



Main avenue of campus with Library at end

## EVENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DAKAR

*Mr. Lee was the winner of the first William P. Gray Foreign Correspondent Fellowship awarded by the Overseas Press Club Foundation. As part of the Foundation's plan, he spent twelve months traveling along the west coast of Africa, doing free-lance writing for the Minneapolis Tribune, the Chicago Tribune, and the New York Herald Tribune.*

*In 1965 he earned the M.S. degree in journalism at Columbia University, and has returned to Columbia for graduate work in African politics.*

BY ROBERT D. LEE, '63

**T**he setting of the University of Dakar is idyllic. Its campus is laid out like a French garden along the Atlantic coast a few miles north of Dakar.

The temperature is seldom too high or too low. Even in June, at the beginning of the hot, rainy season, ocean breezes provide natural air conditioning for the modern, ventilated classrooms. Although the pounding of the surf a few hundred yards away may cause

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a tired head to nod over a book, there is nothing in the physical surroundings to disrupt serious thought.

### TRANQUILITY IS SUPERFICIAL

However, the tranquility is superficial. Beneath it lies an institution constructed in disturbing contradictions. It is a large university in a small country, a French university in Africa, and a Senegalese university that must serve all of what was formerly French West Africa if it is to prosper. The big question is whether it is serving Africa at all.

These problems acquired urgency last spring as a result of a rather unlikely sequence of events. What began as a political demonstration ended in bitter cold war between university students and the government of Senegal.

### STUDENT PROTEST

On Monday, February 28, 1966, several hundred university students met on the basketball court of the Cité Universitaire to protest the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah as President of Ghana. They passed a resolution condemning unnamed foreign powers for allegedly helping the Ghanaian army and police force seize power February 24 while Nkrumah was on a peace mission to Hanoi. As the students were preparing to adjourn, someone suggested a protest march on the American and British embassies. The idea met favor, and students were soon pouring into the street.

The demonstration was a flop. According to the American Embassy's estimate, about a dozen students (not a hundred, as student leaders claim) reached the center of town, where the Embassy is located. The others were headed off by police not far from the University and finally stopped with tear gas and clubs near the Great Mosque of Dakar. Forty-seven students were arrested for demonstrating in the public street without au-

thorization. The rest of the demonstrators, returning through police lines to the Cité Universitaire, decided to stay away from classes until their colleagues were freed.

By Tuesday evening all forty-seven students had been released. Everyone went back to class on Wednesday morning, and the university seemed to return to normal. Conditions probably would have remained that way if the Senegalese government had not committed a blunder it had cause to regret many times over in the month and a half of war that followed.

The Rector of the University of Dakar, Pierre Lelièvre, received a call from the Ministry of Education at 1 p.m. on Wednesday, informing him that the Minister wished to meet with a certain eight students that afternoon. Since the day's classes had already ended, Mr. Lelièvre suggested that the Ministry get in touch with those students through the Cité.

Shortly after 4 p.m. the Rector happened to meet the Minister of Education, Mamadou Wané, in the National Assembly building. "I thought you were meeting with students this afternoon," Mr. Lelièvre said to the Minister. "Oh, my chef de cabinet is seeing them now and I will talk to them later," Mr. Wané replied.

As a matter of fact, none of the students saw the Minister. All eight were notified by letter delivered to the Cité Universitaire that Mr. Wané wanted to see them. Two students from Upper Volta and one from Dahomey were suspicious and decided not to go. The other five (three Senegalese and two Dahomians) proceeded to the administrative building, which houses virtually the entire Senegalese government. There the students were escorted to the basement rather than to Wané's office, and then whisked off to the police station.

Their failure to return to the University that night provoked a new storm of student protest. The incident reeked of treachery. Presumably, those arrested were leaders of the February 28 demonstration; but students

maintain the demonstration had no clearcut leaders, that it was a spontaneous outgrowth of the meeting on the basketball court.

