



The confederation of Senegal and Gambia: a first step to abolishing the boundaries to development in West Africa?

best of their situation. Peanut farming, tourism, and import duties levied on vast quantities of consumer goods for sale — or smuggling — to neighbouring countries have provided Gambia with a stable economy.

On January 1, 1982, the two nations merged in a confederation known as Senegambia, bringing to an end 17 years of discussions. Under the agreement, Senegal and Gambia remain sovereign nations. They are, however, integrating their security forces and their communications networks, coordinating their foreign policy, and undertaking to form an economic and monetary union.

For Boubacar Barry, a history professor at the University of Dakar and Secretary-General of the Association of African Historians, the union of the Gambia and Senegal is but a first step towards the creation of the "Greater Senegambia."

"In current political terms," he says, "Senegambia consists of the Republics of Senegal and Gambia. Historically, the Senegambian region is of far greater dimensions, including the whole of the Senegal and Gambia River basins, from their sources to their mouths."

"Greater Senegambia", then, would include not only Senegal and the Gambia, but vast chunks of Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, and all of Guinea-Bissau. "This Senegambia has always existed," states Professor Barry. "Although its peoples have different names: Peul, Serer, Wolof, Toucouleur, Diòla, Mandé, and so on, we can see that their social and political structures are about the same."

"Prior to the 15th century, because it is adjacent to the ocean and the ocean did not yet play an economic role, this region was no more than an appendage, the cul-de-sac of West Africa, whose centre of gravity was the western Sudan at the loop of the Niger River. But everything changed after the fall of the Mali kingdom in the 15th century. The Mali empire, on the wane on its home ground, fell back to the coast and survived for centuries along the banks of the Gambia River."

After that pivotal century, Senegambia began to gain importance as Atlantic trade, which had become more important than trans-Saharan trade, expan-

ded. At times, such as under the rule of the Wolofs and at the time of the invasion of the Peul conqueror Koli Tengela, it even constituted a single entity. The coastal kingdoms, however, armed by the Europeans, subsequently gained strength and formed a mosaic of small States.

In the 17th century, Atlantic trade had a corrosive effect on African societies, particularly as a result of the slave trade. "Warlike aristocracies established themselves in each of the small coastal kingdoms", says Dr Barry. "Any union was impossible because man-hunting was their sole activity."

"The only pan-Senegambian political force to emerge then was Islam", continues Barry. "Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Islam acted as an ideology of change, both politically and socially. All subsequent attempts at union were by the Moslems."

"Paradoxically," states Professor Barry, "it was the colonial conquest that in a way put an end to the political fragmentation of Senegambia. When France conquered a large portion of Senegambia at the end of the 19th Century, it united all of these kingdoms. At the same time, it created imbalances."

"The colony of Senegal became a homogeneous region, but the English held onto the Gambia. Guinea-Bissau was conquered by Portugal. The rest of Senegambia, although still under French rule, was joined to other colonies. Subsequent independence merely confirmed the political map as it had been planned by the colonial powers."

"Now the independent states realize the impossibility of developing given these ridiculous boundaries," points out Boubacar Barry. "We have two enormous joint economic projects: the Gambia River Development Organization (omvg) and the Senegal River Development Organization (omvs)." The aim of both is the agro-industrial development of the two river basins. The omvg includes Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. The omvs includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and Guinea.

"These are without doubt the two largest regional projects that could ensure the social and economic development of the region, irrespective of national boundaries," says Dr Barry. "Why," he wonders, "can there not be a single structure — the first modern Senegambian structure — which brings all of the countries, including Guinea-Bissau, together to consider these problems globally?"

"It is a dream based on an historical reality," he says. "I do not think politicians have this vision yet. It is good to draw their attention to the enormous possibilities of a Greater Senegambia." □

SENEGAMBIA

BUILDING ON THE PAST

JEAN-MARC FLEURY

Professor Boubacar Barry received an IDRC Professional Development Award in 1981 to write a history of Senegambia from the 15th to the 20th century. According to Dr Barry, this overview of the economic, political, and social aspects of the region's evolution is essential if planners are to formulate regional development strategies. "In fact," says Dr Barry, "the entire region is threatened by desertification and only a realization of the necessity of regional integration — economic, social, and political — will enable us to lead a successful battle against the desert."

Jean-Marc Fleury interviewed Dr Barry in Dakar, Senegal.

Legend has it that to create Gambia a British gunboat sailed as far as it could up the Gambia River. A gunshot fired forward determined the total length of the country (325 kilometres), and one to the left and another to the right demarcated its width, from 20 to 50 kilometres.

This tiny West African country, completely hemmed in by Senegal, has been one of the most blatant anachronisms of the African continent. Gambia posed a serious problem for Senegal by cutting off direct access to Casamance, the larger country's most fertile province, off whose shore oil discoveries have been made. The Gambians, however, have managed to make the