior tribes were isolationist; tribal wars, sometimes continual, sometimes occasional, became an effective way to map out the geo-political landscape. We now know that these wars are an absolutely necessary historical development (as they were on the European continent and elsewhere), necessary so that eventually when the conflicts finally stop, nation-states can evolve. The arrival of the Europeans arrested this natural process. Tribal warfare was not allowed to continue. The Europeans created political boundaries that served their own interests, the needs of colonial France and colonial Britain. What exists today, therefore, is a West Africa that has artificial boundaries, artificial nation-states, which are today maintained in large part by governments that survive on contributions from the developed world. The current political map makes little sense. Ethnic, language and cultural groupings cross today's artificial boundaries. One of the most damaging legacies of colonialism (behind slavery) is the creation of such artificial nation-states. They are doomed to fail. If West Africa were redrawn along ethnic lines, it might be composed of seven conglomerations. One such entity would include the coastal regions of Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Another would include sections of Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire and Mali, for example. Such groupings make much more geo-political sense. It is no wonder that tribal Africans put their tribe before their European-created nation-state.

The problem of artificial nation-states is not limited to Africa, of course. Kosovo is the fin de siecle's most conspicuous example. Should this piece of real estate have ever really been part of a Serb nation? Tito maintained an artificial nation-state for a generation; the conflicts that followed him should not really surprise us; nor can a stability be imposed by outside forces. Similar conflicts are inevitable for Africa. The continent's future will inevitably include the breakup of numerous nation-states; Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, South Africa are all likely candidates.

Colonialization in West Africa has meant urbanization. This is what distresses me most about the so-called modernization of Africa. For the most part these European-influenced coastal cities are wholly obnoxious. That statement is a lot coming from someone who loves cities (by training a city planner), despite all their nefarious features. Africa's cities have Satan as city planner. Crowded slums, with a few pockets of residential wealth for

businessmen and government bureaucrats (not to mention foreigners). Where the common people live, in the low-rent neighborhoods which also contain the cheap hotels I frequent, sewers are often uncovered. Many people, mostly males, hang out. They don't work. They didn't need to work in the villages; they don't especially want to work in the cities. A lot of children do not attend school. Compulsory education is not even legislated in many of these countries. The women are busy taking care of the babies (each will average five during her lifetime), and more often than not, the women are called on to run some sort of business, selling vegetables at roadside, selling their bodies as prostitutes. The men just hang out.

Fellow travelers and expatriates who live here tell me, quite frankly, that Africans are lazy. It's the main observation I have picked up on. But I don't think Africans are lazy. Urban Africans hail from a village culture that does not involve nine-to-five employment. In the villages Africans work very hard, carrying water from the well, river or spring that is located miles away, farming acres that given a choice (but there's no lush land, so no choice) should not be farmed. Africans (like Chinese) have always had a lot of children because so many die young. Modernization has changed things. Babies no longer are doomed to an early death (now, I am told, the infant mortality rate in much of Africa is lower than in some cities in the USA). Wells are located in the villages; the four-hour trip for water is no longer necessary (nothing for the men to do, might as well go to the city). The difficulties of farming are, in part, offset by food that arrives in the form of charity and foreign aid.

The Africa I see from the train window is one influenced by modernization, mostly negatively. It is unlike the China I have often seen through the train window. The latter has modern villages. Electricity, phones, schools, book stalls, movies shown on the side of buildings. There are small businesses and enterprises way into China's interior. Villagers in rural China seem to have no aversion to the tedium of nine-to-five factory jobs. In fact, they appear happy to slave in order to ensure a better life for their future generations. Africans, in contrast, do not live for the future. My sense is that Africans live for today. In traditional village life, one lives for today because just surviving today (you try carrying a bucket of water atop your head for 2 miles on an empty stomach in 30 degree C. heat) is sufficient accomplishment to give life meaning. In the past Chinese villagers have certainly had to endure a similarly difficult life, but they have always been willing to sacrifice for future generations. Sacrifice characterizes Confucian heritage cultures. I think sacrifice for the future is not an African trait, not in the males at least. Women sacrifice, but it is sacrifice aimed at the present, just to keep themselves and their family members alive. Africans worry about today (beware of slavers, drought, tribal warfare, a capricious chieftain - the list is almost endless). The lack of a long time-horizon seems inconsistent with what is demanded by urbanization, which is planned development and industrialization. The Asian model, town and village industrialization as well as industry in cities, seems inappropriate for West Africa, where the culture remains rural and traditional. But we from the West and North are insistent that West Africa follow the Asian model. This approach is sheer folly, in my opinion. If we who have the power

continue to force Africa to follow this approach, it will become one of the tragedies of the twentieth-first century.

