

Westafrica Letter 2

Yoff, Senegal, December 18

In the 20 years that I have been professionally involved with Africa (I first came to live in Ghana in 1984 and have since worked in a further 12 countries on the continent), I have never heard an African use the words 'ecovillage' or 'permaculture'. Not, that is, till I started to become involved with GEN (the Global Ecovillage Network) four years or so ago. Now, their use is apparently all-pervasive: I get three or four email messages a week from Africa describing new 'ecovillage projects' and 'permaculture' initiatives, generally asking for help. Great!



.....or is it?! Am I being unreasonably suspicious in wondering whether all is as it seems? After all, everyone involved with the aid industry knows that a certain amount of game-playing is necessary. There was a period when any funding proposal not containing the words 'integrated rural development' went straight into the dustbin. Then, the use of these same words became the kiss of death to any proposal and they were rapidly replaced with 'participatory rural appraisal' and 'community empowerment'. Then, 'gender' became the all-powerful mantra without which the doors to the magic, gold-filled cave refused to swing open.

These magic words and phrases that give access to the purse strings come and go. An insider's knowledge of the current fashion is a must for all successful funding proposal writers. Could it not be that 'ecovillage' and 'permaculture' had simply joined the lexicon of development buzz words?

No better place to find out than the Senegalese community of Yoff, a fishing town of about 50,000 people that is being rapidly integrated into the sprawling Senegalese capital, Dakar. This community is at the heart of GEN's work in Africa, to the degree that most people within the ecovillage movement are under the impression that it is called EcoYoff (the name of the project to integrate ecological principles into the running of the community). It also happens to be among the most distinctive and extraordinary places I have ever been.

To understand why, of all the hundreds of thousands of small towns and villages in Africa, Yoff should have become the one so tightly identified with GEN, we need to turn the clock back to the early 1990s and to the small New York town of Ithaca. Here, two stories are about to converge.

One involves a group of US citizens, including Joan Bokaer, that had just traversed the US on foot, campaigning for peace and raising funds for various causes, including the building of an ecovillage. Their desire was to create an ecological community that could act as a demonstration and educational facility for people wishing to learn about sustainable living on the ground, beyond the pages of pretty text-books.

The other is that of Serigne Mbaye Diene, a student from Yoff, who was doing his doctoral studies in nutrition at Cornell University, based in Ithaca. Serigne found



a rootlessness in the US that gave him a new appreciation of his own culture: Yoff can date its founding back to 1432 and it retains a tight and distinctive cultural flavour. Serigne was also becoming increasingly aware of the devastating effects of economic globalisation in Africa, especially in terms of community break-down and the loss of cultural diversity.

When Joan and Serigne met at a New Year's Eve party in 1991, they immediately saw the potential synergies in their

respective journeys. Serigne was excited by the ecovillage model and its attempt to build values, active citizenship and community back into the fabric of society. This seemed to offer a powerful counterweight to the centralising and fragmenting effects of globalisation. Joan saw in Serigne's stories of Yoff a powerful model from which her own putative ecovillage could learn in its attempt to build a thriving and dynamic community.

And so, a friendship grew. Through their work together, Yoff began to become known in sustainable community circles and in 1996, it was chosen as the venue for the Third Internal Eco-Cities and Eco-Village's conference, organised by Richard Register's EcoCities network. The conference had a powerful effect in the community, EcoYoff was created and the link with GEN was forged. The same planners that had designed Ithaca Ecovillage, Jerry and Claudia Weisburd, were brought in to help create a similar plan for EcoYoff. The plans that they drew up centred on the establishment of biological waste-water treatment facilities and the creation of green spaces for food production and tree-planting.

In truth, there is not much evidence that many of these planned initiatives have yet been implemented, though I will explore this further in future letters. However, it is on the social level that the truly interesting developments are most evident. This is hugely significant for, among many others, I believe that Africa's biggest challenge is in the area of governance (as is perhaps our own in the West): how to evolve structures for decision-making and working with conflict that allow us to live happily and well together in the modern world.

Like most traditional communities in Africa, the old fishing community of Yoff can be described as a gerontocracy: that is, decisions and disputes are generally handled by the elders, with little or no recourse to the police or other organs of the State. However, in an era of rapid technological innovation and ever-greater concentrations of power, the knowledge of the elders is often insufficient to guide and protect the community.

So it was when, in the late 1970s, the government declared that all non-registered land would become the property of the State. At this time, Serigne was among the first generation of high school graduates to emerge from Yoff and their modern education enabled them to see, in a way the elders could not, the threat this posed to community control over what had traditionally been community lands, surrounding the town.

But what could they do? At first, they were dismissed derisively by the elders: 'how can you grind rocks when you have no teeth?' was the local proverb used against them. But, instead of confrontation, Serigne and his friends set about earning the elders' respect. They collected litter, planted trees and raised funds for the town's school. Also, behind the scenes, they petitioned the government for an exemption and, after a 12-year legal battle, won an important concession: community control over Yoff-extension – a 46 hectare (115 acre) area of land next to the traditional town of Yoff. It is on a part of Yoff-extension that Serigne and his friends continue to hold the vision for an ecological settlement.

Meanwhile, on the traditional lands seized by the Government, a large main road and Dakar's international airport were built. The previously independent, self-governing settlement of Yoff was coming under increasing threat from the expanding city of Dakar and found itself powerless to do much about it. In this context, the elders demonstrated their own wisdom by recognising the need for change. Traditionally, only men and women over the age of 55 are considered elders and thus able to make decisions. Now, with the elders' blessing, the younger generation created APECSY, a community association whose mission is the protection of the natural and cultural resources of Yoff. How well they are doing in this will be the subject of a future letter.

What can be said, without a shadow of doubt, is that Yoff remains highly distinctive and culturally vital. The evening air is filled with the sound of sung prayers. No recorded music here! Every note is sung, unaccompanied by worshippers gathered together in the town's mosques, and open areas, beginning at 5.00am and continuing through much of the day and night. This music is everywhere. At the stall where I stop to buy bananas in the morning, the owner, a tough-looking young man, always has the radio tuned to Islamic singing. The songs are rhythmic, repetitive and deeply meditative.

Nor is this the only music in town. The evenings are also often punctuated with drumming and it is sometimes possible to hear the distinctive rhythm of the drumming that accompanies the ndeup ceremonies, for which Yoff is famous and for which people travel from all over Senegal and beyond. These involve priestesses inducing the ill (often the mentally ill) into a trance during which the evil that is causing the illness is driven out of the sufferer into an animal that is then sacrificed. A major illness, misdemeanour, petition or ceremony of thanksgiving requires the sacrifice of an ox; a less important occasion, a goat, a chicken or a yoghurt offering. The blood of the animal is then used in the healing ceremony that follows.

Down on the beach, meanwhile, there are ceremonies, as always including much singing and dancing, in honour of the great ocean spirit, Mame Ndiare, the town's ultimate protector. The first rams – splendidly fattened and groomed – are also beginning to make their appearance in the town's warren of dusty streets, signalling the approach of the great Islamic festival of Tabiski. So many stories for the telling in future letters!



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