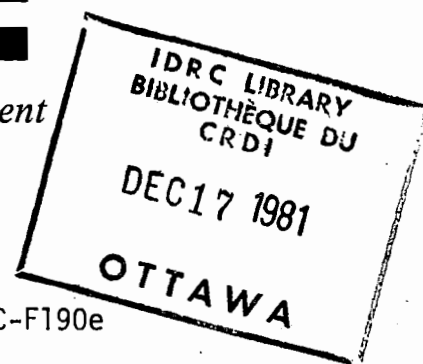


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SENEGAMBIA — SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

by Jean-Marc Fleury

DAKAR, IDRC — Legend has it that, to create the 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, is one of the most blatant anachronisms of the African continent. It poses a serious problem for Senegal by cutting off direct access to Casamance, its most fertile province, throughout which oil discoveries have been made. The Gambians, however, have managed to make the best of their situation. Peanut farming, tourism and some smuggling have made Gambia a haven of peace and stability. Even in 1978, the New York Times cited democracy in the Gambia as an example for the whole of Africa.

On July 30 last, all this collapsed with an attempted coup d'état. Today, president-elect Sir Dawa Jawara is once again in power, but only thanks to the massive intervention of Senegalese troops. The United Nations agencies are examining ways of getting the country back on its feet, while the Senegalese army remains omnipresent. Once again, there is some question of joining the five million Senegalese with the half million Gambians within the framework of a confederation or, at the very least, some sort of customs union.

This would mitigate the effects of one of the most bizarre boundary demarcations on the continent.

For Babacar Barry, a history professor at the University of Dakar, the union of the Gambia and Senegal is but a first step towards the creation of the "true" Senegambia. "In current political terms," he says, "Senegambia consists of the Republics of Senegal and the Gambia. Historically, Senegambia is of far greater dimensions. It includes the whole of the Senegal and Gambia River basins, from their sources to their mouths."

"Greater Senegambia", then, includes 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, Diōla, 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. Something extraordinary occurred. 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, expanded. 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. "The trade favoured the political fragmentation of Senegambia," explains Babacar Barry.

"Warlike aristocracies established themselves in each of the small coastal kingdoms. Any union was impossible because manhunting 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 played a role of ideological change both politically and socially. All subsequent attempts at union were on the part of the Moslems. Islam became the sole form of contesting the established power in that the aristocracies, having associated themselves with the architects of the slave trade, had lost the basis of their legitimacy."

Hence, the popularity of the Toucouleur chief El Hadj Omar who gave concrete form to Islamization in Senegambia. Unfortunately, his action coincided with the colonial conquest, and the most widely acclaimed Senegambian conqueror eventually had to establish his kingdom in the West African interior, in Mali.

"Paradoxically," states Professor Barry, "it was the colonial conquest that in a way put an end to the political fractioning 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. For example, all of Fouta Djallon (the mountainous region where the Senegal and Gambia Rivers find their source) was joined to the colony of French Guinea; the whole of the upper Senegal River region joined Mali; and the

entire right bank of the Senegal River was given to Mauritania, even though the inhabitants along both banks of the river were the same. Subsequent independence merely confirmed the political map as it had been planned by the colonial powers.

"Now that the independent states realize the impossibility of developing given these ridiculous boundaries," points out Babacar 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 organizations is to develop the agriculture and industry of the two river basins. The OMVG includes Senegal, the Gambia and Guinea. The OMVS includes Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Guinea.

"Both these projects are very important for the region, but they pose considerable political problems, making them still just projects," states the historian. "There is the OMVG on the one hand, and the OMVS on the other, although there is no reason for two separate bodies, two bureaucracies for two projects which are essentially the same."

Professor Barry considers it deplorable that there has been no co-ordination of the two projects. "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?"

There is some consolation for Professor Barry. He has just obtained a one-year research grant from the International Development Research Centre, of Canada, to enable him to refine his concept of "Greater Senegambia". He is thrilled by the project. "It is a dream is based on an historical reality. Politicians act on a day-to-day basis. I do not think they have this vision yet. I believe it is good to draw their attention to the enormous possibilities of a Greater Senegambia."