

Jonathan's West Africa Ecovillage Tour - Letter 1

First stop, Nigeria. Africa's biggest, brashest and most extreme. Not so much a nation as a line thrown haphazardly around a collection of ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse, previously independent peoples. (This by a group of white European men in Berlin in 1884, most of whom had never been to Africa. I have it on good authority that all but six of the lines they drew when dividing the continent up between them bisect African peoples.) Well, as it happened, the borders of the new Nigeria happened to include three of Africa's great nations – none of which those sitting in Berlin are likely to have ever heard of – the Ibo, the Hausa and the Yoruba. Imagine a foreign power invading Europe and drawing a line around Britain, France and Germany and saying – you are now one country, just get on with it. Anyway, in the case of Nigeria, get on with it they did.....like cats in a sack.

Next, just to pepper up the mix, fortune threw in a giant dollop of oil.....stirred and waited to see how long it would take for pot to boil over. Right now, it is simmering hard. Kidnappings of oil workers are common. This morning's paper reports on emergency talks between government officials and militants from a community in the Niger Delta (where the oil comes from) who have seized four oil wells together with 75 workers.

Talks, at least, represent an improvement on previous practice on the part of the Government. One tactic employed during similar problems six years ago involved razing the town of Odi, home to 60,000 people, where it was claimed a group of militants were based. Troops arrived unannounced in the early morning and by midday, three buildings only were left standing.

Throughout the Niger Delta region, the predominant mood is one of anger and vengeance. For forty years now, oil companies have been pumping black gold from the ground, enriching the elite in far-off Lagos and Abuja, but bringing little more than blood, sweat and tears to the locals. Driven off the land, victims of extreme environmental degradation and without even the compensation of significant job-creation or investment, the locals have often felt driven to violent resistance and sabotage.

One of the strategies of the saboteurs is to attack the oil pipelines. Other than disrupting the flow, this brings two other potential benefits. Compensation is paid for spoiled land – so, some people destroy their own land in exchange for a cash payment. Also, the oil gushing from the split pipes is harvested and sold on the open market. But this is a risky business. Gordon talks of one incident in which 4,000 people were incinerated in a flash, ignited by a stray spark. This points to a culture driven to extremes of desperation and to a country teetering on the brink of moral and material disintegration.

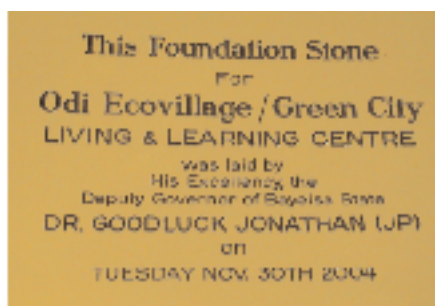
And yet, in the midst of this maelstrom, there is a still point of calm and sanity. A group of wise and committed citizens, led by the estimate Gordon Abiama, is seeking to re-build the town of Odi, the same one that was obliterated by the Nigerian military six years ago, according to ecological design principles. This is the new Odi, Nigeria's first self-declared ecovillage. Gordon and his colleagues have turned their backs on the easy and obvious path of retribution and set about the task of re-building.

This truly is the lighting of candles in the darkness, the 'being the change you want to see in the world'. The ecovillage movement has always been about building the New Jerusalem. At its best, this includes a recognition that some of our brothers and sisters in the sustainability movement must engage in the honourable business of critiquing and dismantling the existing system. However, our distinctive contribution has always been that of midwives to the new society being born through the contractions of crisis; to build the new paradigm from within the imploding ruins of the old. Rarely can this impulse have taken more honourable and courageous form than in Odi.

November 30 was the launch ceremony for the Odi ecovillage, the cutting of the first turf and laying of the cornerstone. A grand gathering brought together several hundred dignitaries from the local region and beyond. Among the non-local representatives were several officials from ministries in the capital, Abuja, and the co-founders of the US-based Earth Rights Institute, Alanna Hartzok and Anna Goeke. Alanna and Annie have been generous and enthusiastic backers of Gordon for several years now and brought with them several solar cooking and lighting devices that drew much attention and admiration.



Odi Ecovillage launch, Nigeria



Odi Cornerstone

The day was a success and generous amounts of funds were pledged by the participants. Events like this in Africa, of which I have seen many over the years, seem to share three common features. First, the ritual of gifting is a very flamboyantly public one: announcements of the amounts donated are delivered in a deliciously over-the-top manner reminiscent of old music-hall hosts. Second, the most memorable and moving donations are rarely from the great and powerful – 'three hundred THOUSAND NAIRA from the Ministry of the ENVIRONMENT!!' but rather the gifts of five to ten thousand naira (£10 - £20) from local women's groups and the like. Finally, the sound systems are set to a volume of hiss and screech that stretch to the limit and beyond all capacity for equanimity and endurance. My head was ringing with tinnitus for days afterwards.

So what of Gordon's vision for the future of Odi? At heart, it is social in nature: a commu-



Gordon Abiama

nity of people proud of their culture and history and empowered to create and share with the wider world a model community, representing all that is best in the African tradition. Sure, there is all the usual stuff about eco-building and permaculture, micro-finance and enterprise, waste management, renewable energy and all the rest of it. And all this stuff is important. But what Gordon has recognised is that without a transformation in culture, and in the pride with which we celebrate our own stories, there is a strict limit on what can be achieved.

So, instead of plunder, the new vision for Odi offers cooperation with natural systems; instead of greed and the quick buck, it offers the taking of a sustainable harvest; instead of trying to imitate the consumerist model dangled by the West, it offers a journey of discovery back to pride in things African. This represents great wisdom and an island of sanity in a region where these virtues can be hard to find. However, no island can stand entirely apart from its surroundings and Gordon and his colleagues will need all the support, luck and sound judgement they can muster if they are to keep their vision on track through the days ahead.

The journey to the airport runs through country infested with gangs of heavily-armed, wild-eyed men that periodically sweep down on the roads to threaten and extort money from motorists. Call for the Police!!.....oh, they are the Police?! Eventually seated on the plane, I look over the shoulder of my neighbour to read the paper he is reading. He is evidently in the legal profession, for the paper is the transcript of a court case in which a policeman has shot dead a motorist. One of the lines reads “No, I did not demand 20 naira (8 British pence) from the deceased”.

Looking for an omen for the trip ahead, I need look no further than the freshly-constructed cornerstone of the new Odi ecovillage. Its message is not just metaphorical, but also splendidly literal. Proudly sitting atop the stone is a splendid brass plaque that carries the name of the man who was supposed to cut the ribbon – in the event, he was unable to attend and sent a junior colleague in his place:

His Excellency, the
Deputy Governor of Bayelsa State
DR. GOODLUCK JONATHAN (JP)

If you would like to get in touch with Gordon, contact him on geoeconomics@email.com or

GEN-Europe Twin Offices
ZEGG Ecovillage (Germany) and Findhorn Ecovillage (Scotland)
Contact details: Rosa-Luxemburgstr. 89, D-14806 Belzig, Germany
+49 (0) 33841 44766, 44768 fax info@gen-europe.org - <http://www.gen-europe.org>