

Yoff
29 January 2005

One winter's morning in 1996 in a small town in Denmark, Elise Guldagger answered her phone to hear the voice of a stranger. Demba Mansaré (founder of COLUFIFA, the Senegalese community-based NGO whose activities I described in an earlier letter) was calling to say that while visiting Europe he had seen a lot of good bicycles that had been discarded. He said that they could come in very handy in Senegal and wondered whether anything could be arranged.



Elise took up the challenge on the spot. Within a couple of months, the association "Bicycles to Senegal" was born and by mid-summer of 1997, the first container-load of 250 bikes was on its way. This was the beginning of what was to become a rich and fruitful partnership. Since then, the Danish association has sent over 2,500 bikes together with equipment for two bicycle maintenance workshops, a large number of sewing machines, typewriters, wheelchairs and glasses plus medical equipment.

Yet, the relationship is as much about mutual learning and cultural exchange as charitable giving. To begin with, Demba and Elise fell in love and married! In addition, many people from Denmark have visited COLUFIFA since 1997 - to work, to study or simply for biking holidays. And many people

from COLUFIFA have been to Denmark - to attend folk high schools or take part in cross-cultural dialogues. Bicycles to Senegal has arranged three inter-faith dialogues on the topic of peace for participants from the two countries and has co-operated with Danish pensioners' organisations to raise awareness of the role of elder citizens in different cultures.

Several other Danish organisations have also become involved in the partnership. Gaia Trust has supported and participated in several conferences on permaculture in Senegal and Guinea. The Folkecenter for Renewable Energy has invited participants from COLUFIFA to training courses, and the Forum For Energy and Development has run a workshop on fuel-efficient stoves in Senegal.

This form of international solidarity is important for the Senegalese ecovillage network. True, in all the ecovillages that I have had exposure to – among the young people of Yoff, in the COLUFIFA network in Casamance, in the costal village of Ngaparou that is trying to find an alternative to conventional tourism.....the list goes on and on – there is a determination to retain local

control over the development process, to move no more quickly than local capacity can comfortably manage. Yet, the ability to identify and work with external organisations that have truly understood the need for genuine partnership and mutual learning is a distinctive and highly impressive feature of the network.

Another story. In the late-1980s, Dan Greenberg spent four years researching and visiting intentional communities as part of his doctoral thesis, exploring his long-held dream of creating a community-based school. 'A seed was planted the first day I visited an actual living community', he said, 'when I realized I learned more in that one day than in the years I had spent studying them from an armchair. I suddenly awoke to the power of community as a holistic context for personal growth and transformation.'

He went on to spend a year working with children and families at the Findhorn Foundation ecovillage in northern Scotland, where he witnessed similar transformation occurring among a group of college students that visited for a week-long program. 'That night', he said, 'I awoke with goose-pimples and the certainty that this was my life's calling - to build a "communiversity" where students could literally bring their education to life and gain the skills, knowledge and wisdom needed to build a more just and sustainable world.'

He returned to the US where he was involved in various ecovillage-based student programs, eventually moving to live in the Sirius ecovillage in Massachusetts. Then, in November 1999, two days after the birth of his first daughter, he incorporated Living Routes with the mission of "creating accredited, college-level programs based in ecovillages around the world that help students gain the knowledge, skills, and inspiration to build sustainable lifestyles for themselves, their communities, and the planet."

Four years on, Living Routes sends US undergraduate students for accredited courses to ecovillages on every continent, including the Yoff Living and Learning centre in Senegal. For the first time in 2005, students will come to Yoff for two three-month semesters in addition to the three-week January term that is now in its second year.

As mentioned in an earlier letter, a unique feature of the education offered by the Yoff Living and Learning Centre is that part of the fees brought in by the US students goes to financing the participation of Senegalese counterpart students, at least one for each of



the Americans. This builds teamwork and the potential for deep cross-cultural learning.

Without actually witnessing such visits, it is difficult to imagine just how important they are for all concerned. For the villagers, whose principal contact with white-skinned foreigners has been through mass tourism, they offer direct and intimate contact with deeply appreciative and respectful guests: the students stay in villagers' homes during their stay. The strong validation offered by the guests for the cultural wealth and generosity that are the hallmarks of life in rural Africa stands in sharp contrast to the habitual denigration of all things traditional and rural in the media and 'mainstream' culture. Money flows into the village, the research projects try to be directly relevant to the needs of the people, the overseas students get a once-in-a-lifetime experience and the Senegalese counterparts gain academic credits



from a US-based university plus invaluable exposure to long-term academic colleagues and friends-to-be from overseas.

