

November 16, 2003

Racism in South Africa:

The following is a response to friend Edith Maxwell's query about any evidence we saw of "The Problem".

Edith:

I'm glad you brought it up. What I found extraordinary was the difference between the South African Blacks and the Senegalese. In Senegal we're used to everyone you meet on the street looking you straight in the eye and greeting you with a smile. Of course, as I've mentioned before, the Senegalese are the epitome of politeness. Before you ask a stranger for directions, you must shake his hand, ask him how it's going, how's the family, and on and on. When you enter an office to do business with one person, you better not greet that person solely. You should greet everyone in that office and shake their hands, else one of them might feel slighted. Sure, you may say that the Senegalese take courtesy to the extreme, and it's probably one of the reasons that it takes longer to get things done, but it's so much better than in South Africa.

There, you walk down the street and everyone averts their eyes, black or white. It's like being on a subway in NYC, except they don't respond with an aggressive "What're you lookin' at!" Once you make the first move, they respond with a smile and open up. The Black Africans with whom I had the most dealings with were the San People. Their facial structure is almost oriental -- high cheekbones, squinty eyes, small in features and stature. Remember the movie, "The Gods Must Be Crazy"? They're the San People. When they realized I was looking at them, it felt to me like they cringed, as if to avoid a blow. Perhaps they were beaten down so long that it's a reflex action that will take time to mend. As soon as I smiled and greeted them, they responded positively.

The only Afrikaners we had personal dealings with were up in Pretoria. They seemed very warm and open. Yet, I recall that we had to make the first move. When we returned to Dakar we talked about our experiences with a couple who had spent two years in Pretoria. They said that they felt a certain amount of resentment from the Afrikaners. They surmised that it may have stemmed from a feeling that Americans got involved where they didn't belong - in the Apartheid Problem - and helped to screw up a pretty good deal.

I mentioned the "squatter camps" or "shanty towns", as they are called. They exist outside of every town of any size. No electricity, no running water. Like the professor said: "one candle tips over, and 100 shanties burn to the ground." On the edges of some "camps" you will see modest two-room bungalows built by the government. I also understand that Habitat for Humanity has done some good work there. But they have such a long way to go.

Those with whom we discussed the problem while we were there felt that, if the economic disparity between the "haves" and the "have nots" didn't narrow soon, they might well see a serious uprising.

Thanks for bringing up a subject that I really forgot to expand upon.

Chuck