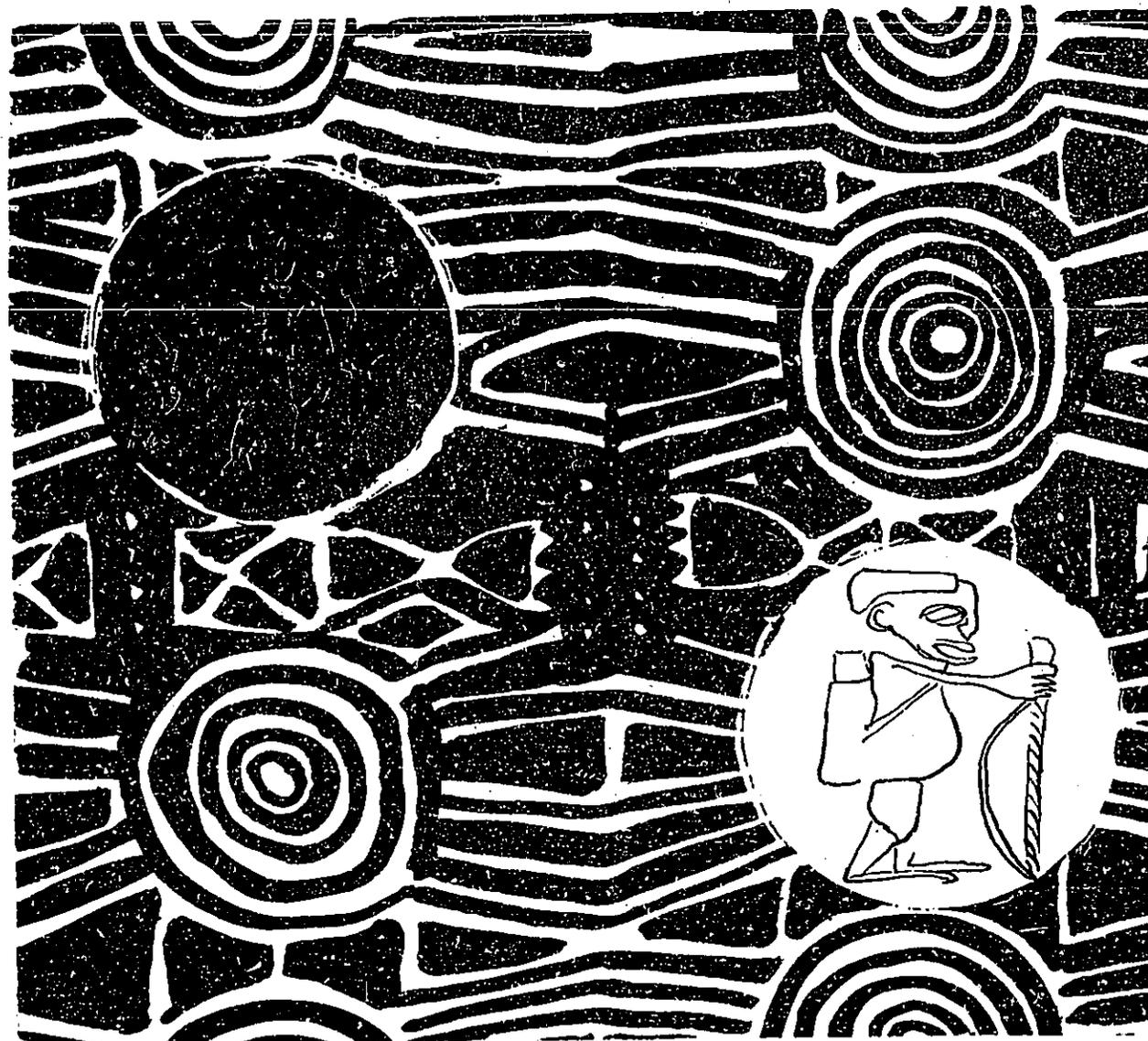


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In the Gambia during elections . . .

