

Week ending 28.11.09

The Saturday workshop started after a breakfast at 10.30. I mention this trivia as the attendance sheet was a farce; I arrived at 9.30 expecting to have to make an excuse for being a little bit late for the 9am proposed start but I was the third person there; the attendance register asked for a time of arrival and everyone had written a time between 9 and 9.20 (apart for yours truly - I thought of the advice of the Assistant Commissioner who recommended we should read Graham Greene's *A Good man in Africa*). Apparently this is common practice here, in the Education Offices workers signing in between 8.30 and 9 think nothing of declaring in writing they arrived at 7.20. The day was less enlightening than the previous one; we were expected as department teams to present visual teaching aids, I had stuff prepared earlier so suggested 'we' produce a poster to support the materials; I left them at one stage for ten minutes wondering whether any of them would continue the ideas in my absence; nothing was done. Whilst I don't mind shouldering the burden of planning, creating resources and ICT requirements I am worried that the legacy I leave should be more enlightened lecturers as well as the more inspired teachers but they might be the hardest people to change. The best part to the day was the appointment of a 'Gambian' name = a sign of acceptance; I am to be called Pateh, a Fula name which I have yet to find out its meaning. The Fula tribes were originally nomadic herdsman; the nomad title seems appropriate for my earlier life.

On our way to a Christmas Party 'planning' party at the experienced volunteer's home we stopped at Serrekunda market. Can't remember which week I missed it but I compared notes with British tourist Peter last week who was unimpressed; I referred to a scene in *Monty Python & the Holy Grail* where two of the incidental characters hold a conversation sitting in the mud "Who was that?" "It was the king," "How do you know?" "Because he isn't covered in crap like us". Peter knew what I meant. Anyhow in the sunshine the red dust was better. We realised the market works as more of a commune than a group of merchants; visiting the first stall we were taken by its merchant, some distance, to a second stall where the original merchant struck a deal to sell us some blankets, we set off independently to find some cooking ingredients. When we stopped at a stall to ask merchant no.1 suddenly appeared and sent us to follow a boy to another stall in another alley where we bought from merchant no.2. Heading out of the market with all we needed I stopped to ask a price of a shirt and merchant no. 1 & 2 stepped in to lead negotiations! I walked away as we were joined by another interested party who started to strike up a rapport but we were saved; an obvious tourist couple with giveaway bumbags were a far easier target than ourselves as our three latches detached for better prey! With sympathy I suggested to Denise we check the couple were all right with the hustle; her attitude was more hard-nosed.

On Monday I had my official three month review; a tick box session for VSO so they can say they have given us a support counselling session - where we have to work out the answers. Our issues were duly noted but little was given in the way of resolving serious issues, such as sexual harassment in the workplace. The official brief had suggested that my VSO line manager would have spoken to my Gambian employer to discuss any issues but this hadn't been done. It was billed as a workshop which meant some sandwiches for the participants; there was a concurrent workshop happening within the VSO office which was provided with a more substantial buffet but it was obvious we were supposed to be finished before they were fed. I managed to find things to do in the VSO library and thus engineered a further plateful of lunch. The lesson of the week has been the association of workshops with food. Not attending college also

meant I was at home early for an afternoon so we took the opportunity to hit the beach at 3.30; the surf was great again and the ocean is a little more refreshing now.

The series of workshops that had preceded the weekend continued in Brikama with our attendance expected in between lectures. However, my professional colleagues didn't consider that aspect and saw it as a further opportunity to cancel lectures, to get well fed and collect an easy *per diem*. I was expecting to leave early on the Tuesday to observe some training teachers but learnt that schools were closing in anticipation of Tobaski\*(Eid stage II) so that outing was cancelled but I had to endure further 'professional development' on matters that I learnt about in my teacher training, and didn't expect would be appropriate to the trainers of teachers. ( This assumption was wrong according to the experienced volunteer, Anne). The students got wind of the lecturers attitude so didn't attend college, and any teaching I wanted to do was impossible; I managed a tutorial with a number of willing students ( 5 hours earlier than the normal lecture). So it was I went to start these workshops at 9am, to find nothing ready so would return at 10.30 for a 'breakfast' (a mini bagette containing steak & chips or chicken salad) and be taught to suck eggs waiting for lunch of rice and fish thinking that the word 'workshop' couldn't have been more of an oxymoron. Colleagues and instructors engaging in mobile phone conversations in/outside the hall, recounting irrelevant stories or reading their newspapers.

In amongst this the Principal of the College had suddenly announced a new job in the New Year so was taking the rest of the year off in outstanding holiday entitlement so a leaving presentation was arranged for Wednesday afternoon mid session. I was amazed to witness a big pompous African lose control of his emotions; I can't blame him after 26 years at the college but I didn't expect to see a man, who could normally groan on officially and ceremoniously with little consideration for his audience (because that is what is expected from such a position), in tears. Fish pasties and pop was the nosebag before the workshop lunch.