On Friday the punishments were announced: the three Senegalese students were to be excluded from the Cité Universitaire and deprived of their scholarships; the five foreign students were to be expelled from Senegal — the next day they were ushered out of the country.

Students considered these punishments an act of war, and they countered by deciding to leave the University *en masse*. A fund was started for those who wanted to go home but could not afford it. The first departures (Malian and Voltan students) were scheduled for the following Tuesday.

President Leopold Senghor now feared that student disturbances would disrupt the opening of the First World Festival of Negro Arts on April 1 in Dakar. Already visitors were beginning to arrive. Surrounded by police, the University of Dakar was not a pretty sight. The President sought the support of other countries that send students to Dakar. Back came telegrams of support for the Senegalese government, urging foreign students to remain at the University.

When the Malians and Voltans went to the railroad station on Tuesday, the Malian ambassador to Senegal was there to warn them against going to Bamako. He said they could expect a cold reception there, even punishment. Ticket agents had been instructed not to serve anyone carrying a Voltan or a Malian passport, but this did not prevent students of other nationalities from purchasing tickets and passing them on to their departing friends. The atmosphere was festive. Students exhilarated in their newfound solidarity. When the train pulled out, some hundred students were on it.

At this point, the University Council decided it was time for an exchange of views between students and government. The Council called on the president of Senegal's Economic and Social Council, Mr. Boissier-Palun, to act as mediator. In a single day Mr.



Medical students writing year-end examination

Boissier-Palun, highly respected in academic circles, met with student representatives, talked with President Senghor, and arrived at a compromise proposal that he said was acceptable to the government.

Mr. Boissier-Palun proposed that students who had been expelled from the country be permitted to return to take year-end examinations if they so desired; that the three Senegalese students be "provisionally" readmitted to the Cité Universitaire; and that the government take no other sanctions "if everything returned to order," i.e., if students returned to class immediately.

The proposal was not acceptable to the students. They voted it down at a general meeting on Friday morning, and the reasons they gave indicated a return to antebellum conditions was no longer possible. Moreover, they disliked Mr. Boissier-Palun's reply to their request for permission to organize a student association grouping all nationalities. He had said that university liberties would be "totally guaranteed" so long as students did not use them as a "pretext for organizing political groups or reconstituting leagues that had been dissolved for political reasons." This was simply a restatement of the government's long-standing position.

On the day the compromise was rejected, an *ad hoc* strike committee (including officers of existing national student associations)

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published a memorandum on "The Events at the University of Dakar," refuting a radio speech by Minister Wané. He had said students undertook the February 28 protest for reasons "entirely foreign to their own working conditions." In the memorandum students replied that the spontaneity of the protest march was "surely a result of a dramatic situation which the students of the University of Dakar know very well." The "situation" included three kinds of problems: living conditions at the Cité Universitaire, the lack of Africanization of the faculty and curriculum, and the apparent tendency of the University to become a Senegalese institution.

In effect, the students accused the University of failing to serve the continent on which it is built. There can be no disputing their contention that the faculty remains largely French. In the College of Letters and Humanities, three of twenty-eight teachers are Africans. The percentage is higher in

Science and Medicine and Pharmacy, but in no college do Africans make up the majority of the professorial corps.

This situation might not be so serious if Africanization were progressing rapidly, but it is not. One Senegalese assistant professor estimates it will take forty years to Africanize the faculty at the current rate. Aging French professors, many of whom arrived in Dakar when Senegal was still a French colony and now hold important seats in college councils, insist that prospective faculty members, whether French or African, be judged strictly according to their academic credentials whether the subject they teach be France or Africa.

African students accuse some of the French professors of racial prejudice. They try to prove their point by showing that the 767 French students enrolled at Dakar invariably do better on examinations than do the Africans. Few Africans manage to go beyond the licence degree for a *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures*.