By Raya Dunayevskaya

it's a long, hard road to independence

THE GAMBIA, the last of the British West African colonies, has, this May 31st, attained self-government. This was not the underlying issue in the election held in late May. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, in his report of the 1961 Gambia Constitutional Conference, envisaged "internal self-government" as a result of a general election to be held "not later than May 1962." The underlying issue between the contending parties—the ruling United Party (UP) and the opposition People's Progressive Party (PPP)—was an unstated one: how near is the road to independence when self-government is weighted down by the Governor's commanding presence over internal security, defense, foreign affairs, and the Public Service, plus the unspecified "reserve powers."

The campaign of the Chief Minister and leader of the UP, Mr. P. S. N'jie, gave one answer: "The Gambia is in no hurry." The leader of the PPP, Mr. D. K. Jawara, gave a totally different answer. Back in 1960, when he first went into opposition, he issued an "Independence Manifesto," which called for internal self-government in 1961 and independence in 1962. On May 31 the Gambians made the PPP the majority party, giving it 18 seats plus one for its ally, the Democratic Congress Alliance (DCA). The UP got 18 seats, a not inconsiderable minority. A further complication in the election picture is the status of the four non-elective Chiefs whose votes are as valid as those of the elected members of the legislature. A bloc between them and the UP could make the road to independence as difficult to travel as are the real, and impossible, roads in the protectorate, which are wiped out during the wet season.

Anyone who watched the campaign at close range knows that the election results do not tell the full story. As the coming struggles are sure to disclose, the election results are only the consequence of the fact that the parties, concerned with winning power, muffled fundamental issues. The PPP concentrated on stories of alleged bribery by the ruling party "or its agents," while the UP, for its part, reacted to the collection of membership dues by the opposition party by demanding in its Newsletter that "poor people's parting with pennies . . . be stopped."

To get the full import of the election results, it is necessary to see all the crosscurrents and undercurrents in this historic election. Besides the political parties, there are the trades unions, which, officially, remained neutral, but whose power was felt in the strikes of 1960-61 when constitutional reforms were wrested from Great Britain. Nor can the observer discount the role of the youth, who, in the 1950's, met to ask their leaders to form a united party so that the Gambia should not be left in the backwaters of the continent-wide struggles for independence. Some of these, in the present election, are no doubt responsible for the fact that the DCA, under the Rev.

J. C. Faye, who had organized the first political party in the Gambia in 1951, nevertheless this time won only one seat. This lack of confidence in the ally of the PPP did not come from "the right," but from the youth in the civil service who, in 1960, had expected strike support from this party, which, instead, had advised them not to strike. An additional insight into the undercurrents playing through a colonial police department came, quite unsought, to this writer by virtue of having incurred the displeasure of the authorities through some lectures delivered to certain citizens who are now too young to vote but who will influence the future development of this enchanting but ravished land, which was the first, and is the last remaining, British colony in West Africa.

The Gambia Workers Union (GWU) has more than 9,000 paid-up members. This is not denied by the Gambia Labor Union (GLU), from which the GWU split. Mr. J. R. Forster of the GLU questions the integrity of the leadership of the GWU but not its militancy nor its membership. Mr. M. E. Jallow, the young, energetic, and astute General Secretary of the GWU, denied the accusations of non-integrity in finances, accusing the GLU of "talk, talk, talk, and no action." He said that the GLU had cut itself off from the masses by not participating in the 1960-61 strikes. He told me that in this, the first general strike in the Gambia, the police had made the error of using tear gas on the strikers, thus rallying the entire population behind them. After the Enquiry of 1961 the union won recognition from the Gambia Oilseeds Marketing Board, and a rise in wages. "Moreover," continued Mr. Jallow, "before the Gambia Workers Union came into existence, things were static. Then political movements really developed, but these do not give us credit for the political development, and the union does not endorse any party. But 80 percent of all workers—artisans, farm laborers, clerks, dock workers—are in the Gambia Workers Union. We have all workers except the senior grade of civil service. We have a closed shop on the docks."

The union has not only dock workers and farm laborers, but also carpenters, masons, and tappers of palm trees. Mr. Jallow acknowledged that the GLU was the first union on the scene, back in 1929. He did not exclude reunification with it, but insisted that the split had been due only to lack of activity, not to the ideological differences that divide other African unions between the Ghana and the Dakar blocs. Both unions are affiliated with the ICFTU (International Con-

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federation of Free Trade Unions), and do not wish to follow the Ghana model of giving up trades union independence to become an integral part of the party or the state.