Next: the red-lighted inn

Bonjour from West Africa (5)

5. The red-lighted inn

My home in Dakar for the next three days is L'Auberge Rouge. A highly recommended cheap hotel - many of the backpackers' guides (the ones in English and Japanese at least) list it - this inn has about twenty rooms, on two levels, circumscribing a shaded courtyard. Sometimes I will relax in the courtyard, reading Conrad, and watching a steady stream of passers-by. There is never much conversation between the couples; these are silent unemotional business transactions; the environment is quite conducive to reading. When the wind is blowing, I can hear the flutter of bedsheets drying on the roof. (One full-time Auberge Rouge employee is assigned to clean and de-stain the sheets). The human flow in the courtyard begins around noon and lasts at least until 3 a.m. The participants of these rendezvous - about one hundred each 24 hours - span the ages (the largest age disparity I saw was 75-30), shapes and sizes (women were often larger than men), with a healthy dose of French expatriates, who I assume are either tourists or are part of the military garrison that France places in Senegal to supplement the country's own army.

In West Africa there is little shame, even some dignity, in prostitution. I find this attitude a bit shocking, as I hail from a somewhat prudish culture, the Southern United States. More worldly Europeans, in contrast, don't give the corporal activities of L'Auberge Rouge more than a passing thought. Yet it reminds me of Africa's number one problem, one in whose shadow all other problems pale (if you can pale within a shadow). Chinese tell me that China has three major problems (population, population and population). Similarly, Africa's plight can be summed up in one word: AIDS. When translated into French, the words of the acronym become 'sida.'

As far as we know, sida started in East Africa. Now, some two decades into the contagion, countries near its birthplace have visible signs of death. Over half the population of Malawi, for example, would test HIV positive. (I can't vouch for these data; they come from local medical workers.). Fellow travelers tell me that Malawi's primary and secondary schools are now having problems finding teachers, a profession that relies on people in their thirties and forties. In Malawi the average male lives to the not-so-ripe age of 46, I am told. Even more insidious, babies every day are born with sida; parents die young leaving grandparents to take care of the offspring. After twenty or so years, I think it is fair to say that sida has killed Malawi (it has destroyed a country that survived 30 years of benign, if self-serving, dictatorship), and it is having a similar effect on its neighbors, which are more rural countries and thus affected less rapidly by the disease. (Initially sida spread across Africa along transport routes; the infection is worst in the cities, but now all Africa is at risk even though sometimes whole villages have been

spared.). Given the prevalence of polygamy and extra-marital relationships in African culture, the continentalization of sida is inevitable; education through billboards, the main line of attack against the disease, is largely ineffective.

Sida has slowly made its way to West Africa. The situation is nowhere near as severe as in East Africa. But West Africa, given its French influence, has one factor that will hasten the spread of sida so that the extent of the disease will within a few years surpass that in East Africa. And it will spread much more rapidly until it blankets the population, except perhaps for a generation of elderly. That factor is prostitution. So I wonder, as I sit in the garden of the Auberge Rouge and read *_Nostromo_*, how many Africans are being infected at this moment within the very walls of this compound.

The only thing that will save Africa from a death by sida next century is the discovery of a vaccine. Even with a vaccine, I don't hold out much hope. Today, polio is alive and thriving in West Africa, despite the existence of a vaccine, in fact two vaccines, for two generations. Many African countries are in the midst of a campaign to make Africa polio-free by the year 2000 (such a campaign has the ring of an international charitable organization and I suspect it enjoys little grassroots support and that it will not be effective). I am not optimistic that Africa can become sida-free even with the miracle of a vaccine. It probably wouldn't cost that much to inoculate all of Africa (with the money from a week's bombing of Yugoslavia and everyone could get a free meal thrown in), but it would require the same type of willpower as demanded in any war. I wonder if the North and West, much less Africa itself, has that willpower. How important is Africa to the world? In any case, a vaccine has yet to be discovered.

I wrote above that prostitution in Africa has a certain dignity about it. Perhaps that's because so much of the population is involved in the trade, either as practitioners or paying participants. I don't want to debate here the noble quality of the world's oldest profession, but I do want to discuss dignity. If I were asked for a single word to describe West Africans, it would be 'undignified.' I know this is a horrible thing to say about a people, a stereotype, a generalization. Often I hear tourists comment that a certain group of poor people (I have heard this said about Chinese, Indians, native Americans, Africans, etc.) 'have such dignity.' At best this is a rather condescending remark; at worst it tends to be racist. So, despite the possibility that my comments will still be criticized along these lines, let me qualify my remark: I have never traveled anywhere in the world where more people have less dignity than in West Africa, as I define dignity, which is a personal perception, a feeling/observation more than a dictionary definition.

