THE NEW AFRO PESSIMISM INFLATION, DEVALUATION AND STAGNATION PLAGUE POPULOUS WEST AFRICA, A REPORTER DISCOVERS 10 YEARS AFTER HIS LAST ASSIGNMENT THERE.

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Abstract (Abstract): Nowhere is the sense of running futilely in place more pronounced than in Nigeria. With 90 million people, Nigeria has more people than the the French-speaking countries of West and Central Africa combined. Everything seems outsized about Nigeria. A former Time magazine correspondent used to say that other Africans got culture shock when they visited Nigeria, because it is so brash and chaotic.
Nigeria also is an immensely disppointing place. In 33 years since independence, Nigeria has had six military coups and two failed experiments in democratic rule. The first was modeled after the British parliamentary system. More recently, the U.S. federal system was the model. That lasted four years, until New Year's Eve in 1983, when the generals stepped in again. The coup in 1983 was announced to the country by Col. Sani Abacha. Abacha emerged as the force behind a palace coup in 1985 that replaced one set of generals for another. Finally last year, Abacha, by then a general, wrested power for himself. He promptly dissolved the national and state legislatures, rolled back measures intended to revitalize Nigeria's corruption-plagued economy and imposed restrictions on public commentary by political leaders.
A woman roasts peanuts over an open fire in Bamako, capital and largest city of Mali. Open fires for cooking are common across West and Central Africa. Although Mali is among the world's poorest countries, it is one of the few palces in French speaking West Africa where news media independent of government control have become established. MAP: West Africa

Full text: After an absence of 10 years, I recently was back in Dakar, the wind-swept capital of Senegal, on West Africa's Atlantic coast.

The city was more populous, more sprawling, more animated than I had remembered. Its liveliness was most evident in the multitude of street vendors, the irrepressible representatives of what is called the economy's informal sector. These free-lance merchants ply the dusty, broken streets of the city's center, hawking a bizarre array of items - from plastic coat hangers to household utensils, from cheap toys and men's shirts to pirated cassettes.

The vitality in Dakar, once the administrative center of French-ruled West Africa, is actually deceptive. Senegal, like much of West and Central Africa, seems to be frantically running in place. The past 10 years have brought little real progress, politically or economically, to one of the most despairing corners of the world. Life in West Africa is short and impoverished, and conditions are not getting better.

According to World Bank figures, the population-adjusted gross domestic product increased in just 10 of the region's 21 countries from 1985 to 1992. In the sprawling landlocked countries such as Mali and Chad - places with few natural resources and limited economic prospects - life expectancy at birth is 48 years. Illiteracy rates in some countries exceed 70 percent. The few countries that have been blessed with abundant natural resources - oil-rich Nigeria is an example - have squandered their wealth on extravagant public-works projects and rampant official corruption.

The most salient impressions from recent visits to West Africa were how deep the despair seems to run, and how marginalized the region is becoming. Afro-pessimism is in full flower these days.

Certainly contributing to the gloom was the major currency devaluation in January in the French-speaking countries of West and Central Africa. Fourteen former French colonies, including Senegal, make up the African Financial Community. Their common currency is the CFA franc.

Since 1948, France had guaranteed its convertibility at a rate of 50 to one French franc. But in the face of growing pressure from international financial institutions and other Western countries - including the United States - France in January persuaded the CFA countries to accept an exchange rate of 100 to one. That meant an immediate 50 percent drop in the value of the African currency. And millions of people in West and Central Africa suddenly became poorer.

Eventually, devaluation should encourage exports from French- speaking Africa. But the immediate effect was a sharp increase in prices of many imported products, including pharmaceuticals, gasoline and foodstuffs such as rice.

Although devaluation had been rumored for months, the countries in the franc zone were poorly prepared for the move. Government officials did little to explain or justify the devaluation. Senegal's president, Abdou Diouf, suggested blithely that the best reaction to higher prices was to change habits and begin consuming local products, ignoring that Senegal hasn't been self- sufficient in food production in years.

Much more memorable to the Senegalese was Diouf's pledge shortly after his re-election last year that "there will not be a devaluation."

The devaluation and the confusion and consternation it has caused also deepened a sense that African countries are too often the victims of more powerful international forces and institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The fund and the World Bank had long insisted that devaluation was a much- needed step to stimulate the region's economies.

The CFA franc certainly was overvalued. But export growth - a principal objective of devaluation - probably will take years.

More than ever, the Balkanization of Africa looms as a principal obstacle to economic development. Given the way the borders have been drawn, West and Central Africa are simply too splintered to compete in the international marketplace.