It was also admitted that during the elections there has been some decrease of membership. It is hard to say how much of this was due to the fact that the political parties thought the trade unions were "interfering in politics," and how much to the situation registered in the complaint of one trades union official: "The workers want to strike all the time. We thought we should wait till after the election and see how close we are to independence."

From old timers I also pieced together the pre-history of the first trades union. When most American and European workers did not know Africa was on the map, there were strikes in the Gambia. The river craft seamen seem to have been the first to strike "during the troubles following the First World War." Each firm used its own craft plus privately owned cutters to transport its nuts—the main basis of the whole economy to this day—to transit stations, and each firm imported its own purchases; yet all the firms united in the Chamber of Commerce and refused the workers so much as an interview when the spontaneous strike broke out. Soldiers called out used their gun butts on the strikers, who had the sympathy of the people. Then a Commission of Enquiry was established, and finally the workers got a small increase—they had been earning only a single shilling a day—"plus 45 pounds of rice and eight shillings fishmoney monthly for each man."

The old timer continued. "The old saying was, 'The sun never sets on the British Empire, and the wages never rise.' During the world depression there were more strikes, but the unemployment and misery were such that the workers could not hold out." He concluded: "Organizations come very quickly here, especially among the young, and also disappear, but revolutions are going on all the time."

Ninety percent of the Gambians are peasant farmers producing the basic cash crop, the groundnut, with the most primitive tools: an ax, a hoe, a sock-sock (a kind of trowel). Despite the British Information Office's assurance that "mechanization has been tried in the form of government-sponsored tractor ploughing by contract, and experiments made with mobile threshers and hulling machinery," many of the farmers do not have even an ox, much less a tractor.

Farmers live in thatched houses—more often, just single rooms with nothing in them but hard beds and, perhaps, some hard chairs and what passes for a table. Several of such houses make up a compound, which is fenced in with woven rush knitting and separated from other compounds and houses by a narrow, dusty alley called a street. There is no electricity, no plumbing, no transport, a single hospital for the whole of the 3,974 square miles. Many villages do not even have a well.

The largest tribe is the Mandinka, which traces itself back to the glorious Mandingo or Mali Empire. But the Wollofs too are mainly farmers, and so are the Fulas, the Serahulis, the Jolas. Their lives revolve around two seasons known as "the Hungry Season" and "the Trade Season." As if these were natural phenomena like the rising and setting of the sun, the Gambians relate how, during the Trade

Season (which lasts from December to April) they sell their groundnuts to firms acting as agents for the statutory Oilseeds Marketing Board, which pays them so little for all their hard labor that they do not have enough money left for many of the remaining months of the year: May through November. The Hungry Season reaches the most serious proportions just before harvest time, and, in trying to live on a hungry stomach, they depend on the Syrian and Lebanese middlemen, to whom they are always in debt. In response to the Hungry Season cooperatives arose, but they are by no means widespread. Many a village has asked for one without getting one, and these coops likewise act as agents for the Gambia Oilseeds Marketing Board (GOMB), and while the people go hungry, neither the GOMB nor the middlemen are in want. The British Government remains the biggest single employer, and its top-heavy bureaucracy eats up 50 percent of the budget. Truly the Gambia is an "extravagance." It is so to the Gambians, who must bear the burden, not to the British, who pay themselves very handsomely for this extravagance.

After Great Britain abolished chattel slavery in 1807 the Government was compelled to encourage agricultural development; nevertheless the only major development came with World War II, when rice production was doubled. But, worked mainly by women, again with the most primitive of tools, it still remains a subsistence, not a cash, crop. The causeways and dikes built in the rice swamp and mangroves along the river are so inadequate that that was the major complaint at all political rallies under the auspices of both parties that detailed "how we really suffer." Not only has no industrialization of any sort been embarked upon, but even in primitive agriculture palm kernels, which could have been developed, now grow wild.

