

Week ending 21.11.09

We found a new venue to skype home and despatch the Saturday communiqué at a beach resort with wifi. It allowed Denise and I to do our computer stuff outside (it's ok with out air-conditioning now) while the kids got to play in a pool. Through the afternoon we had another Gambian guest, my language instructor for in-country training, she found us because the neighbourhood now know the "toubabs" home. John, our neighbour registered a complaint about the kids taunting and teasing him; after tea one evening they had gone to his door to compare notes on what they had eaten and then gloated about the bananas in chocolate sauce Denise had prepared; such a treat is not readily available here – he may be applying for an 'asbo'! In the evening we attended the leaving do of a departing volunteer; no house clearing as she lived up-country.

On Sunday morning we took a walk on a birdwatchers path to enable Abi to make use of her birthday present bird book; we got away from it all until we reached the other end when we were hustled by the bird-watching guides; we 'escaped' to the beach where we were hustled by waiters and vendors. We had hoped the hustling would lessen for us when the real tourists arrived but it hasn't. I'm tempted to start taking some junk to the beach and start interrupting their sales pitches in the same way that they feel interrupting your own conversation is justified, ...and then interrupt some more to attempt to apologise. During a "cultural" session through the afternoon a band appeared with traditional instruments = calabash koras, etc and after playing a native piece played *quan tala mera* (not sure of the spelling but you know the Spanish muzak); I joined in with my version = *one ton of melons!*

On Monday I started the day observing a student teacher at a Secondary school, it entailed more of the off road sand driving to find the place, but I was impressed with the application and respect of the students(Grade 8 = Year 9). It is a shame these students don't have the educational experience and opportunities that the UK youth are offered; they would be so much more deserving and appreciative. I saw more of the same application during another observation on my way home after attending college to deliver a lecture. The lecture was to the group of Madrassa Arabic students who had previously expressed their lack of learning in maths but they are demonstrating good functional maths (without understanding) at present. They are multiplying also, a further baby has been born who attends and some students from the other Madrassa class are stealing in when they have free periods. Their appreciation and welcome is so refreshing and I am worried for the disappointment my absence to attend a VSO workshop will cause next week let alone an observation afternoon as well.

On Tuesday I had forgotten to include reading material for the gelleh commute, there has been a glitch in the delivery of my *Guardian weekly*, so I was forced to pay more attention to the world through which I was passing – the 'health and safety hat' took over watching a station wagon fill its interior bench seat and then the open backed area with over 20 children – what would the insurance company say to that to protect their liability? [I recently had a lapse in my "don't carry school children because my insurance company doesn't like it" attitude the other week when I had seen a lone child hitching near a junction, I stopped and then watched 3 further kids jump up from the undergrowth under a billboard and tear towards the car; I could do nothing but laugh at the wit of the gang and then give them a lift ½ a mile down the road (Gambians don't walk that sort of distance if there are vehicles on the road they are travelling).] I also noticed a gelleh travelling through 3 directional planes- from the rear you could see that

the front and rear wheels were so far out of line with each other that they would have made four separate tracks in sand/snow with probably a couple of inches between each set of tracks; the body of the van was similarly askew by maybe as much as 15° to the direction in which it was heading. How on earth the driver kept going with speed and confidence I will never know; riding a bike with handlebars even slightly out of line I find impossible.

I also fell foul to a tropical disease; a cough really but of such an unusual catarrhal quality I think it should be classed as tropical - and I was running a temperature. If I was in the UK a dram of whisky would have cured it I am sure; a very early night and no beach rugby seemed to alleviate the worst of it but I think the infection may still be lingering in my lungs. My running, since, has brought on coughing fits that seems to be shifting the remainder.

