

BOOK REVIEW

Review by Nancy Wong

In the old days people used herbs to heal themselves. The bush was full of wild animals such as lions, hyenas, monkeys and wart-hogs. In the water there were crocodiles and hippos. There were many hunters in the village but now there is nothing left for them to hunt. Before, when the wells filled up, the water would overflow and run into our house. We had to use canoes to go in or out of the village," so says Kissima Binta Timera, a man, aged 69 years, from Bakel, Senegal, giving an insight of life in his part of Africa during his youth.

This excerpt is from a Panos publication, *At the Desert's Edge*: a series of accounts of life in the countries bordering the northern part of the Sahara Desert. They include Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. As few in the rural Sahelian are literate, their recorded histories are written by "outside observers" such as priests, colonial officers, anthropologists and development planners from the ministries or donor agencies. The unique feature of this fascinating record of life's ups and downs in an environment so harsh and forbidding is that it is told by the inhabitants themselves. Since the average life span of the Sahelian is about 50, living to the ripe old age of 60 or 80 speaks much of the subject's resilience and fortitude. As such, their words of wisdom about the ways of their world and changing times and fortunes leave an invaluable repository for future generations as well as a useful development tool for their own government agencies and NGOs of the international community to assist them in ways that are beneficial and relevant.

Conceived by the Panos Institute which is an information and policy studies institute, dedicated to working in partnership with others towards greater public understanding of sustainable development, the Sahel Oral History Project was funded largely by NORAD with contributions from other European NGOs and UN agencies. The project was linked to ongoing development sites — 19 in all countries, and a vast area encompassing 17 different African languages. Some 500 individual interviews were conducted with some group interviews, bringing the total to more than 650, half of them were women. So readers are offered a wide

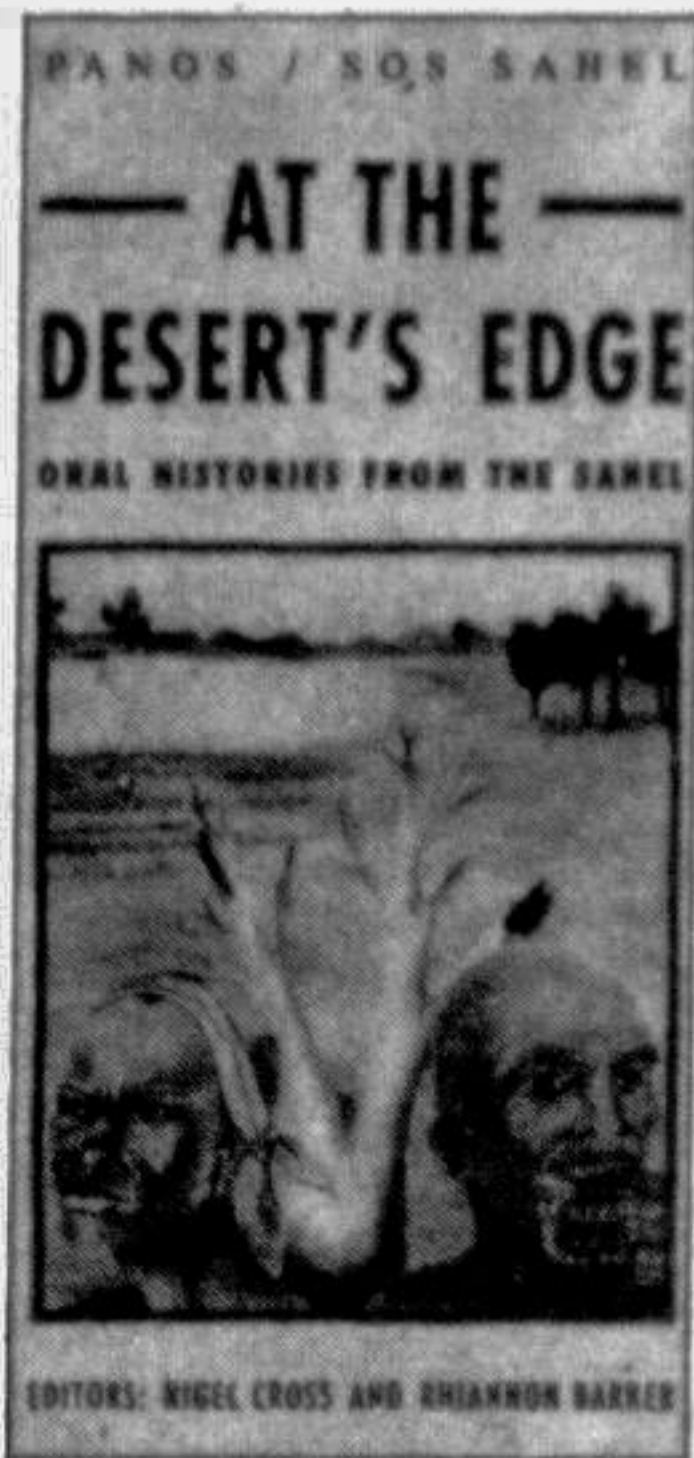
cross-section of opinions and experiences. Interviews were chosen from people who had previous experience and working knowledge of the sites such as field workers, research students and local journalists.

