

GROWING UP IN SENEGAL

Each year came the time, not of the grape harvest, but of the bottling of the mass-wine. A 100-litre barrel of white wine arrived at the boarding school from the "Maison Carrée" of the White Fathers in Algeria. That day, three or four of us girls would be cloistered in the pantry with the cook and the whole day was spent washing, filling and corking an army of bottles. In the evening, when we were all finished, we were unexpectedly rewarded with a hot, sweet, pan full of wine, after which we tottered back to join the rest of the boarders.

We also had a cellar...and a wine cellar. At the beginning of this article I mentioned that Marcel and I celebrated our engagement in this convent. I had brought our engagement meal with me from Dakar, the city where I was teaching. You can imagine my disappointment when I realized that I had forgotten the wine. The Mother Superior of the convent generously offered me several bottles of "pelure d'oignon" — to the great surprise of a French colleague who was teaching with me at the Marist Fathers' College and who had made the trip with us.

"Opportunity makes the thief", we say. This was true of everything in our education at the boarding school. We were in turn ballet dancers, actresses, choristers and poets, depending on the needs of the moment. Once a year we presented an evening per-

formance in which our artistic talents were noted by the townspeople. It was a real "tour de force" to make African girls dance to Vivaldi's Four Seasons or other classical music. This way of dealing with us in the varied circumstances of our lives has taught me never to give up when asked to do something beyond my abilities.

But where was my African culture in everything I have been telling you? Not very far away. Our boarding school was right in the African quarter. The shouting, singing, tom-toms and hubbub in the street reminded us that we were very much on African soil. Among ourselves we could speak Wolof or one of the other Senegalese languages but only at our own risk, because we could be deprived of our monthly visit to our parents if one of the nuns found us speaking any language other than French.

We were immersed in French life, but our African culture was still near the surface. In the small details of our lives, we thought like Africans, as this anecdote will show.

One day a nun read us a letter from her cousin, who was telling about her wedding in France. We found the wedding rather dull by our African standards, so we decided to perform it again and we began singing at the top of our voices in the recreation yard: "You toubabs (whites) can have your waltzes, we will play the tom-toms in honour of the wedding of Mother Aimée's cousin".

Sometimes we found this imported culture hard to bear. Comparisons were too easy and too cruel. We talked about whites and blacks when comparing French and African girls. Sometimes it was discouraging to think that fate had not been kind to us; we were not the right colour; it took us more effort to succeed in becoming like the whites and...was that really what we should become? Should we transform into that imported culture, our everyday culture, which was the African culture, even if it was not visible? It was with that feeling that I went to see an old missionary. I told him that I could never be like the white women and that they were luckier than we were. He replied, "My dear child, it is only in musical notes that one white is worth two blacks".

Much has happened since I heard that memorable statement. My country has gained its independence, and my beloved boarding school has had to close after over 115 years of operation.

I left St. Louis for Dakar, the new capital. After finishing my studies, I began my career as a teacher. In the Scout movement I was a National Commissioner. I am an educator twice over and I have always been interested in the problems of young people. That is why I was at the international camp at N'Dangalma in 1963.

In July 1965 we were married in Montreal and we then left for Oxford, England. I was offered a position in the Maison Française at Oxford where I gave French courses to students in the Colleges who wanted to learn the language of Molière. After England we went to the United States, where I taught in the International French School in Washington. During two summers, at the request of those interested, I organized and directed a day camp for the children of IMF and World Bank employees. There again it was not just two cultures in confrontation.

Now that I have a family of three boys and one girl, it is my turn to instruct and educate my children. Both our cultures have been presented to the children. I am happy to watch them grow without problems or complexes both in Canada and in Africa.

Of course, there is no need to say that I have never regretted the education I received. The cultural cross-breeding has for me been the best possible preparation for living in Canada, my adopted country. It is very important for us to be models and guides for our children and to be proud of a past, that because of its nature and the circumstances, called upon us to outdo ourselves. Our children should know that. That is what a marriage of cultures is all about.

Dip Doodles by Vic Lotto



Mom, Dad, come and see what Sara just found in the sandbox.