Abigail and Bradley's Sport Day on Wednesday was a huge let down, I had delayed my attendance at college to watch the kids take part at the national stadium. Abigail had complained at the training for the day that she had endured – running in soft sand in the heat against some children two years older than her - and we had just about overcome her developing negative attitude towards sports to encourage her to participate whatever the outcome; but she never got to compete anyway – I waited around for just under 5 hours for nothing. It was the more galling as the years of running school sports days could do nothing but pass through my head in the tedium; this was the antithesis of anything I have done(I feel I must write to the Head Teacher to express concerns for Abigail and to offer an alternative consultation). There were, however, some lighter hearted races for the youngest children; the 'mother & child' race required the kids to 'wrap' a doll to their backs with a strip of fabric (as the mothers do with babies to walk, prepare food, clean, farm etc) and balance a board on top of your head (by tradition it would be a calabash of water). I'm not being the over protective parent or racist (I hope) to suggest that Bradley was unfairly handicapped in the race by not having hair with at least a little bit of afro cushion/ wiriness so he had to make do by tilting his head at an awkward angle to complete the race.

My usual college day on a Thursday is a long one; first in and last out, at 6.30pm, but in the absence of a lecturer and the imminent Students Union Elections requiring a final presentation of manifestos at 4pm my late class conscientiously requested an early start. I agreed but then rued my decision just after we had commenced work; the outgoing Information Minister arrived with a message about the delayed stipend payment due to the students (overdue since October) and since one of the proposed candidates to replace him is a member of the class there was already some tension; it became very heated; another student union executive member arrived with a message on a totally different matter but was oil on troubled water. I witnessed African "politics" in action; plenty of shouting, exaggerated hand gestures; would be peace makers who could only upset the people they were attempting to calm by their own demonstrative body language. Such situations are covered nowhere in the VSO training manual or courses but... ..I suggested the student's union representatives left, then got the class on their feet and told them to "follow me", we walked around the quadrangle to cool down, as a plan it had just about worked (despite unfortunately re meeting one of the union representatives!). But then the class secretary, a very conscientious young man who was mortified at the behaviour of his fellow students, felt he needed to use threats about involving the Head of the School of Education which started to stir things up again. I convinced him that wasn't necessary and spent 5 minutes being a wise old git (anyone who doesn't know the Tom Sawyer line "when I was 16 my father was the biggest fool I knew, it was amazing how much wiser he became over the next ten years" think it out

now) explaining that at any time, but especially in politics there were many young men who would feel they could change the world with anger but the more aged amongst us had learnt otherwise. I also explained the primeval reflex within the brain for “fight or flight” and the resultant chemicals making rational thought processes impossible, i.e. maths, which was why we went for a walk to redress the chemical balance.... Wow, I learnt a lot about myself through the episode, and think I earned my bacon. The second executive member was able to return and relay his message about a theft of digital photos without a lynching!

On my return home I stopped at the Senegambia hotel to liaise with a friend of Denise’s family, a bird watcher from Billingham. The original plan was to collect some pencils Peter had couriered for school children but he had done this through his tour operator but I did ask him to carry some shells back for Abigail’s classmates as well as some letters for delivery to the Withams. It was good to talk with someone from ‘home’ despite having to visit the tourist strip where I found myself sneering with disdain at ‘overweight underdressed’ tourists (no the old git hasn’t returned- the tourists were older than I and should know better, and Peter was appropriately dressed!).

Lectures were cancelled on Friday, in deference to the elections, but teaching staff were required to attend a training workshop. Cue Gambian time; the breakfast “start” at 9am materialised at 10.30. We were then given a ‘lecture’ by a visiting Swedish lecturer on creative media art (great CPD for me and will be put into practice on my return if I have a job) which will not be possible to achieve in the Gambia but his performance considering the lack of preparation by the host lecturer (the second most IT savvy guy in the college!), glitches, interruptions and lack of his obviously normally IT aware Western audience was a lesson in professional adaptability. I offered him a lift home and struck up a further rapport. An agenda for the workshop appeared after the ICT session; the day required a break to allow for Friday prayers and lunch. I successfully negotiated an early exit on the grounds that I had made a prior engagement with my family before the workshop had been announced (Wednesday afternoon). Before anyone tuts about a part-timers attitude, I was the only VSO present; Anne was observing up-country and Amy had made previous arrangements with her visiting family. I will also be attending the continuation of the workshop on Saturday.