The period during which interviews were conducted was between June and October 1990, hence readers are assured of an up-to-date account of the various social, political and climatic changes which have taken place. The subjects ranged from both political and economic refugees (Eritreans and Tigreans of Sudan) to pastoralists in Mali, Niger and Chad to farmers in Burkina Faso and the irrigated riverine areas in Senegal and Sudan to the fishermen and crocodile-hunters in Mauritania and Chad.

Despite cultural, linguistic and political differences in the whole Sahelian region, one common complaint emerges throughout — i.e. climatic changes for the worse. The earth has grown drier and hotter, bringing more desertification with its attendant harshness. Treinicha Mirt Bliki from a project site in Mauritania says: "Sand dunes have become a huge problem for us. Some are as big as buildings and move around with the wind. As they move they destroy our crops and cover fertile areas. The dunes have buried houses built on low-lying land."

Toure Timeres echoes: "In the past, the wind was strong but there wasn't any dust. During the cold weather, you had to light a fire to keep warm, and the rain fell in bucketloads. During the floods, the water used to come right into our houses. It no longer pours as hard during the rainy season. I have lived through seven years of drought." Yes, because of the depletion of the ozone layer, vast tracts in Africa have been tragically affected, to the extent of wiping out whole ways of life. Pastoralists and farmers are specially hard hit, as grazing land has simply dried up and herds of cattle and even the hardy goats have perished.

There are people like Kouahan Sanou, a woman from Mali, who remembers having been comfortably well and even wealthy in their childhood, with her father possessing more than 80 cows. She says, "We had food and animals, and we children were well dressed. When I got married I wore the most beautiful cloth in the village." But the quality of life steadily deteriorated with the onslaught of desertification. This erosion of the environment affected everybody — from the prosperous farmer to the ordinary housewife, who had to walk much further to fetch water for the family's needs from drying wells. To hear it from the lips of Abouba Ali, a native fisherman from Chad: "The water in the River Chari used to be so high that it came up to this spot — where today you can see some trees and bushes growing. In those days this area was like a forest. Now there is nothing... it is a desert out there. The rain no longer falls and there are no longer any little streams where fish can lay eggs before swimming back into the main river. If there are no eggs, how can there be any fish?"