Africa is burdened with mostly arbitrary, foreign-imposed borders drawn by former colonial rulers such as the French and British. They divided their territories in West and Central Africa in ways that suited their commercial interests, rather than to accommodate their ethnic, economic, religious, linguistic and historic patterns. The result was a patchwork of thinly populated countries that, alone, are too small to sustain thriving economies or to appeal to foreign investors.

Thirty-seven countries in Africa have populations of 10 million or fewer. Of those, 17 are in West and Central Africa. Senegal, for example, has 7.8 million people. Mali, which is larger than California and Texas combined, has nearly 9 million people. Benin, roughly the size of Pennsylvania, has 5 million.

Regional cooperation and economic integration ultimately will have to happen if the region is to thrive. But by playing on an exaggerated sense of national sovereignty, the rulers of West and Central Africa cling to power and make regional cooperation and integration even more unlikely.

The region's latest generation of rulers is proving difficult to dislodge, even though they have presided over years of economic decline. They have proven themselves adept at exploiting or circumventing the electoral process. Elections have been held in several countries in the past few years and in most cases, incumbents have retained power. That suggests little real vitality in the region's democratic processes.

Senegal's president, Diouf, has been in power since 1981. Lansana Conte seized power in neighboring Guinea in a military coup in 1984. He was elected president last year. Omar Bongo, Gabon's president for 26 years, won re-election in December with 51 percent of the vote. He had himself sworn in early to thwart legal moves by opposition groups seeking to challenge the election.

In the tiny country of Togo, Gen. Gnassingbe Eyadema, a brutal dictator who has ruled since 1967, won 97 percent of the vote in elections last year that most opposition parties boycotted.

According to reports from Togo, 21 protesters arrested during the presidential campaign died in jail under mysterious circumstances. To win sympathy, Eyadema has claimed they were poisoned by their supporters.
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Nigeria also is an immensely disppointing place. In 33 years since independence, Nigeria has had six military coups and two failed experiments in democratic rule. The first was modeled after the British parliamentary system. More recently, the U.S. federal system was the model. That lasted four years, until New Year's Eve in 1983, when the generals stepped in again. The coup in 1983 was announced to the country by Col. Sani Abacha. Abacha emerged as the force behind a palace coup in 1985 that replaced one set of generals for another. Finally last year, Abacha, by then a general, wrested power for himself. He promptly dissolved the national and state legislatures, rolled back measures intended to revitalize Nigeria's corruption-plagued economy and imposed restrictions on public commentary by political leaders.
So there is abundant reason why Afro-pessimism flourishes in West and Central Africa. Nonetheless, the region has a few, tentative signs of promise.
Just west of Nigeria lies Benin, the cradle of vodoo and, until 1990, a country locked in the grasp of a repressive Marxist regime. A revolt that welled from the grass roots toppled the regime and brought to power an elected government. It was a rare instance in which power swung peaceably from dictatorship to democracy.
Trappings of pluralism quickly emerged, notably in the form of an independent, alternative press. Benin has several weekly and monthly papers that don't hesitate to challenge the government.
A similarly vigorous, independent press has emerged in several other French-speaking countries, notably Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Such a lively, challenging press would have been unimaginable 10 years ago - and it suggests that democratic pluralism ultimately may take hold in West and Central Africa.
To be sure, though, obstacles to sustaining a vigorous free press in French-speaking Africa are imposing. With few exceptions, the broadcast media remain under the control of the central governments. Reporters and editors for the state- run media openly chafe at the restrictions. But they also acknowledge a tendency to self-censorship. They know how far they can go in challenging the government line.
An even greater impediment is illiteracy, which is so pronounced that the potential number of newspaper readers is small, and typically concentrated among the educated elite in the capitals.
So it will be a struggle to establish a culture of dissent in West and Central Africa. That task will be especially difficult if the region remains as splintered and marginalized as it is. It can't afford another 10 years of running frantically to stay in place.
W. Joseph Campbell, a Courant staff writer, reported from West Africa for the Associated Press in the early 1980s. He returned to the region this winter to conduct week-long reporting workshops in Senegal and Mali. The programs were sponsored and organized by the Academy for Educational Development, a non-profit organization in Washington D.C.

Illustration

PHOTO: (Color), Jean Luc Manaud; Matrix International MAP: (color), The Hartford Courant; Caption: PHOTO: A woman roasts peanuts over an open fire in Bamako, capital and largest city of Mali. Open fires for cooking are common across West and Central Africa. Although Mali is among the world's poorest countries, it is one of the few palces in French speaking West Africa where news media independent of government control have become established. MAP: West Africa

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