At the end of the workshop I was expecting a break for the Tobaski weekend but we were presented with a schedule for further workshops next week where the departments were to share practice of 'learner centred methodology'. The Maths department were nominated for one of the first demonstrations so decided a further meeting was required the following morning; I reluctantly agreed but said I wanted it early to finish quickly; two others agreed but the boss wanted a leisurely start at 10. He at least got there at that time on the Thursday but the colleague who lived nearest and had set the time at 9am arrived 10.45; but why he bothered I don't really know – he contributed nothing and left within half an hour to go and collect his wages and Tobaski loan. Having produced all the half dozen resources the selected topic required with no contribution of ideas from my colleagues protocol required a written plan; so the department laptop was turned on ... and handed to me to create as well. If it sounds like I'm blowing my own trumpet I really wish it didn't but it highlights the lack of creativity and motivation that exists and part of my role is to rectify this situation amongst the lecturers; if I was the first volunteer, it would be understandable, but my predecessor was obviously more imaginative than myself but her legacy to her colleagues would appear to be the textbooks she bought that we refer to for content. I might have felt less frustrated with the week if I had spent time inspiring students to be better teachers than their masters. We were able to make something of the delayed day as the kids were off school so had gone to Brikama with me.

The mosque had turned up the volume for Tobaski so I was awake early on Friday for the local equivalent of Christmas Day. I had decided my training schedule for the marathon required a long run, better in the cool of the morning, so set off at first light

(6.40). Whilst contemplating the day ahead, and whether the children should be subject to the witnessing of a ram sacrifice at the home of the family we had been invited to, I saw a fully grown turtle on the beach surrounded by vultures. Determined that I should help the creature back into the sea I sped up but was mortified to find the beautiful creature was dead and had obviously been that way for a couple of hours. In a letter to Dale some months ago I mentioned how very 'real' life was here in Africa; I think such an episode continues to show how cosseted our lives in North Europe( don't feel I can say Western world when I'm living in the West of Africa) really are. As I finished my run I saw rams being washed in the sea in readiness for their slaughter.

We attended Adama's compound in Serrekunda (just off one of the main thoroughfares so we got a real insight into what the place is like at its heart- still dirty but warm and genuine). The ram had been slaughtered with the Imam's blessing but Denise and I were invited to watch its preparation – cut up by two tailors but held by members of the family, including children. I noted the creatures 'crown jewels' were the first part to be removed from the skin; the seven year old son of the eldest son(head of the family in the absence of the father/grandfather) then played with the testicles with apparent ironic innocence. The 'biology lesson' dissection was better than anything I did at school and thoroughly enlightening; we're debating which pictures can be published on Denise's blog now that the *Evening Gazette* has alerted it to the public. To make a comparison with our Christmas Day rituals you couldn't get more extreme! The consequential feast was even better – I normally run a mile when offered sheep's liver but it was cooked with fresh heart in such a way that we all enjoyed it, followed by grilled mutton all from a communal bowl. We then, I suppose, 'sat around' (absolutely nothing on the telly, left on, that droned on with religious messages from mosques around the country) outside drinking Attaya; highly sugared green tea mixed with garden mint until it was time to eat more stewed mutton cooked with rice. Whilst eating we shared a bowl with a daughter of the family, Adama's youngest sister Khaddy (his twin sister was expected to be at her husband's compound to work) who is trying to get to University, but the wives of the family were out of sight preparing the food, such is the patriarchal nature of the society. We returned home to be given a leg of ram by our Christian landlady as she was given too much by her Muslim brothers; I had to turn 'butcher' to allow freezing and cooking options.

Aware that Saturday mornings had become a call home time and meant we missed exploration options I suggested a walk recommended in a 25 year old nature guide book. Whilst the pathways had disappeared we were rewarded with some good bird watching; boring it may sound but you can't fail to be impressed with the opportunities here. In the North East the appearance of Ospreys in Northumberland makes the local news; here one a day is possible. The birdwatcher's guide we bought Abi for her birthday is getting well used. On our return home I had an altercation with an officious policeman wanting to check my papers; I questioned his selection when a motorbike sailed passed with no visible number plates – they were obscured by the hand written "For Sale" sign sellotaped over the plates! When I went into Gambian slow motion response to his directions - to increase the back log of traffic – his supervisor suggested letting me go. The car is obviously recognised on my route to work and home locality so is unhindered but elsewhere seen as fair game!

\*Tobaski here recognises the act of Abraham/Ibrahim preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac to Yahweh/Allah but killing a ram instead. Goat/ ram markets have been chaotic up and down the country. The compound next door had 2 or 3 rams in it leading up to the event; who were noisy around bed time but 'it's all gone quiet over there'!