

w/e 10.10.09

A day with some teaching came at last. Shortly before teaching I had tracked down the syllabus that I was supposed to work to – the wasted journey from Friday redressed at last but really to no avail when I encountered the class. By way of an introduction the students were asked to give their view of mathematics; most stressed the importance of maths and many suggested it was difficult. Towards the end of the activity two lads articulated the lack of maths teaching that they had received; another then confided that he had never been taught maths so was very worried how he could ever teach maths. I had not anticipated that I would be facing ‘teachers’ that had not had an education in ‘core’ subjects; they had only been taught in Arabic about Islam alone. I felt as stupid as the donkey/ass outside the classroom who kept interrupting with loud brays (remember I have no windows to eliminate such sounds). I tried to match the syllabus to something approaching their needs – Year 1 or 2 I fear.

Whilst I have been enjoying the drive to and from work, collecting night shift security guards hitching a lift, I was finding it hard to justify the expense of petrol, approx 80-90 Dalasi each way which equates to about half of my daily allowance; the alternative is gelleh-gellehs where the return journey is 34 Dalasi – about a sixth of the cost. I made a decision to use the car on the days when I have an early start and endure the public transport on the other days. Tuesday was a later start so I set out, with Denise to ensure she found the largest shop on Karaiba Avenue(she’d managed to miss it on Monday!) in a gelleh-gelleh and started to question my decision within 30 metres when I spotted a soldier at the traffic light junction (a sign that “the president is travelling”). I continued anyway to my first interchange (co-operative/ Westfield junction) where the road was half closed for the President’s intended trip to the airport – this means that a dual carriageway, which might aswell be a single carriageway as the gelleh-gellehs stop so frequently getting in each other’s way, is actually reduced to single carriageway at crawling pace as the gelleh-gellehs stop and start their way through Serrekunda. Imagine the if Queen, or Gordon Brown, were to travel to Heathrow using the most direct route along the A4 with their side kept empty while the remainder were required to contra-flow on the opposite side and the only alternative route was via the North Circular Road(sorry for Boro readers but closing one side of the A19 flyover and closing Newport Bridge might achieve the same effect) and you can start to understand the resultant chaos. Add to this the paranoia that assassination may strike, so you leave a large window for your passage through the ‘corridor’ to keep would be assassins guessing, and you can well and truly bugger up your country’s commercial backbone and ensure development is hindered. I arrived over an hour later than car use would have achieved. I felt like an enduring Gambian as I explained what was happening to a desparate University lecturer(her first lecture at the new campus) from Cameroon, but even with 3 years experience in The Gambia, this chaos was new to her. My training here must have been good to accept my lot; I tried to console her with the thought that maybe the lesson her students will have learnt from her delay was that when they have matured to a position of influence they might change attitudes towards such petty minded systems that encumber a country already on its knees.

During my lecture I was amazed by one of the students who knocked me off stride; he had actually played *Tag Rugby* last summer with some RFU coaches so I had some hopes for Rugby development.

The return journey took just over an hour, which meant I was late for my first intended outing at *touch rugby* on the local beach. I debated whether I had enough energy after the journey but was glad I went. No VSO were present but Peace Corps, MRC, older

expats and keen Gambians. A dozen white men, half a dozen white women and 8-9 locals made up the teams; I concentrated my efforts on the dry sanded area not wishing to handicap my speed further by running through the shallow bit of sea that constituted one wing. After shaking hands at the end I was approached by one of the Gambians, who had also been involved in the aforementioned *Tag* version of the game, he lamented that their rugby had not been developed further but asked if I could get involved with coaching/ development as he recognised my apparent experience of the game. I have promised to return with pen and paper to establish contacts required but I feel one of the hopes I had, with regards to rugby here, has presented itself to me without too much searching. I did ache subsequently, 3 months without the sprinting and turning required had taken its toll.

Fortunately I took the children to school on Wednesday morning and was told they needed collecting at 12. Knowing Denise would expect me to explain why, I asked a teacher to be told that a public holiday had been declared that afternoon to acknowledge the arrival of the World Cup on its tour of Africa. As I was not due to lecture until the afternoon I made enquiries to establish that there was no point in attending the college so found myself with the time off. Cue Denise having me around to spend money; we bought a second hand oven. I also picked up a newspaper to find that the President hadn't actually gone on his proposed trip on Tuesday; he had changed his mind at the last minute blaming 'technical' issues.