There are obvious weaknesses in their argument. First, Africans are seldom as well prepared when they graduate from the lycées as are their French counterparts. Furthermore, the courses in French history, French literature, and French law are naturally more familiar to Frenchmen than to Africans. Finally, all examinations are written in French, which is a second language to the Africans. This handicap becomes severe at the level of the *Diplôme d'Études Supérieures*, which requires a long thesis.

The Dean of the College of Letters and Humanities, Louis Thomas, readily admits prejudice exists among some of his old-guard professors. A young history professor analyzes the problem as one of age: a number of teachers "just too old to understand" react with hostility to student complaints, and this hostility is interpreted as ill will, racism, and disdain. He considers the older generation of the faculty the greatest single obstacle to the development of the University.

There are other obstacles. The students

The Library was dedicated in 1965



complained in their memorandum that the curriculum contained little African subject matter. This complaint was elaborated a few days later in a manifesto, issued by the Senegalese Student Association, which proposed the study of national languages, more emphasis on the history and geography of Africa, and inclusion of African sociology, ethnology, literature, and philosophy in the curriculum.

The Senegalese policy of higher education is to adhere totally to the French system. This means offering not just equivalent diplomas earned by taking similar courses but identical diplomas awarded for work that is, insofar as possible, identical to that done in French universities. It follows that there is little room for African subject matter in the curriculum. For instance, in the first three years of the law curriculum there is no mention of Africa. In the fourth year law students study the "law of Overseas Territories (French) and the Co-operation Program" (French foreign aid). The outline for a course in contemporary political problems makes reference to "The New Nations" — that is all.

Rector Lelièvre maintains that students must understand French history and politics in order to understand French law. And there is no such thing as French physics, French biology or French medicine, he points out.

Students did not push their criticism of the curriculum to its logical extreme, the abandonment of the French diploma. And yet none of the students whom I interviewed expressed a strong feeling that the French diploma should be kept at all costs. All were interested in maintaining quality, but most of them believed this could be accomplished by an arrangement for equivalence of diplomas. One student said the French diploma holds a distinct advantage for Africans: "It means you can always get a job in France when you are at odds with your own government."

The advantages for French students in

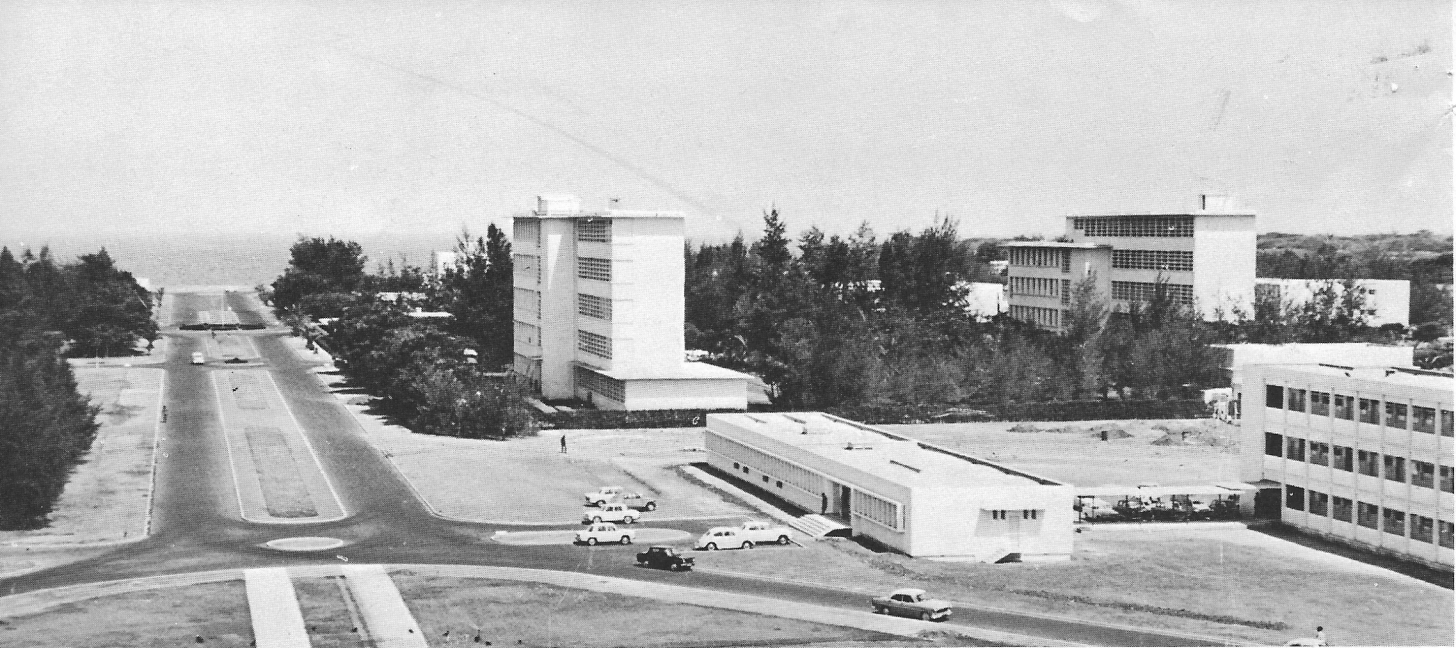
Dakar are obvious. They obtain the same degrees as in France while working in a university that has superior physical facilities to any in France, outside Paris. And the facilities are less crowded. The University of Dakar could easily accommodate half again the current 2,600 students and still be less crowded than French universities.

