

## Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) Yoff/Dakar

The day *erupts* with a roar. The pre-dawn call to prayer is exultant: chanting bursts forth from every minaret. The rams that have been progressively filling up the street corners and courtyards over the last month join in the din with their braying. Now, young men and boys drive them through the early dawn light and the maze of dusty streets to the beach where they are dragged out into the waves (amid much resistance – sheep are not creatures of the sea!) for one final, pre-sacrificial grooming.

What on earth is all this about? As you might expect, Bob Dylan has a fresh slant on the original text:

*God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son'  
Abe says 'man, You must be putting  
me on!'  
God say, 'No'  
Abe says, 'What?!'  
God say, 'You can do what you want  
Abe,  
But the next time you see me comin',  
you'd better run',  
Abe says, 'Where d'you want this  
killin' done?'  
God says, 'Out on Highway 61'.*



Well, as it happens, by the time Abraham and the boy got out to Highway 61, God had had a change of plan and suggested Abe slaughter a ram that was caught in some briars in the place of his son. This biblical story is central to the biggest celebration in the Muslim calendar. Through the day, televisions show crowds of unimaginable proportions at the holy sites of Saudi Arabia as the great annual Islamic pilgrimage reaches its peak. By mid-morning, throughout the Muslim world, all the way from Malaysia to Senegal and beyond, all the rams have been killed, each household undertaking its own slaughter.

Speaking of religions, celebrated ecovillage elder, Craig Gibsone, said in a recent television documentary on Findhorn on British TV: 'it is all shamanism, all of it' –the blood of Jesus turning into wine, the horns, conch shells and chanting of the Tibetan Buddhists, the panoply of Hindu gods and spirits (many of them associated with animals)..... Here, it is just so much fresher and more obvious. Islam is still a relatively recent arrival in Senegal (it was not widely adopted by the country's largest tribe, the Wolof, until the eighteenth century) and the pre-Islamic belief systems remain strong. Traditional ndeup drumming and chanting rituals regularly continue long into the night here in Yoff, during which evil spirits that are believed to cause ill-health are driven out of the sick

into animals that are then sacrificed. The shared symbolism of the sacrifice is unmistakable. It is also, it seems to me, comforting: despite all our best efforts at sanitisation, more of the wisdom and power of wildness may be available to us for the tough times ahead than we might anticipate.

Some more reflections of the ecovillages that we visited last week. There are some mighty impressive stories here. There is the fishing village of Ngaparou on the fashionable Petite Côte that finds itself sandwiched between clusters of tourist hotels to the north and south. The villagers have noted the rise in prostitution and child sex abuse and the cultural dislocation in neighbouring communities that have resulted and they have refused the tourist dollar. They are now seeking, in collaboration with GEN Senegal and other organisations, to develop a smaller-scale and more respectful tourism and to increase income-earning opportunities outside of tourism. Further south, the ecovillage of Mbam has responded to the loss of mangroves and increased salination of their soils with a mass campaign to train and mobilise all the neighbouring communities in a mass re-planting exercise.

In the southern region of Casamance, the villagers of Oussouye have contributed their own labour and locally-gathered building materials to the construction of one of the village's schools and its health centre. The ecovillage on the island of Carabane has dug protective dykes against the sea and has succeeded in cutting back to sustainable

levels the harvesting of mangroves. Working out of its headquarters in Faoune, the community-based organisation,

AAJAC/COLUFIFA, is developing locally-available resources – sesame, honey, poultry, bamboo – with the aim of empowering and enriching the approximately 350 villages that it works with directly. And everywhere, village cultural troupes kick up a frenzy of singing, dancing and drumming.



These good-news stories reveal common threads that seem to go some way towards providing an answer to the question I asked at the start of this journey: namely, what constitutes an 'ecovillage' in the African context? Ecovillages, these stories suggest, are communities that have at their heart groups of committed people who are seeking to protect and regain local control over the communities' cultural, economic and ecological resources. They are also

characterised by high levels of voluntarism and a strong ethic of *solidarité sociale*.

Local control of community resources is under threat from three principal sources. The first is resource appropriation by industries feeding the global consumer class. In Senegal, these are primarily peanuts, tourism and fish: all use up resources (land, water, protein, etc.) that were previously available to local people. The second is quite new ecological problems caused by population pressures, often fuelled by inward migration of people from areas that have experienced more serious ecological degradation. This includes the arrival on Carabane of fishermen from Mauritania, Mali and beyond, who cut down the mangroves to fuel the fires on which they smoke their fish. Finally, local cultural integrity is under perpetual threat from the insidious effect of the global media machine that systematically glamorises western lifestyles while denigrating more traditional ones.

What ecovillages seem to have in common, then, is a recognition of these threats and a determination to work together, internally and with others, to protect and win back community control. Does it matter that many of those involved in this work rarely or never use the word 'ecovillage'? I think not. Their mission to promote diversity and local control in the face of homogenising and centralising global trends clearly locates them within the ecovillage family, irrespective of what words they might use to describe their work. Moreover, these communities gain much through their association with GEN Senegal – both in terms of the training and technical assistance that they receive; and, at least as important, the relationships of solidarity and strength that develop between them.



By late morning, an uncanny stillness has fallen over Yoff. The streets, that just a few hours ago had been thronged with men walking to the mosque in fabulously rich, traditional robes, are empty. Even the tailors shops and hairdressers, that have been working late into the night for weeks, are now closed. With the rams all gone, the street corners feel sad and barren. The task of butchering is now well under way. As the morning progresses, each household looks in on itself as the air fills with wood-smoke and the smell of roasting meat.

After the feast, the promenade begins.

People spill out into the streets, dressed and groomed in their richest finery. The children wear new outfits: beautifully-embroidered, brightly-coloured dresses and robes, stiff denim shirts and jeans, suits and ties, often outsized, with sleeves and trouser legs rolled up. Richly-intricate hair-braiding that has been hours in the making is finally uncovered and joined to the grand parade. The streets become a carnival of colour. From the mosques, the singing is incessant.

Some segments from Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech by Wangari Ma'athai, whose Green Belt Movement has been responsible for the planting of over 30 million trees in Kenya.

“The women we worked with recounted that unlike in the past, they were unable to meet their basic needs. This was due to the degradation of their immediate environment as well as the introduction of commercial farming, which replaced

the growing of household food crops. But international trade controlled the price of the exports from these small-scale farmers and a reasonable and just income could not be guaranteed. I came to understand that when the environment is destroyed, plundered or mismanaged, we undermine our quality of life and that of future generations.



Tree planting became a natural choice to address some of the initial basic needs identified by women. Initially, the work was difficult because historically our people have been persuaded to believe that because they are poor, they lack not only capital, but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges. Instead they are conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems must come from 'outside'.”

“Entire communities also come to understand that while it is necessary to hold their governments accountable, it is equally important that in their own relationships with each other, they exemplify the leadership values they wish to see in their own leaders, namely justice, integrity and trust.”

“The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace: there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the

environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come.”

“Culture plays a central role in the political, economic and social life of communities. Indeed, culture may be the missing link in the development of Africa. Culture is dynamic and evolves over time, consciously discarding retrogressive traditions, like female genital mutilation, and embracing aspects that are good and useful. Africans, especially, should re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity and self-confidence.”

This is the family to which the ecovillage movement in Africa belongs. It is one that understands that ecological restoration and human well-being are one and the same. It appreciates that leadership needs to develop from the grass-roots up. And increasingly, it recognises that a strong, vibrant and self-confident culture is what holds the family together.