Interested in the opportunity to see the trophy, to participate in the public gathering of Africans and do my civil duty I went to the Independence stadium, but suggested it would not be suitable for the kids, who went to the beach with Denise. I found a seat with some shade, from the floodlight gantry, but suffered a hot backside from consistently baking concrete and watched the spectacle unfold over about 3 hours. For a long time I was the only white face in the stadium, until 4 organisers/coca cola photographers arrived but I only counted 8 other white faces by the end. At first the PA system sustained music that had colourful women dancing in the stands (the sort that the camera focuses on in every World cup minnows match) and even had platoons of soldiers dancing in their ranks before a motor cavalcade arrived with the vice president. This heralded four of the best Gambian musical acts; one of which (a girl duo) I was told not to film by a schoolboy, his words "if you show this to your people at home they will think we are batty". Then the main man arrived preceded by a jeep with mounted ak-ak and his posse of about a hundred women running in white t-shirts and green trousers (APRC party colours); he was stood in the sunroof of his extended limo throwing packets of biscuits to the crowds, behind him was an open section to the vehicle from where two further soldiers threw more biscuits. He was followed by three more open backed jeeps with more boxes of biscuits, protected by gun-slinging soldiers, and numerous other siren wailing vehicles. As he completed his second lap of the stadium the schoolboy became concerned for my safety whilst filming and put a protective arm across my shoulder for fear of a crowd surge to reach the flying biscuits. As I turned off the camera my phone began to ring; the display showed it was our neighbour John but on answering I could just make out Denise's voice but the dozen or so sirens within the bowl of the stadium made it impossible to hear; I had to shout to request a text message as the only viable option. The text followed; *Denise and kids locked out, hurry home*. Brilliant! waited all that time and then to leave before the big event so I thanked my new friend and started to leave, the first gate was locked but Gambians were crawling through a hole at ground level, I asked the Policeman if there was a better exit for me and he directed me along the terraces. This path was blocked by three drummers with the standard spontaneous dancers from the crowd – I was told that

if I wished to pass I needed to share in the culture so “danced” my way through, to cheers, to reach the next set of steps. I asked an Immigration Officer if I could leave but was told “no, you have to stand still for the National Anthem”, I managed to keep a straight face and patriotically stuck my right hand to my heart, then realised I still had my hat on, so took it off and stood out the remaining bars of the anthem (fortunately it was not a tediously long one!) before I was able to force my way out through the gate.

Nothing else could match the bizarreness of the afternoon, Thursday at college was a long day and my posterior was definitely damaged by the experience of hot concrete. I did get to meet the main classes I was recruited to teach for the first time; a far more articulate and intelligent bunch than those mentioned above and receptive to the message I was giving. I also learnt what ‘team-teaching’ means out here; let the volunteer come up with all the resources and ideas to teach with and explain it to your co-workers – not quite the sharing of skills I had been promised by VSO.

I encountered a potentially corrupt traffic policeman on my Friday journey, on this occasion the hitcher I was carrying had failed to use his seat belt so I was liable. He demanded a fine of 1000 Dalasi (£25) I said I would have to visit my bank after my mornings work and return, just as one might in the UK, if he provided with me with a form to ensure the money got to him. He wanted me to go straight away, I refused stating that I must complete my work first; he threatened to impound the vehicle – I accepted this was the only course of action in the circumstances: he let me off. The passenger apologised and said “he has need for money” as we drove away. After work we had need to test the medical provision available to us as Bradley was having breathing difficulties after an overnight cough. We were impressed, (so rest assured those readers who are concerned for the welfare of the children). We were seen by a doctor within 10 minutes, he diagnosed a spasm and prescribed a course of action that was decisive (but over cautious) and would have probably needed 3-4 further referrals if it had happened in the UK. Bradley was immediately placed on an electronic nebuliser, followed by an oxygen mask before a chest x-ray (a cannula/ iv feed was fitted meantime). We returned to the doctor with the x-ray, and some embarrassment at Bradley’s recovery – he was hyperactive after so much oxygen. We left with a diagnosis of bronchiolitis (carried in the dust at this time of the year) and three bottles of medicine. The kids had acquired 6 lollipops (so might feign illness to return) and Bradley was given a set of kiddy sunglasses, which he chose to wear upside down – with his yellow blond hair he had the appearance of *Buggles* (for those of you unfamiliar with 80s music, search *Video killed the radio stars* for an image). We stopped at Bakau jetty on our return home to buy some fish from the returning boats. What a sight! I had anticipated fishermen selling the odd fish off the side of their boat, as we might see on Redcar sea front. Picture the 1940 Dunkirk evacuation to start to understand the scene; 50+ men stood chest deep with the large fish trays on their heads rushing to whichever boat came in to carry the catch to shore. Catches are stored in old, disconnected, chest freezers (probably about 100) on a jetty where we were invited to view the stocks – Barracuda, Butter Fish and Captain Fish(5 foot long) the more exotic varieties. The guide book recommendation doesn’t do the event justice and will be a must for any of our visitors. After a weeks work I was too tired to ensure this review was available for despatch during our Saturday morning Skype session; the connection wasn’t good anyway.