AT THE DESERT'S EDGE

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People who derive their living from nature form close ties with it and retain a kind of simplicity which city life tends to destroy. This characteristic comes out fully in the conversations of the rural Sahelians. Far from being attracted to the gaudy diversions and noisy games of the city, the farmer would any day prefer to spend his time in the fields tending his crops. The same applies to the pastoralist: as a Mauritanian saying goes: "Let my stomach burn from hunger but let me never leave my country." Judging from the direct monologues (translated from various African languages), the oral traditions in the Sahelian countries are rich in imagery and express vividly the speaker's thoughts and feelings. This is what makes this collection of interviews so different and personal retaining the flavour of the land of its inhabitants.

wrought by unfavourable climatic changes, the Sahelian countries have to cope with natural enemies like huge swarms of locusts which have been known to wipe their crops overnight, diseases which attack their domestic animals and illnesses such as cholera, dysentery which plague their children. Yet, so resilient and resourceful are these plucky people that they have medicinal cures from the herbs in their backyards, so to speak. As the reader proceeds through the interviews, he must often wonder what keeps them going, in the face of such overwhelming odds. What is outstanding is the sense of integrity and reverence for "God's laws." There is this old woman, Kouahan Sanou from Mali, whose life story is that of riches to rags: having had a comfortable childhood her crops were destroyed by drought and locusts in her adult life and her husband and seven children died, leaving her only two surviving offspring. After all this turmoil, she still had the courage to assert: "I have never thought about resorting to stealing to solve my problem — I would rather die than do that. As far as prostitution is concerned, it doesn't exist in our culture, we don't allow it."

Tough as life must be under such exacting natural conditions, a Nigerian couple and their community still had the spirit to go on a pilgrimage to Mekkah, to give thanks to God. Fauré Maussa recalled: "In those days, there were no cars or planes. We had to do the journey on foot. Thousands of us, many with children, set off on this trek." They sold all their worldly possessions and faced physical hardships and

dangers of all kinds, including banditry, finally reaching Mekkah, stayed a while and returned. All this took seven years!"

In the face of this harsh environment and its continuing degradation inflicted by men and nature, many NGOs are valiantly battling against heavy odds to make life more bearable and easier. They have succeeded to some extent as evidenced by the Sahelian population. An older woman from Burkina Faso acknowledges that "modern women are freer than we were. Twenty years ago a woman had to marry and care for a husband chosen for her by her father or brother. If she didn't like the choice she just had to put up with a miserable existence. Women today do not accept such subservience and refuse to accept what they do not want. They are better provided for and better organised. For those who cannot read or write there is the opportunity to join a group run by the Union des Femmes du Burkina, which educates women and is a forum for debate and exchange of ideas."

NGOs have also provided essential facilities like easy access to water and, in some projects, land for market gardening together with seeds, seedlings and modern farming tools, fertiliser and technology. Improved communications have also given access to towns whereby market gardeners sell their produce. For some who are willing to face the unknown and different kinds of hardships, the Middle East is an avenue to seek their fortune. Thus, times have changed a great deal in material terms, for the better. However, the social cost is a different matter. Old folks regard this upheaval with some dismay — in the sense of lost tribal values such as respect for the elders, a general responsibility for all children — related or otherwise — in the village and a cohesion which makes villagers help each other out in times of distress. In the "old days" farmers who were fortunate enough to have reaped a rich harvest would store the excess grains and simply give them away to a needy neighbour when he faced hard times. But nowadays this goodwill no longer exists. The poor would just have to pay for it even if it means selling his offspring as a bonded labourer.

For all interested or involved with sustainable development, *At the Desert's Edge* is an enlightening testimony of those who have lived through it during the present century — as the participants are mostly the elderly with their rich store of vivid memories.

Future Looks Upbeat for Shanxi Farmers

by A Special Correspondent

FARMERS here have much in common. For one thing, most of them are poor or very poor. Few cultivate plots larger than half a hectare, only a handful of which are irrigated.

Hilly and mountainous terrain, poor soils and a harsh climate have made farmers here among the poorest in China. More than 85 per cent of the 133,000 families in Shanxi province live below the poverty line.