The British do not even know Gambia's population—the 300,000 is just a guess since no census has been held since 1952; most Africans feel that they now probably number a half-million. The British have concentrated on "the city"—Bathurst—which has a population of around 30,000 and is the only big city in the whole country. There the streets, or most of them, are paved. There is found not only electricity but even cable service. The plumbing is modern, especially if you live in "European" homes or in the one plush hotel in town, the Atlantic, which is patronized mainly by Europeans. The British like to say there are only "209 Europeans," but a closer look reveals that the insular British, when in Africa, evidently consider themselves the only "Europeans," for they do not count some 50-75 Frenchmen, not to mention the 600 or more Lebanese and Syrians, who could hardly pass for Africans.

Bathurst also has "the schools," not only primary but secondary, and, at Yundum (where there is an airport) also a teachers' training college. Even here, however, school is not compulsory, and there is only 10-11 percent literacy.

The British point to their program of "Africanization" which has been going on "for decades," and it is true that the civil service, especially in its lower rungs, is staffed by Africans. Here the Wollofs comprise 50 percent of the population, and the Akus—the detribalized "Westernized" minority—help swell the

civil service as clerks. Which does not mean that either the Wolofa or Akus are satisfied with the British interpretation of "Africanization."

In one of the major meetings of the campaign, held in McCarthy Square in Bathurst, the Chief Minister and leader of the ruling UP faced this electorate and revealed at once the wide gulf between leaders and ranks. In a quiet voice which meant to thunder, Mr. N'jie said, first in English and then in Wolof: "It all boils down to this, that the United Party wants evolution, not revolution. Memories are not so short that you should have forgotten the disturbances, the upheavals, the looting in the protectorate. There are those who think self-government means cutting off from the United Kingdom. We are not quarreling with Britain. They're giving us self-government, and for a long time we will have to depend on them." He then paused, and with gentlemanly disdain continued: "The more I look at the People's Progressive Party the more I discover what is foul and filthy in this organization. Their intention is to leave the West and join Ghana and Russia."

Yet, in fairly impromptu meetings held just a few miles away, a UP organizer spoke with great passion against Europeans in general and the United Kingdom in particular: "You can't manage a country when you are not a citizen of that country. Europeans know their land; we know ours. The British know the United Kingdom; we know the Gambia. A farmer knows how to farm and we know how to manage ourselves. It is time we did so. It is time the British learned we intend to do so."

Later, I joined a PPP transport with the energetic, level-headed leader, Mr. Jawara. It would take no time at all to get a mass meeting going. The sight of the PPP truck, a minstrel shouting out that "D. K. will speak," a single drum beat, and, in a few minutes, under the *dzantaba* (a shady tree where villagers gather to discuss) hundreds would assemble and listen and speak. The meeting might be preceded or followed by an *asofo*, the PPP's own musical invention, a combination of folk and jazz in praise of the leader. A few drums beat out the tune, the leader of the band speaks it, the solo soprano sings it, and the chorus repeats it. It was infectious and exciting and it went on for hours, as did the meetings themselves.

I heard no reference to Ghana, much less to Russia. Mr. Jawara had a considerable number of the USIS publication, "American Outlook," and he denied leaning toward any particular African bloc, insisting that one cannot think of relations with other countries until one is independent. As the Reverend Faye phrased it, "The aim of England is to edge us around to Senegal. The British do not want to free us even now. They are starting to call us an enclave of Senegal, although we were never that under colonial rule." The PPP and DCA favor economic ties with Senegal, and only one single PPP candidate, Paul Louis Baldeh, spoke against Senegal, and he stressed that it was his personal position, not that of the PPP: "My view is that if Senegal's independence is tantamount to permitting French influence in West Africa, then I favor reviewing the whole set-up of African unity, because I believe West African unity can be achieved by Africans only when they meet as Africans and are not being influenced by former colonialist powers. If the Senegalese Government feels it can speak of Senegal

without dictation from France, then an independent Gambia would do all in its power to cooperate with such a government."

