

Week ending 23.1.10

A full week of work where what used to interest is now becoming the norm. I am sure new eyes would see the Gambia differently but it is now part of the acceptance of all the elements that make up my challenge. I thought 'culture shock' would be a short sharp shock not a 4-5 month learning curve.

One thing that I am finding hard to balance is the VSO requirement for me to be a 'resource person' which I thought meant supporting fellow lecturers to create resources. What I seem to create is materials that have no value for the lecturers intended and students who consider me as a stationer! The examples of such behaviour were a fellow lecturer who one moment marvelled at an aid I had created on brown paper (a recycled ground nut wrapper) then turned it over to jot down his ideas with little respect. Students come to our office to demand sellotape, presentation cardboard, and use of a stapler. Is it because they are scared of going to the school office and consequently the 'white man giveth' philosophy prevails as a soft touch from the colonial days or because they are too lazy. Either way I don't believe I gave up as much as I did to just be a store of stationery items; my help should have more long term value. I don't like to make colonial references for the sinister overtones that exist but I fear it runs too deep, kids we pass will say 'give me money', nearby adults justify their begging suggesting it is expected of the *toubab* to buy them sweets. The students use a similar direct 'give me' but I'm afraid (right or wrong in your opinion) that I have taken to pointing out that 'I'm sure the British taught you manners before Independence', the comment passes straight over their heads.

Other culture shock differences relate to what we consider 'decent'. The first is nose-picking; not just the discrete thumb or index end into the lower regions of the nose by the bloke in the car next to you at the traffic lights. This is a full index finger shoved in without discretion and brogged around before removal for a studied inspection before dropping the 'business' on the floor. It is usually the right hand, reserved for shaking and eating! The second is the slurping of tea; this includes the well dressed ladies. It is sucked from the cup; I can just about repeat the noise by sucking soup from a spoon with a distance of almost an inch between puckered lips and a spoon – but I wouldn't do it anywhere near my Mum!

Appreciative that this paragraph might be intensely boring to some, jump ahead if the word 'gardening' is wholly uninspiring. Whilst looking to adjust my work/life balance during my placement I had planned to experiment with vegetable growing in tropical climates. I had brought some seeds from the UK, though when I visited the British Commission and read the restrictions on importing seeds(4 packets) I was worried that I might be upsetting the environment with something that might overrun but 2 of the 3 packets have failed to produce any shoots. British carrots have not taken; I bought some Gambian carrot seeds which have. Beans likewise have failed but I am unable to compare with Gambian varieties; some spinach has grown but also proved tasty to different insect life. I built a scarecrow and other bird scarers, so they cannot be blamed – I was worried weaver birds would strip my young plants. The real success I am having is with tomatoes; some have grown from the compost I put into the ground before sowing any seeds – I hope they survive bird attacks when in fruit. Part of the problem is getting local advice; I'm sure in colonial times some British gent would have had the inclination to write a book about gardening in West Africa(just as they did about mammals(1960) but now no longer in print according to Amazon), John tried to research 'pruning fruit trees in tropical climates', as his role in statistics relates to agriculture and could justify the time, but nothing was offered of any use. As part of the experiment, the use of coconut husks soaked in water was recommended to provide good fertiliser – I have

been brewing a barrel of the stuff since October and have now applied some to await the outcome.

On Saturday we took a walk along an undeveloped beach where we stopped to watch a fishing crew haul in their net; it was a far more worthwhile catch than we had previously witnessed. Over a 100 fish must have been landed so it was a great opportunity for the kids to get close to and handle live slippery fish. For our tea we bought a 2 foot 'flying' fish (its body had outgrown its wings) which I then had to carry home with a finger through its gills= much better than buying from the fishmonger at *Morrisons*. I then also had the opportunity to use the blade on my Swiss Army knife/multi-purpose tool that is supposed to help every Boy Scout descale a fish; it works really well! I also had my first gutting experience (learnt from an ex Major at Teesdale 2008) and we all survived. Next Saturday will probably be 'clean the nation' *sett settal* so such outings won't be possible.

You might suggest *sett settal* as a way of reducing your council tax bills in the UK. How it works is like this; any rubbish you accumulate in the household bin you take out into the street and dump it. It builds up until the last Saturday of the month when you go out and set fire to it and maybe collect a bit more of the forlorn rubbish in the street to add to your pyre; you're not missing anything because the shops aren't open and you can't drive between 9am and 1pm. You also need to also sweep up around the rubbish pile. Thus you can do away with refuse collection and road sweeping! Any takers?