The kind of exchanges that Bicycles for Senegal and Living Routes are facilitating point to a growing hunger for a new mode of international relationship. This is one that rejects outmoded models based on charity and dependence, on the deep-

seated belief that this is a one-way relationship with givers on the one hand and takers on the other. Both parties are clear that what is needed is a marriage of equals, with each partner bringing much of value to the table and having much to learn from the other. There is a healthy assertiveness on the part of Africa and an equally healthy humility and willingness to learn on the part of the West.

Once you spot the change in outlook, it is suddenly evident everywhere. Both this year and last, participating in the three-week January-term ecovillage course and tour were not just US and Senegalese students, but also participants from other African countries. In 2004, we had Gordon and Rose Abiama from Nigeria. This year, Raymond Nzuetu and Jean-Paul Atusameso from the Democratic Republic of Congo joined us. These were all sponsored by the Earth Rights Institute, a small US-based organisation dedicated to promoting initiatives that 'further democratic rights to common heritage resources, and building ecological communities.'

The ERI was co-founded by Alanna Hartzok and Annie Goeke, veteran US Green Party activists (Annie has been a vice-presidential candidate on two occasions while Alanna has stood for Congress). Together with their Nigerian-born but now Philadelphia-based colleague, Francis Udisi, they have gathered and sent to Nigeria tens of thousand of books and hundreds of computers. As you may remember from my first letter, Alanna and Annie also flew out to join Gordon and Rose in Nigeria for the opening ceremony of Odi as Nigeria's first

ecovillage just a couple of months ago. Now, they are helping to raise funds to help the Jatukik Providence Foundation, from which Raymond and Jean-Paul have come, to establish the first ecovillage in the Congo.

Then, into my post-box this week pops a letter from two women from South Africa (Theresa Brown and Astrid Stark) to tell me that they have quit their high-paying corporate jobs in Cape Town to commit themselves to their mission “to employ our talents, skills and experience to advance the cause of sustainable development through creating awareness in the media of projects and programmes endeavouring to heal and transform the people and the planet.”

“Nervous, exhilarated, humbled and full of gratitude that we have been entrusted by the Universe with our first mission, we leave Cape Town in a month’s time for Nairobi”, Theresa says, to embark on the ‘Tour d’Afrique’, a three month (March to May 2005) cycle-tour through 6 east African countries.

Sponsored by several national and international organisations, their aims include raising funds for bicycles for health care workers and planting trees wherever they go. They will be documenting and raising awareness about the distribution of bicycles to health workers, setting up bicycle maintenance and repair workshops and identifying potential entrepreneurs who would like to start up their own workshops.

One final good-news story this week of healthy international cooperation concerns someone who does not yet even know of her contribution. Helena Norberg-Hodge has done much over the last couple of decades to bring to international attention the Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh. Her educational work (at the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC), the organisation she has created) uses the Ladakhi experience to throw light on the true nature of the ‘development’ phenomenon worldwide, North and South. At the heart of her teaching lies the need for a profound respect for traditional societies and cultures and for an abandonment of the current dominant development paradigm that is doing so much to undermine them.

In my Living Routes Sustainable Development class last week, I showed her video: ‘Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh’, curious as to what would be the reaction of the Senegalese students. I see numerous parallels between Ladakh and Yoff and I wondered if they would share my perspective. The effect was as I had hoped. The students were excited to see their own community mirrored on the screen: there was the core role of faith and the monastery (here, of course, the mosque), the strong ties of community solidarity, the underlying interconnectedness of people, culture and landscape, the various ways in which traditional patterns were coming under threat.



Perhaps most important, the traditional approaches to education, child-rearing, food-production, house-building and so on were receiving strong validation rather than disparagement. In a re-evaluation of what constitutes true wealth, many of the traditional virtues were persuasively presented as a precious heritage that has been lost in much of the rest of the world, most comprehensively in the 'developed world'.

Of course, Helena is among the first to acknowledge the dangers of glamorising traditional lifestyles and that what we are in pursuit of is locally-based societies that combine the best of the traditional and the modern. This is precisely what the ecovillage impulse is all about: an exploration of the fertile meeting points between North and South, tradition and modernity, environment and development, education and activism, spirit, culture and natural ecology.

Let me leave you with some websites and email addresses should you be interested in getting more information on any of these splendid initiatives:

- GEN Senegal: www.cresp.sn/gensen
- COLUFIFA: www.sip.sn/faoune/aajac/aajac.htm
- Bicycles to Senegal: u-land@u-land.dk
- Living Routes: www.livingroutes.org/
- Earth Rights Institute: <http://www.earthrights.net>
- Tour d'Afrique: <http://www.tourdafrique.com>,
theresabrown@mweb.co.za
- ISEC: www.isec.org.uk

Jonathan