The University was built to serve all of what was once French West Africa. But with the breakup of the federation into independent states the University has become legally a Senegalese institution, although fewer than a third of its students come from Senegal and 80 per cent of the money for its operation comes from France.

Most students, Senegalese and others, believe the institution should be a catalyst for African unity, not for nationalist thinking. In their memorandum they proposed that African countries sending students to Dakar share responsibility for administration of the University. Their proposal was echoed

Administrative building





View of campus looking toward ocean

in a motion adopted March 16 by the faculty of the College of Letters and Humanities and later approved by the Council of the University.

On March 30 the Minister of Education, Mr. Wané, made another radio speech to the Senegalese nation to announce a new government peace offer. His concessions represented a near total victory for the students: students would be given representation in the administrative council of the Cité Universitaire as well as in the Council of the University; ministers of education of other countries with large numbers of students in Dakar would be invited to participate in the administration of the University.

On only two issues did the students lose. They gained the right to organize a general student association on condition that it "concern itself exclusively with university questions," but students say this is impossible. They regard the setback as temporary. Second, no relief was obtained for the three Senegalese students who were shut out of the Cité Universitaire. The five foreigners, on the other hand, were allowed to return and take their exams.

There was also an aspect of the victory not spelled out in the Minister's proposals. During the entire incident the government never once invaded university grounds, although it surrounded the campus with police at the start. Several times officials pointed out that

the government had respected and intended to respect the university franchise. Thus, the crisis served to reaffirm student liberties within the University, liberties that were being violated only two or three years ago.

Students accepted Wané's proposals but declined to resume classes until all of their colleagues who had gone home were back. Not until April 16, with Easter vacation come and gone and the Festival of Negro Arts well under way, did the last contingent arrive. Then everyone buckled down to make up for lost time.

But no one believed a permanent peace had been achieved. Much depended on the good will of the Senegalese government. By obtaining the right to representation in university councils, students assured themselves of an influence on reform. But there was no guarantee that any reform in either faculty-hiring policies or in curriculum would take place. None of the basic contradictions in ownership, administration, and orientation of the University had been resolved.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the "events at the University of Dakar" — the euphemism most frequently employed by the Senegalese government for what was in fact a tough, cold war — is the indication that African students are no longer content to swallow ready-mix educations prepared according to foreign recipes and served up to them by foreigners.