Unreliable rainfall, periodic droughts, short frost-free growing seasons, and infertile and highly erodible soils lead to low, unpredictable crop yields.

Even in normal years, many families must rely on relief grain to survive. The rarely cut meat except during the Spring Festival.

Since whatever grain they do harvest must go to feed the family, few have any surplus to feed livestock. Thus, less than half and families have even one pig and even fewer own a draught animal. More serious still is the lack of vital manure for their crops.

Opportunities for earning any off-farm income are practically non-existent, trapping hundreds of thousands in chronic poverty.

Now things are looking upbeat, with a little help from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). Small-scale irrigation systems, financed by the government and credit from an IFAD loan, will be built with village labour on some 10,000

hectares of land. This will allow about 40,000 families to substantially increase harvests. Some 100,000 households will benefit from the reclamation of riverbeds, draining of steep slopes and other land improvements. Over 16,000

Hilly and mountainous terrain poor soils and a harsh climate have made farmers in Shanxi province among the poorest in China

hectares of low-producing land are expected to be developed into full production.

The US \$50.6 million Shanxi Integrated Agricultural Development Project is designed and financed with a US \$25.3 million loan by IFAD. Around 550,000 people will directly benefit from the project.

Credit — along with extension and technical support — will be a major feature of the project. With loans, poor families would be able, for the first time, to own cows, sheep, goats and pigs.

While a pasture improvement programme will increase the supply of fodder necessary to raise them, these animals would not only permit families to improve their diet but would also provide the manure that is so essential for increasing crop yields while the sale of offspring will become a source of income.

Increasing food crop yields is one goal of the project; increasing the prospects for earning income is the other.

Since the region is well-suited for growing apples, walnuts and other fruits, poor farmers will be helped to plant orchards and to market the produce. In the two counties of Oixian and Wuxiang, about 28,000 families — through credit and technical advice — will plant mulberry bushes on slopes too steep for food crops and to start raising silk worms.

Since silk culture is primarily carried out by women, they in particular would benefit from the income they earn both from selling the cocoons and working in expanded cocoon drying and silk selling facilities.

The Shanxi project is just the most recent of IFAD's efforts to support China's rural poor as they strive for a better, more secure life. With over US \$113 million in loans, the Fund has financed two livestock projects in Sichuan and the northern provinces of Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang and Hebei, two agricultural development projects in Hebei, Shandong and Yantai, a rural credit project in Hebei and a freshwater fish farming project in Guangdong.

The legendary capacity of the Chinese farmer for hard work, along with effective government support, has made all these projects highly successful in bringing significant improvements in production and living standards.

Philippine's women richly contribute to farming

by Henrylito D Tacio

WOMEN are good corn farmers. The active involvement of rural women in corn farming and as partners in decision-making contributes substantially to the adoption and dissemination of technologies," says Dr Lydia P. Oliva, a researcher from the University of Southern Mindanao, in southern Philippines.

Dr Oliva's study indicates that women are the main controllers of farm accounts and of the products used in households (either for consumption

or for sale). Women, the study showed, can also generate

Women now tend to equally share, if not dominate, in most of the decision-making in the farm

additional income through off-farm activities.

Dr Oliva says that "the degree of work involvement was high in such operations as planting, fertiliser application, weeding and harvesting."

It was consistently observed that the wives and children (daughters particularly) were more active than the farmer-cooperators in almost all farm activities studied by the researchers.

It was apparent that their active participation was instrumental in enhancing corn technology adoption in project areas. Thus, a study was made in the towns of Carmen and Antipal in North Cotabato, Bansalan and Digos in Davao del Sur, and Malunog and Tantaran in South Cotabato.

Among OFRO cooperators, there were 39 wives, 80 daughters and 34 hired women involved in the study.

"With the OFRO project and the active participation of women and children in the trials and other activities conducted, the improvement in decision-making involvement of women has become evident," says Dr Oliva, who headed the study.

