

Westafrica Letter 4

January 1, 2005, Yoff, Senegal

As in most communities under pressure from the forces of modernisation (what a pernicious word! – it comes loaded with loud boasts about its own supposed superiority, even inevitability), there are many currents playing just under Yoff's surface. So, while the ear is immediately drawn to the pervasive Islamic singing from the mosques, the drum-trace rhythm of the animistic ndeup rituals also punctuate the night air and hip-hop and rap blast from the open doors of music boutiques. The call to prayers competes for attention with the latest game from the English Premiership.



Marian Zeitlin

By the side of the main road skirting the community, women following the modest Islamic dress code file past models in slinky Father Christmas outfits selling the latest mobile phone products to hit the market. Highly colourful, traditional costumes vie with replica European football shirts: on the beach, countless football games with countless would-be Drogbas, Beckhams and Ronaldinhos. All the while, giant planes rumble low over the city, so close you can almost see the faces at the windows, on their way into and out of the neighbouring Dakar international Airport.

Into this great, vibrant mix, another ingredient has just been added. This week, a group of students – 12 from the United States and two from the Democratic Republic of Congo – has just arrived to undertake a three-week course at GEN Senegal's educational unit – the Living and Learning Centre. To understand what they are doing here, and what they add to mix, we need to rewind back to 1996 and the Eco-Cities and Eco-Villages conference that I mentioned in a previous letter.

One of the participants at the conference was Marian Zeitlin, an academic in her late 50's, born in China to teaching missionaries and with long experience of working as a development professional in the near-neighbouring countries of Ghana and Nigeria. Marian was immediately inspired by Yoff and excited by the prospect of helping to ground the emerging ecovillage concept in such a rich and distinctive community. The ecovillage philosophy, with its insistence that traditional knowledge and wisdom are a key part of the solution rather than, as for much of conventional Western-style development, a problem to be solved, seemed ideally suited to the context of Yoff. Plenty of locals at the 1996 conference thought so too. Without too much further thought, Marian decided to stay. And before too long, out of the efforts of Marian and her Senegalese colleagues, GEN Senegal was born.

Marian used her academic contacts – she is a Visiting Professor at Tufts University in Cambridge, Massachusetts and a Courtesy Professor at Cornell University in New York State – to develop a series of educational programmes. These were initially geared towards students in the United States but latterly have drawn interns and students from across Europe and North America.

Today, the Living and Learning Centre runs university courses through the year. There has also

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been a steady stream of interns – students at various stages of their university programmes – coming to do research and field work in Senegal for between one and twelve months. In all, a little over 200 foreigners have come through the Living and Learning Centre. This is a small enough number not to intrude upon the integrity of the local community. It is nonetheless large enough to add a tasty additional flavour.

Senegal is an unusually comfortable and welcoming environment for foreigners so many overseas students who have the opportunity to travel for part of their studies choose to come here. Of the many educational packages here appealing to this market, that offered by the Living and Learning Centre has two distinctive features. First, rather than living in expatriate ghettos, the students lodge with host families. This serves both to inject money into the local economy and to give hosts and guests a rich cross-cultural experience. Second, a portion of the payments that come into the Living and Learning Centre



from overseas universities and interns is used to pay for a counterpart Senegalese student to work with each of the incoming foreigners. Among many other benefits, this ensures that much of the fruit of the educational experience remains in Yoff, built into the fabric of the community in the shape of its young people who have participated in these courses.

Moreover, the kinds of research that the students undertake can bring specific benefit to the community. Two short stories to illustrate this. In 1999, a second-year Harvard student from the United States, Jascha Hoffman, came to spend four months in Yoff as an intern. The head of his host family was one of Yoff's senior griots (these are the story-tellers and praise-singers at the royal courts, the keepers of the people's wisdom and history in what were traditionally oral cultures).

Jascha's interest in local folklore grew and, as he began to learn the local language, Wolof, so he together with his counterpart Senegalese student and other local friends began collecting traditional stories and to write them down. The head of one of Yoff's elementary schools, Abdoulaye Touré, became interested in what they were doing and began to consider how the material they were collecting could be used for educational purposes. Already Touré's dissatisfaction with traditional pedagogy based on learning by rote and using subject matter alien to the daily lives of the students had led him to develop more experiential and creative educational methods.

Now, he began introducing the stories into his classroom. They would be recounted first of all in Wolof, then dramatised theatrically by the children, then discussed in French. The stories, of course, contain all the traditional wisdom and teaching of the people and this proved far more interesting and relevant to the students than what they had been previously subjected to. Crucially, the local language and culture were being validated and celebrated in mainstream schools in a way rarely seen in Africa.