Mr. Jawara himself stuck to the concrete economic question — "The living standards, the productivity and purchasing power of the mass of people, the farmers and manual workers, is abysmally low. . . . It is sometimes argued that because of its small size and its lack of rich resources the Gambia dare not claim its freedom. This argument is not valid as all people, rich or poor, are equally entitled to freedom." Moreover, he continued, the natural resources have not really been tapped "any more than the human resources." And one of the PPP entourage, pointing to the one all-weather road that the British have begun and that is supposed to be completed next year, said: "It took the British 375 years plus one to build a single road. We cannot do worse than that."

No youth has impressed me more than the youth of the Gambia. Here is a land where, in the country, literacy is only one percent, and, in the capital, 10 or 11 percent. Even "the city" cannot boast a public library or a bookshop, outside a small mission one. There is no newspaper; indeed the laws governing the publication of newspapers make it very nearly impossible, since large bonds and securities are required as guarantees against "blasphemous or seditious or other libel." This characteristic of a police state pervades the whole life of the town, which is supposed to have "the charm of a quiet seaside resort." It may be that, in the case of the Gambia, the police may have less of a terroristic and more of a paternalistic character, but there is no doubt that every one feels he is being watched and informed on.

Nevertheless the youth twice invited me to speak, once on youth movements the world over "like the Freedom Riders in America, the Socialist Youth in Great Britain, the Zengakuren in Japan"; the second time on "The Humanism of Marxism: a Philosophy of Freedom."

An interval of a week separated the two talks, an interval during which the police department invited me to make their acquaintance. The first invitation for an interview with the Assistant Superintendent of Police, a Britisher named Mr. J. L. Hobbs, came the morning after my first speech. The subjects discussed ranged from the question concerned with how I knew Africans well enough to be their houseguest to the information that "here" my speech would be "misunderstood." I asked Mr. Hobbs whether it was required that I clear my speeches with the Police Department; I thought attitudes like that produced Communism. His reply was that, while he found my anti-Communism "interesting," what disturbed him was my "pro-African nationalism." He said he would need to report the whole conversation to his superior. I do not know whom he thought this would frighten — me or the youth who had invited me to speak. But obviously the police were not prepared for a repetition of "the act."

Bright and early on the morning following the second speech a policeman once again came to fetch me, this time to the Superintendent of Police, an Uncle Tom type of African named Mr. H. L. Evans, who simply tried to declare my "re-entry" (I had been to Dakar) "illegal." When I made it clear that I had no intention of bowing to a technicality, which

was discovered only after I had spoken to the youth. I was ushered in to the Commissioner of Police himself. Once again I was in British hands. Mr. E. L. Eates was very polite and no fool. After I stressed that "if it were not for another matter of which the police had full reports, this technicality would never have arisen, and I had no intention of bowing to anything so contrived before completing my assignment of reporting the elections," Mr. Eates extended my stay 24 hours beyond the time I had requested. My every stop, however, continued to be watched. Thus when I was in Kaur (the interior of the Gambia, not Senegal) the Chief Minister's social and propaganda secretary, a Mr. Karayol, who was my guide there, found a not very plausible excuse for my reporting to the police station there and registering. This I did. When I went up to the protectorate again, this time with the entourage of Mr. Jawara, I was not asked to participate in any such farcical situation. However, as I would meet the police who supervised the election, I would be greeted with, "Oh, yes, madam, we heard you were somewhere in the bush." Finally, although I arrived at the airport a half-hour before de-

parture time, I was told, "You are late. The plane has been in for some time."

I do not know what deprivations will be visited upon the youth groups who had tendered the invitations to speak. I do know that their spirit will not be easily downed. Far from having "misunderstood" my pro-African freedom views, these youths spoke of Pan-Africanism as an "umbrella" which was presently covering different views, and hoped that the Gambia would "have learned from both blocs of African nations" and would make its contribution to "true and full independence." There is no doubt whatever that they will become a force in the post-election developments. It is this, in fact, that worried the Police Department, which, as Mr. Evans stressed, "like the Gambia quiet and intend to see it remain so."

Symbolic of the spirit of the Gambia is the title of a new newsletter, *Africa Nyaato!* (*Nyaato* is the Mandinka word for "forward.") The small box alongside the name proclaims that it stands for "Workers' Interests and Pan-Africanism." Quietly or otherwise, the struggles for freedom did not end with the election. They have just begun.