

Week ending 27.2.10

Saturday morning in the wifi café threw up an interesting encounter as a fellow Brit got chatting. I can't publish too much as he wants to keep his services quiet at the moment, otherwise he'll be in trouble for running a business without a local partner. He is an ex BBC film-maker looking to set up a 'professional' media operation out here; admirably, from holidaying experiences, he has come here, without the capital every Gambian thinks is vital to get off your backside and make a buck, to prove that making a living is possible if you try. He has already got some thinking about recycling shoes to making money. An acquaintance has been struck, with a fellow recycler, and the intention is for him to promote rugby, on film, as an alternative sport to the 'routine' football in the Gambia over the coming weekend. Networking or what?

For the first time in ages my Saturday afternoon held the promise of rugby. The team of Gambians I have been coaching, the *Rhinos*, had an exhibition game before a local football match; my expertise was to be applied as referee of a 'sevens'. Denise wanted an outing to the football stadium, Serrekunda East or the 'buffer zone', so the plan was to take the car – she wouldn't start. Into a taxi we hopped, with the kids on our laps to avoid the fare, and Bradley wanted to pay the driver, unfortunately this led to me losing my wallet. I realised just as I prepared to take to the field but knew that there was little I could do at that point other than see out the game.

After the game (only 5-a-side on a football pitch) I made my excuses while asking the policeman player which station would be the best one to report a loss (concerned about my lost alien id card) but the lads had a 'whip round' – very touching in the circumstances as they wouldn't accept any refusal. Opposite the stadium is a park with probably the only 'play area' in the Gambia (*Surestart* standard) so we had to allow the kids an opportunity to play – they had been driven past with mouths agape for 6 months. They were mobbed by locals who wanted to show them about the well used broken climbing frames (no graffiti, burnt sections or empty booze containers though). While they were engaged I was approached by a young confident Gambian who seemed if he just wanted to talk to a foreigner but I ended up being interviewed as he is an aspiring sports journalist who wanted a story about the introduction of rugby to the Gambia. Nothing has been published yet as I haven't supplied a photograph!

As we left the park to hail a gelleh one of the VSO jeeps pulled up; we went to beg a lift. The driver was on his way to a rendez-vous to collect my wallet, that had been reported as found and contact had been made as a result of my VSO id card. We were delivered to the meeting point; I expected to face a taxi driver but instead it was two 'unlikely' looking types who handed it over. The money, a padlock key and copy of residency had gone but Visa cards remained; not a bad result in the circumstances so I gave the two some of the money the Rhinos had given me for their time.

We felt we had our fill of events for a day as we caught a gelleh transport out of Serrekunda but another 'episode' occurred. The minibus was full (imagine battered old Toyota Hiace instead of Ford Transit) with 14 passengers, driver, fare collector, 10 litre buckets of smoked fish and the 2 kids on our knees and made it ½ a mile before the suspension, that Denise was sitting over, collapsed! What else can you do but get off and start walking as all the following gellehs were equally bulging? The kids will be fatalistic after such experiences, Denise visited some new localities and we didn't have to walk too far before a taxi driver decided to end his tea break to give us a 5-5 ride home.

Sunday was quiet but Monday took on a fateful aspect as the gelleh van I was sat in shunted the back of a 4x4. I felt a bit of a wuss as the only one to show any signs of injury when I checked my shin after I had slid into the collapsible seat in front of me. The gelleh had suffered more, but continued after the bumper was lifted back into place. The incident also made me lose my bearings and I alighted too soon for the village of a school I intended to visit. It made for a

pleasant morning walk but did make me what I thought would be 25 minutes late for an observation; I only missed 5 minutes (this is the Gambia!). This seemed the turning point in my luck; I was offered a lift in the Principal's car to the college and was then offered a lift back from college to Serrekunda as I finished work.

The return journey was a pleasure; the University lecturer with whom I had jousting before Christmas was returning the favour and we discussed further political issues. The main point being the President's speech (I had managed to read a copy) from the Independence day celebrations. He had called for more honesty from the rank and file (kettle calling the pot...) and had a dig at 400 years of British colonial rule! He tried to boast greater achievements in 10% of that time (45 years of independence); complaining the British only provided 2 hospitals and one road. The sad truth is the British were only really interested in the 40 years between 1920 and independence and their hospitals have lasted; many other health centres funded by foreign aid have become squats when the overseas money has expired! Some students have challenged me on the issues – some accepting the role Britain played in using the Gambia merely as a thorn in the French side to halt slavery and the gross exaggeration of time; others complaining that we still exploited their resources (peanuts, or groundnuts to be precise) and we should have given them manufacturing factories! Apparently this is not the first time he has baited the British, bigger 'players' in the Commonwealth, like Nigeria, show more tact, but not him. He could be trying to curry favour with the Chinese who seem to support road building projects currently – and also have a market for their cheapest c**p here but need the roads to get the stuff to more places; in 400 years I suspect they will feel exploited!

The car had returned from the mechanic on Tuesday evening with a 'new' carburettor and a bill that I didn't have to pay until Friday, to make sure it worked. Remy wouldn't start on Thursday so I was late getting to college; the class I teach at 9 enjoyed my late arrival as I set such expectations for morning starts. They were more forgiving on the following day when I was again late, because I stopped my journey to work to allow the mechanic to get to the car, as I needed it for a meeting that afternoon with the visiting junior rugby coaches. The car did work Friday evening but then failed to start on Saturday morning, despite the aid of neighbour John and compound security Abubacarr. I so much wanted to thrash the car with a broom to vent my frustration – a real John Cleese *Fawlty Towers* moment – but thought that Abubacarr wouldn't understand and be upset; John commented I showed incredible restraint. So for the third morning on the trot I arrived late at college, (partially because the president was travelling and blocking off the highway); on this occasion it was less important as it was the weekend and a public holiday but a special coaching session had been set up for the secondary school PE students. The coaching on the field was great and received very well but then for a classroom session where the students focussed on laws and various trivia to take notes upon.

It was so indicative of the problems of education in the Gambia where copying things from the board appears to be the main objective. I've had my fill of that for this term from the week's work. My Primary Teacher classes had been set an assignment to present a lesson teaching geometry topics and I had spent all Tuesday observing trainee teachers in a local school. The teaching is so uninspiring; the closest link I can make is to Victorian 'object' lessons. They would consider spending a 40 minute lesson just teaching about a square (a rectangle the following day, etc.) This 'institutionalisation' is preventing initiative and makes development, since Independence! all the more harder to achieve.

My independence will be curtailed next week as Mum arrives! She is visiting sooner than she had previously planned but a great fillip to family morale.