

Book Review by The Washington Times - Thursday, September 24, 2009

A MAN FOR ALL REGIONS

Seychelles Global Citizen: The Autobiography of the Founding President of the Republic of Seychelles
By James R. Mancham

Paragon House, \$24.95, 352 pages

Reviewed by Lelei Lelaulu

GENERALLY, after distinguished careers, internationally recognized political leaders from the developing world descend gently into well-deserved rest from the strobe lights of the politico-paparazzi. Sir James R. Mancham, K.B.E., is an intriguing exception. His helmsmanship of the Republic of Seychelles, a tiny group of islands off the African coast in the Indian Ocean, was rudely shortened by a violent coup that ended democracy on the tiny island nation.

Undeterred by the brutality of the Tanzanian-supported coup on his isolated archipelago, Mr. Mancham, traveling in other regions, plied his "smiling philosophy" of dignifying the views of political opponents, gaining the respect of leaders in the nongovernment firmament.

In his accounts of negotiations to gain independence from London, Mr. Mancham details a litany of encounters with duplicitous British officials who could have populated a lesser John le Carre novel of bungling and betrayal by the guardians of the Establishment.

Mr. Mancham, who originally pushed for integration with Britain, soon realized colonizers could not be relied on and were even downright deceitful dealing with their charges. He writes, "[T]he word 'colonialism' had become synonymous with oppression, injustice and brutal exploitation."

Even when the Union Jack was lowered for the last time in the capital Victoria during the independence celebrations in June 1976, the first Seychellois president looked out to the harbor at warships assembled to respect the new nation from India, Australia and Iran. He rued that there was "not a single name from that never-ending list which constituted the Falkland Islands invasion armada."

Educated in London and Paris by parents of Chinese-French extraction who wanted their bright son to be "a man of letters and culture," Mr. Mancham did return as a Middle Temple-anointed barrister, but he used his legal training to enter the political arena with calls to repeal laws such as one protecting the "almost feudal privileges of the island's planters which made it an offence for an ordinary Seychellois citizen to be in possession of a coconut without a written permit."

It was also at the time when nationalist fervor in Africa had been excited by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's "winds of change" speech committing London to the dismantling of its empire as quickly as possible. Mr. Mancham wryly suggests decolonization was Whitehall's way of preparing the United Kingdom for entry to the European Union.

However, the colonial practice of divide and rule, the denuding of resources and the dumping of territories accelerated as spent colonies were ejected from the chilly bosom of Whitehall. And, without adequate training and appropriate aid, former colonies descended into civil strife and dictatorships.

Looking across the English Channel didn't help, as Mr. Mancham was subjected to the perfidy of a Paris trying to wrench cultural dominance from the English, who vanquished them in battles for control of the islands in the 19th century. In fact, it's a wonder Mr. Mancham didn't swoon into the welcoming arms of the Soviets after his subjection to the double-dealing of Paris and London.

When you grow up in a colony, it is hard to think of any Big Power initiative that was based on altruism. Indeed, when London and Washington acceded to Mr. Mancham's push for an international airport, it was clear the oil-consuming West needed an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" like the powerful U.S. base in neighboring Diego Garcia to monitor and protect the oil lanes. So, the Seychelles got an airport big enough to land military aircraft, and the airliners bearing high-end tourists and their tourism dollars.

Mr. Mancham noted the base was moved to Diego Garcia instead of another preferred island because of a small colony of booby birds. There were, however, no displayed qualms when the native human inhabitants of Diego Garcia were removed to make way

for the fortress.

After the start of his forced exile, Mr. Mancham started to really play on the international stage. At the Universal Peace Federation, he was thrust into the international limelight in New York alongside the likes of former Prime Minister Edward Heath, former Secretary of State Alexander Haig and other luminaries. He joined the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace, which placed him in the company of religious leaders of diverse faiths and regions.

His wanderlust contributed to his political ouster, and the coup leaders used his many absences as excuses for toppling Mr. Mancham, but through his exposure to other lands, he was also able to see that without aid from the colonial governments, the best way to generate income was through their citizens' desire to travel to faraway islands.

Ignoring the colonial masters, he went to the people. Recognizing tourism as the largest voluntary transfer of resources from the colonizers to their ex-colonies in history, it was only a matter of time before British and French tourists were taking and leaving in the Seychelles more money than their governments gave in aid.

So, yes, Mr. Mancham had a taste for the sweet, fast life, trotting the globe in style, watering with the jet set, but he also almost singlehandedly lured the high-spending glitterati of the early 1970s to the Seychelles. And, as we know, where celebrities go, so go the paparazzi, whose pictures of half-naked celebs and royals relaxing on beaches beamed around the world - priceless branding gifts for unknown destinations.

It wasn't long before the seductive charms of the Indian Ocean island nation of some 85,000 souls was drawing 75,000 tourists a year to the airport that Mr. Mancham built. He put the Seychelles on the world tourism map at its richest layer where well-healed elites stay longer and spend more money.

Mr. Mancham is the father of his country, and with his superb PR skills, he transformed an obscure backwater into a destination synonymous with the good life. Because of that, he bequeathed to the Seychelles tourism-generated income far beyond what even the most benevolent former colonizer could have offered. And he did so by energetically and skillfully being a man for his nation in all regions.

Lelei LeLaulu writes on the linkages between development, climate change, conservation and food security for the Development Executive Group. (Courtesy: The Washington Times - Thursday, September 24, 2009)