Jascha left Yoff after four months and is now working a free-lance journalist in New York City. However, the project that sprang from his fascination with local stories has grown into the PALETTE (Préservation à l'Ecole de la Tradition aux moyens des Technologies Emergentes)

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project. Under the project, traditional stories, games and ceremonies have now been documented and integrated into the experiential educational package. Touré has helped introduce this package into all of Yoff's five elementary schools and the concept has also spread to other parts of Senegal. A book of local folk tales has been published and there is a PALETTE website describing the concept and the teaching methods, with an on-line copy of the book of folk tales. This resource is also used by teachers in Yoff and beyond to teach children how to use computers. The PALETTE project is funded for the most part by Jascha and his family.

Touré, meanwhile, remains heavily involved in the PALETTE project as its Director, but an increasing portion of his time is devoted to his other great passion, solar ovens. The development of the prototype that he is currently in the process of disseminating in Senegal has benefited in no small measure from inputs made by two US engineer interns coming through the Living and Learning Centre.

A second locally-based initiative that has enjoyed significant input from visiting students and interns is an educational project aimed at pre-school age children. This began with a study of young children in Yoff undertaken by three US students together with their Senegalese counterparts. This study found that many of Yoff's children arrive in school poorly prepared for the adventure of learning, for three main reasons. First, many of them have little command of French, the language of instruction in Senegal's schools. Second, a large number of parents are not able to afford to buy books, toys and other educational aids. Third, traditional methods of teaching children in the local culture tend to be biased more towards rote learning rather than creative discovery.

Armed with these findings, GEN Senegal launched a project to try to equip children with more of the tools they would need to get the most from their school experience. This began with the creation of a mobile library of images in the form of pages of coloured photographs, thematically based ('home', 'food', 'animals', etc.) alongside the words describing the images in French and in Wollof.

Children and parents are both invited to a local school that is free Saturday mornings where facilitators trained by the project demonstrate the use of the materials. Here, the morning includes the provision of a meal, singing, drawing and other educational activities. Over time, as the number of facilitators – in many cases, adolescents and young women from Yoff – has grown, visits are now also made to people's homes where many neighbouring parents and children gather together.

The project head, Oumar Barry, a psychologist who studied in St Petersburg for a decade, noted that the absence of toys and other educational aids continued to be a big problem for the local kids. So, a toy library was established, with children coming in once a week to the centre to return their borrowed toy and take a new, and more advanced one for the next week.



Evaluations have demonstrated the value of the project. Kids are arriving at school more confident and better prepared and among the parents of Yoff, there is a marked enhancement in the ways in which they interact with their children and encourage their learning. The initiative has been replicated in the northern town of Meckhe and agencies including the Senegalese Ministry for Young Children (isn't it wonderful that there is one!), UNICEF and the World Bank have shown

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Young Children (isn't it wonderful that there is one!), UNICEF and the World Bank have shown interest in the programme.

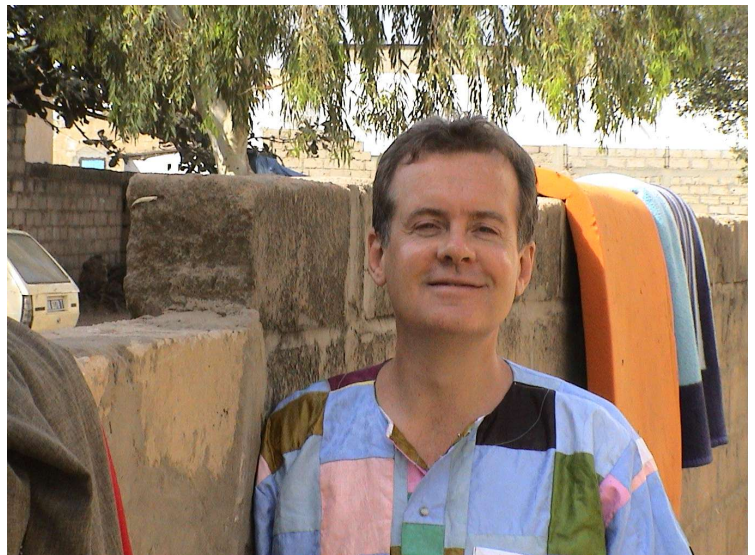
This is a solidly local initiative, driven by the highly competent Oumar Barry and staffed entirely by local facilitators from Yoff. Yet, there have been important inputs from the Living and Learning Centre. The initial survey was carried out by US students and their Senegalese counterparts. Much of the work in sourcing and printing the images was done by a US student.

Canadian students and their Senegalese counterparts were involved in the training of the young facilitators. A French student and her counterpart undertook a study into local activities and behaviours that promote educational development in Yoff and this has fed into the project. Several of the overseas students that have been involved with the project have sent over donations of toys on their return to their home countries. Finally, Marian Zeitlin, Director of the Living and Learning Centre has met out of her own pocket much of the financial cost of the programme.

This is skilful and effective multicultural cooperation at its best. It is the contribution of each according to her means for the greater common good.

This evening, the students split into two groups for ecovillage tours in the north and south of the country. For 12 students from the US, two from the Democratic Republic of Congo and 16 from Senegal, another chapter in multi-cultural action learning in the service of the people is about to open.

Jonathan



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