The study found that women were not directly involved in plowing, harrowing and furrowing. However, 92 per cent of the wives were highly involved in harvesting, while 62 per cent of their daughters were moderately involved in the same activity.

The study also showed that 66 per cent of wives and 50 per cent of their daughters were highly involved and moderately involved, respectively, in corn planting. Wives were highly involved in fertiliser application (70 per cent), weeding (87 per cent), weeding (77 per cent), and drying (72 per cent) of seed corns.

Most of the hired women were highly involved (100 per cent) in all of the activities, excluding plowing, harrowing and planting.

In terms of economic contribution of women, women helping till their farms have been found to earn about P 2,430 (US\$95) for an average of 81 man-days of labour. Off their farms, women earned about P 990 (US\$38) in 33 man-days of labour. Thus, for each cropping of corn, the women contributed about P 3,420 (US\$ 132) in terms of man-days labour.

"Unlike before, the women now tended to equally share (if not dominate) in most of the decision-making in the farm," Dr Oliva said. "This is especially true where monetary considerations are concerned."

Dr Oliva says that "this prevailing cultural value among Filipinos implies that women play a major role in deciding what technologies to adopt."

The study "underscores the importance of evolving development strategies to harness women in our present effort toward shifting our subsistence farming to a market-oriented farm business," Dr Oliva says.

Experts dub giant Himalayan dam project dangerous

NEW DELHI: The October earthquake which killed 2,000 people and devastated thousands of houses puts a huge question mark over the future of the controversial Tehri Dam in the foothills of the Himalayas.

For three years, opponents of the giant dam have highlighted the seismic hazard of the proposed dam on the Tehri region of Uttar Pradesh state. The earthquake, which had a magnitude of 6.5 on the Richter scale, occurred at the Tehri-Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh state.

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, who flew over the Tehri Dam site and nearby devastated villages, ordered a review of the entire project. The Uttar Pradesh government, run by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party has also demanded a review.

"We have been asking for a disaster management plan for the Tehri Dam," says Sunil Roy, a former Director-General of Tourism and chairman of the first expert committee on the Tehri Dam. "Now there is need for a disaster management plan for the entire Himalayas."

Two leading environmentalists — Dr N D Jayal and Dr Shekhar Singh — have served legal notice on the Environment Ministry demanding the withdrawal of its environmental clearance for the Tehri Dam. They claim that the project authority has failed to submit comprehensive environment management plans and blueprints for a water catchment area and rehabilitation.

Waiving administrative procedure for technical clearance and cost/benefit analysis, the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh state pressured the Planning Commission and had the project passed.

Analysts point out that the main point of contention is that the dam was designed on the basis of reports by earthquake engineers and not seismologists who are better equipped for a proper assessment of the risks.

Critics argue that only seismologists are competent to determine the magnitude of possible earthquakes in the Himalayas and the peak ground acceleration (movement) which must be taken into ac-

count for a proper feasibility study.

The present design of the proposed dam provides protection against an earthquake of 7.2 magnitude on the Richter scale. Given the fact that the Himalayas have experienced some of the most powerful earthquakes (the latest in 1950 was 8.7 magnitude), the dam site could well experience a tremor up to 8.5 magnitude on Richter scale.

As early as 1978, local residents have opposed the project.

The main contention is that the proposed dam was designed on the basis of reports by earthquake engineers and not seismologists who are better equipped for a proper assessment of the risks by Prakash Chandra

ject. The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi even asked the Department of Science and Technology to review the project.

Mr Roy was appointed chairman of the reviewing committee. He saw critical gaps in vital information or seismicity, siltation and other geological data. In 1986, he submitted a report saying the dam should not be constructed because the seismic risk was too great.

Based on this report, the environmental clearance was not granted by the Environment and Forest Ministry. But this did not deter the government from enlarging the project to 30,000 million rupees (US \$1,053 million) for generating 1,000 MW of electricity in the first phase and 1,400 MW in the second phase.