West Africa has an oppressive tourist culture. By that I mean that almost everywhere one (a white person, that is) goes, he or she is besieged and hounded and assailed by beggars, touts, salespeople, con artists, street entrepreneurs. The touts, salespeople, con artists and entrepreneurs are common to tourist areas all over Africa. I dislike them, but I accept them as a by-product of modernization and tourism. It is best to treat them like gnats, and ignore them or dismiss them with a wave of the hand. What makes West Africa a bit

different from other tourist cultures, however, is the abundance of people asking for a pure handout; they are not selling anything. These beggars come in many forms.

I don't mean beggars like the ones in India (yes, and even China), where begging (in India that is) is an actual profession and the culture (both Hindu and Islamic) accepts begging and instructs the privileged to help the poor. To me beggars in India seemed dignified enough, and I did not feel especially targeted by them. Their main audience was the general Indian population. In West Africa, however, especially when one (again a white one) visits a place of sufficient interest to be listed in a guide book but also when just walking down a street in a normal neighborhood in a non tourist-oriented location, one is constantly under attack. I'll give one example from my first day in West Africa.

In Abidjan I went out to purchase a bottle of water. This was before I realized that city water in West Africa is perfectly drinkable (thank you World Bank and UN). Perhaps it is not very tasty, but it does not upset the digestive system, either. My criterion is: if the stuff out of the spigot smells like a swimming pool, it's safe to drink. After buying mineral water that first time, I am approached by a well-dressed man. Hearing me speak what I intend to be French (and his thus knowing that I am a native English speaker), he begins in English (it is American English so he is probably from war-torn Liberia, a source of much of the refugee population) a general conversation, asking how I like Africa, aren't (suggestively) the women beautiful, how many children I have, the normal questions put to perfect strangers. Eventually, as I walk away, he says, 'Oh, will you give me some money?' What, for having talked with him? Here was a man, who seemed middle-class to me (he offered to have 'his boy' press my very wrinkled ((but clean)) shirt, but I declined), apparently unemployed at 9 a.m., and he asks me, a perfect stranger, for a handout. I consider that a big undignified, by my standards. My response, by the way, is a question for him: 'No, why should I give you money?' For the next eight weeks I will find that it is virtually impossible to walk more than several hundred meters anywhere in West Africa and not have someone approach, strike up a conversation, and eventually try to sell me something or ask for money or a cadeau (gift). I always answer these requests with the same question (often simply 'pour quoi?') and never got a response much beyond 'I need it.'

The people of modern-day West Africa have developed what can be called a cadeau culture. As nation-states these countries survive (I mean survive, not just supplement their own resources) on the handouts from the wealthy, and rightly so guild-ridden, North and West. Without foreign aid, most countries in West Africa could not exist as they do today (in other words their urban infrastructure could not be maintained and salaries of politicians, bureaucrats and business elite could not be paid). So, perhaps it is not surprising that the average man or woman or child in the street expects the white tourist to hand over something of value, for which he or she receives nothing in exchange, except the knowledge that the receiver received it. This is exactly the game the national governments play. In Benin, a country where the tourist culture is probably the most oppressive of any country in the world, hundreds of village children will encircle entire tour groups, making escape impossible without the white foreigners' delivering something

of value. Many tourists seem to accept this condition. Would locals ask for gifts if there weren't at least a chance they would be forthcoming? In fact, I meet tourists - mostly French tourists, but then most tourists in West Africa are from France - who bring with them boxes of Bic pens and various trinkets for dispensing during the very types of occasions described above. Tour books even recommend bringing 'small favors.'

I do not mean to say that foreign aid is all bad. Rural schools and drinking wells and health clinics are being built. No doubt some of the money improves the quality of life of particular individuals. But foreign aid does a lot of harm, too. It destroys traditional culture. It reinforces corrupt regimes (by giving politicians more patronage to dispense and tightening their grip on office), and it perpetuates the urban-rural divide, making the cities bigger and more enticing and directing a village-to-coastal city population flow that results in more and more urban problems (lousy sanitation, increased sida, higher urban unemployment, more crime) that must be dealt with by more and more foreign aid. Sadly, the good intentions of the North and West pave a hellish road in West Africa. The single largest effect of foreign aid: to beget the need for more foreign aid. It seems not to be in the interest of the world's poverty bureaucrats to address this problem. Perhaps the question 'Will you give us more money' should be responded to with a more serious 'pour quoi?'

Next: Pests and bush taxis in the Casamance I