

## Week ending 5.2.10

Keeping apace of these journals has not been easy this week; for five of the last seven nights we have been without electrical power. I learnt on the last occasion that it was part of some scheduled maintenance work. When the power has returned late on an evening I have had to complete college work; count your blessings for this 'electronic' mail.

Monday started with a visit to local Secondary school to observe a student teacher. On arrival I met up with a gap year student, Chris, who I had previously encountered on the beach through Sunday's touch rugby sessions. Through his interest for rugby I had started to interest him in becoming involved with coaching 'the team', the meeting was coincidental but he directed me to the Principal's office to allow me to go through introductory procedures. The teacher I was looking to observe was unwell apparently, so I arranged to return the following day. Duly, I arrived to observe on Tuesday and was taken to the appropriate classroom where Chris' fellow gap student, Tim, was already teaching! He was asked to handover to 'my' student for me to observe an unorganised lesson – I gave feedback accordingly but then was approached by Tim who complained to me that he had been responsible for most of the teaching that had been going on from the previous week, when he had arrived and he hadn't even had the opportunity to watch how it was done from his supposed mentor! Amazing, an eighteen year old steps off a plane from the UK and is thrown into Secondary school teaching. I gave my philosophy on the matter of 'the white man giveth', in this case his time, so the Gambian can sit back and let the *toubab* do the work. I did point out that if Tim wanted to become a teacher after University he will never get another practice opportunity like this – he can't 'break anything' as whatever he teaches it will probably have a greater effect than the local supposed professional. It will be interesting to return to observe later in the term to see how much time the student has completed of his practice; Tim will hopefully be able to keep me updated!

The two of them are part of an organisation called *Smile*, which is an acronym for short term development projects, and *Ganfes* which is a Christian support group for four months. They did join me later for the Tuesday training session at the 'buffer zone' (West Serrekunda). The Gambian lads had developed tackling for themselves over the weekend so had an opportunity to show off their skills, alongside the two further Brits, and I came away impressed – they've come a long way in the 3 weeks since I first saw them running lines for the committee. They now want to hold a demonstration sevens match for the committee next Saturday so development is definitely afoot.

Not so my *field of dreams*. On Tuesday we were told that the Vice Chancellor did not want to interfere with our proposals and that our plans could go ahead, on Thursday I was told I might have to move the facility a bit further west so went to ask to borrow an axe - so that I could cut down the dead tree in the middle of the field ( its removal had been promised in October so I felt it was time I took matters into my own hands)- but was told that I might be wasting my time as that wasn't west enough. I really am starting to wonder whether the Gambia will appreciate the facility, a government policy I have read this week would support me wholeheartedly and could give me good justification but I fear the bottom line is the African need for pomp and ceremony – a meeting point to show off their gowns of education, etc. As the P.E. lecturer pointed out 'el prez' loves his titles (self appointed Dr., Sheik).

He waylaid my journey home on Wednesday, to Denise's annoyance. Just imagine the Reggie Perrin tone "sorry I'm late dear, forced off the road by the paramilitaries at Busumbala, President on his way to his farm at Farato, three stretch limos today, no flying biscuits, only one gun jeep, two were already guarding the farm, about a dozen vehicles with an ambulance bringing up the rear". It has been a week of 'public' enterprise transport this week in the *gellehs*

which I should share with those of you facing a grind of a journey. On Wednesday I was squashed next to a young couple who could only afford one seat so the girlfriend sat on her boyfriend's knee but because of the cramped conditions ended up being one of my knees as well; I didn't get a discount! On Thursday, whilst alighting I ended up with my heel in the potty of the infant breast feeding next to me. I did have a novel experience at the busy Westfield junction where I have a connection to catch; normally, the moment you step out of one taxi a youth approaches and starts shouting in your face "Brikama, eh, Lamin, eh, Brikama" as you are shepherded, and may even be pulled by the arm towards a particular van. But on Friday, I had "excuse me sir, but are you going to Brikama or Lamin?" At first I was so taken aback I misheard him. I hope it continues, I suspect it might have something to do with the fact that the University of Gambia has transferred even more of its organisation to Brikama, it is definitely more busy within the campus.

I also found an instance of Africans struggling with technology. Whilst hunting down the aforesaid axe I noticed a brand new wrapped chest freezer sat on top of a desk. The packaging had clear arrows pointing which way was up but the thing had been inverted; cue 20 minutes trying to find somebody responsible enough to explain that what they had done would seriously affect the workings of the thing if irreparable damage had not already been done; time will tell. If anyone reading has a greater understanding of refrigeration than me please advise. The way I feel towards the University (re sports field) is not good but I have to remember I am here to share skills; I am currently reading a book titled *British Colonial Administrative system on the Anvil* which discusses the coming of independence in Gambia and I do feel some of the expectations of the old civil service administration are implied through ourselves now.

I am staying 'British' about my time keeping and not giving in to casual Gambian ways; that skill did create a contretemps on Friday. Due to lecture at 11am I arrived at college at 9.25; by 9.27 I had the class secretary asking if I could start the lecture early as their timetabled lecturer hadn't turned up. I agreed and was 20 minutes into my lecture when the original lecturer decided to arrive; the students suggested she should come back next week – she had an excuse that she wouldn't be around; they suggested she come back after I had finished – she stated she had another class at that time; the students were face with no choice and asked me to come back at 11. (I should add that this slovenly lecturer was the Nigerian lady who had slagged off the Gambians in the workshops back in the first week of December!). I returned as proposed, marched in and started getting ready while she was quite clearly unprepared for such efficiency (or you may think arrogance- I didn't care!); some of the students clapped!

On Saturday we had been invited to a school inter-house sports day. After a morning of domestic chores through sett-settale we were not anticipating much other than a poorly organised sit around where we would be looking for excuses to leave. It ended up a really good experience, an enthusiastic gathering of a village community. We felt like privileged guests with balcony seats overlooking a '400m' track marked around a football pitch= very tight curves to run. It felt a little like a Roman coliseum with Gladiatorial conditions as young Gambians ran their hardest before collapsing; no easing down just do or die which meant plenty of action for the four stretcher bearer parties. We shared a food bowl with the Head teacher - no cutlery just hands in to squeeze the rice into a ball to put in your mouth; Bradley ate for England in the circumstances but was admonished by Denise for his gluttony. Bradley also enjoyed the music played through the afternoon (a *Club Bongo* soundtrack for Middlesbrough readers), we were sat above the sound system so he jiggled for the crowd beneath – would be Gambian Billy Elliots.

Next week holds a conference with our unenthusiastic Programme manager and the arrival of 'fresh' VSO blood with some incoming upcountry volunteers.