In July 1990, the Environment Ministry, under political pressure, granted the clearance upon certain conditions — the two most important being the development of a catchment area and a disaster management plan.

Mr Roy and Dr Jayal now say all dam construction in the Himalayas should be stopped and each of them reviewed after consulting respected and independent seismologists.

out with a report giving a number of reasons why the government should not go ahead with the project. Among them: the hazards posed by earthquakes.

The Auditor-General

pointed out that 36 earthquakes took place in the course of 80 years within a radius of 80-320 kilometres from the project site. Its expected 100-year lifespan no longer holds true because of

high sedimentation.

In a visit to India in 1986, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev promised technical assistance to the project. Whether Soviet aid will continue amid the political

changes in Moscow is an open question.

The strong lobby of contractors and politicians, who are likely to make a quick buck in the 40,000 million rupees (US \$1,404 million) pro-

ject, has been very active in securing clearances for the various stages of the dam.

Now they plan to go to the Supreme Court to have the clearance withdrawn. — Depthnews Asia

Dado, Amie and Ya Ya Show How to Do It Yourself

Rosemary Long writes from Gambia

A year ago, Dado Manneh and Amie Bojang spent their days cooking rice, washing clothes, and sitting in their compounds with the other women, gossiping, snoozing, or pounding millet.

In the village of Tanji, in the tiny West African democracy of the Gambia, cooking and pounding millet were all that girls could look forward to — first for their mothers and sisters and later for their husbands.

Life for the boys was not much different. Sometimes, Ya Ya Jammeh drove a van, but the rest of the time he would sit on the bantaba — the village meeting place — with the other men, smoking, drinking gunpowder tea, or sleeping the time away.

Their lives have changed dramatically in the last year, and the change has paralleled the alteration in attitudes of the village itself.

Twenty-five miles from the capital city of Banjul, with a population of around 2,500, is Tanji, a straggling hodgepodge of cultures, with its main street clamped at one end to the fish-smoking sheds that are the only solid source of income for the community, then poking inland like a finger to where the maize and millet and cassava grow in small plots.

The village is only a few generations old and populated by half-a-dozen tribes. The incomers from Senegal (which surrounds the Gambia on three sides) and those from other parts of the country are mistrustful of one another, usually jobless and mostly with minimal or non-existent education or skill-training.

But all this is changing, thanks to the refusal of people like Dado, Amie and Ya Ya to settle for an empty future.

These three have become managers of the village's own development project.

Today, Dado is usually clattering away at a typewriter producing memos, management committee minutes and thank-you letters to dignitaries who have dropped in to see

team of volunteers to plant flowers in the communal garden.

All these things happen in and around the village Centre. Original funding and a measure of continuing financial back-up came from a small British charity, but in most respects

Three ambitious residents in the Gambian village of Tanji had little to look forward to until they decided to take the future into their own hands. The projects they have developed to improve literacy and other skills are giving them the independence they have hoped for.

this self-help phenomenon, Amie, with her baby gurgling on her back, might be issuing books in the new library or running numeracy sessions for groups of adults.

And Ya Ya maybe singing and counting and chanting the alphabet with 30 bright-eyed pre-school tots, or rallying a

the Tanji Community Development Project, as it is formally known, (tries to be self-financing and democratically run by the villagers themselves.

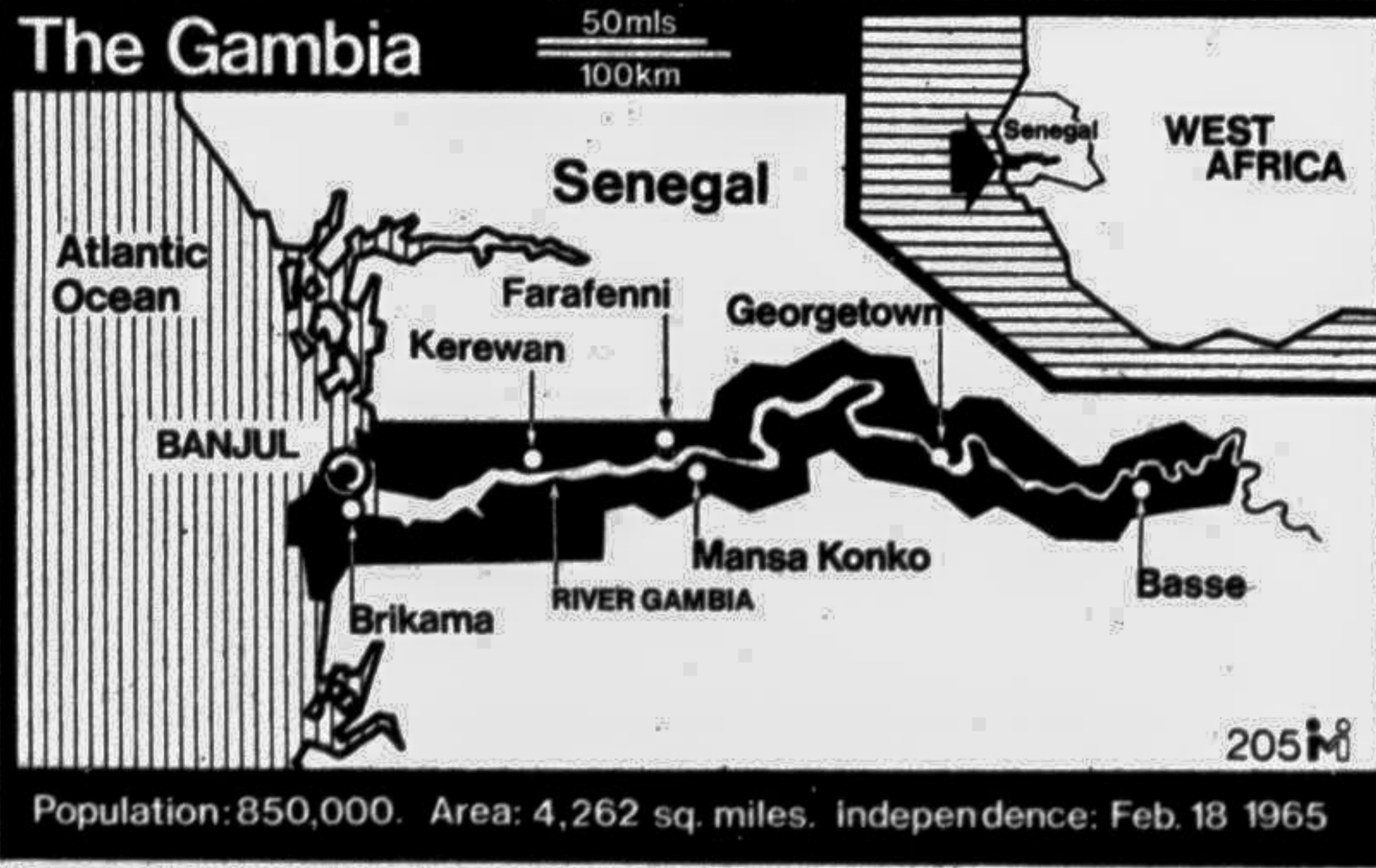
"The women and girls of the village are very happy," said Amie. "Before, there was nothing for them to do except

housework, and their menfolk had no hope of jobs. They couldn't help their children to read and write because they themselves had no education. Now, look!"

She is pointing to a corner of the large whitewashed hall — a combined social centre,

teaching facility and business headquarters — where 15 men and women are learning to read and write.

Soon, they will be able to use the Centre's own library, where books by African and European authors crowd the shelves under a large globe of the world presented by an



Population: 850,000. Area: 4,262 sq. miles. Independence: Feb 18 1965