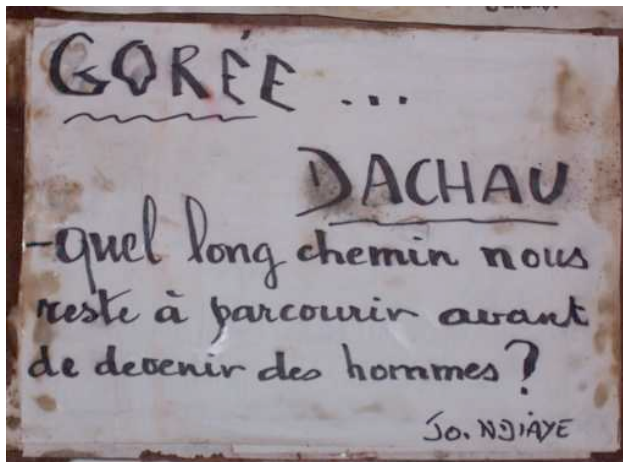


Yoff  
February 6

Sitting just off Dakar, l'Île de Gorée is pretty as a picture-postcard. Rows of splendid Mediterranean-style town-houses painted in delicate pastels of ochre and pink, yellow and green. Bougainvillea tumbles down from balconies and artists' ateliers open invitingly onto the street. There are fine squares, a splendid cathedral, and elegance of design at every turn. This is where waves of colonists – Portuguese, Dutch and French – created a Europeanised haven, with Africa safely kept at bay. It was also one of the centres of the slave trade that saw in the region of 20 million (no-one was really keeping a count back then) African slaves deported to the Americas.

True, Gorée was never a major exporter of slaves on the scale of, say, Elmina in Ghana or Ouidah in Benin. However, its location just south of the western-most tip of Africa is of symbolic significance. Looking out from Gorée towards the great expanses of the Atlantic, it is somehow easier to make some form of imaginative contact with horror of the times, of the unspeakable cruelties inflicted and privations suffered.

The *Maison des Esclaves* (House of the Slaves), a building that was used for the trade and shipping of slaves, keeps the story vibrantly alive in the form of a



permanent exhibition and verbal presentations that are unapologetically shocking. The curator of the museum shows the chains and shackles with which the slaves were tied, describes the appalling density in which the prisoners were stacked for the journey to the Americas, unable to stand up, the death-rate during the journey (20 – 25 per cent), how the blood, vomit and excreta would fall from one layer of

captives down through the others, the inhuman punishments meted out, the throwing of the sick and dying to the sharks.

Anyone with a grounding in Irish history may be nodding some level of recognition at this point. But that this could have continued for 300 years, in the process denuding large swathes of the continent of its strongest and fittest young people takes a long while to sink in.

The curator of the museum respectfully acknowledges and expresses his heartfelt sympathy for the Jewish people for their sufferings during the last century. But he also wants to know why *this* story is so little known. True, the current

Pope has visited *La Maison des Esclaves* where he has publicly apologised for the complicity of Christians in the trade. However, a look at the international balance-sheet shows the flow of resources still to be remorselessly from the poor countries of the South towards the rich countries of the North in the form of debt repayments. No mention of reparations for the far greater humanitarian (*and economic*) debt incurred during the three hundred years of the slave trade. Given the enormous social, psychological and economic costs, is it really surprising that Africa has failed to 'develop' according to western dictates? It is surely more impressive that it has been able to retain as much dignity, forgiveness and gracefulness as it has. Immediately, the image of Nelson Mandela jumps to the front of my mind – representative and ambassador of all that is best in the continent.

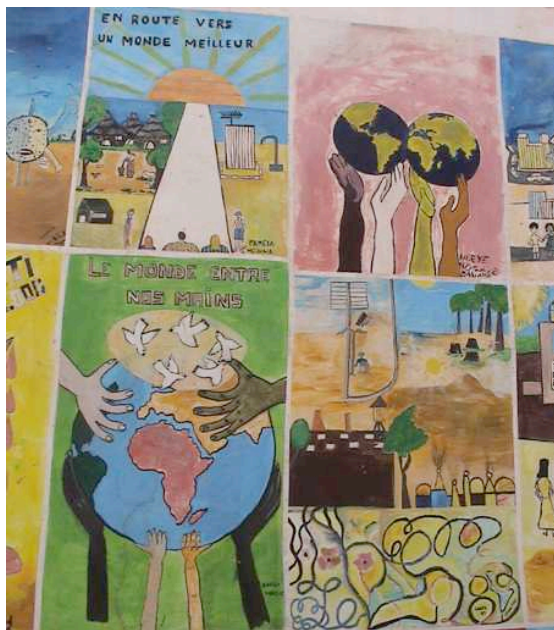
There was a better and richer time for West Africa, when the great inland kingdoms of Mali, Songhai and Ghana controlled trans-Saharan trade. When Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali, left his capital, Timbuctou, to go on pilgrimage to Mecca in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, he took with him an entourage of 60,000 people – what a spectacle that must have made.

This week in Yoff, the courtyards and pavements have been filled with parties of beautifully dressed residents, welcoming pilgrims back from their journey to the holy sites in Saudi Arabia. Airplane travel may have made the journey much more accessible and less arduous than in Mansa Musa's day. However, to have made the pilgrimage remains one of the high points in any Muslim's life and the celebrations have been long, exuberant and, naturally, loud: as ever, the singing and chanting from the mosques has formed the omnipresent sound-track.



This West Africa ecovillage journey has brought me into contact with so many good-news stories involving lots of intelligent, committed and insightful people – both here in Africa and among partner initiatives overseas. This raises an all-too-familiar question in my mind: if the ecovillage movement is so alive with energy and imaginative initiatives, at a time of generalised political apathy and inertia, why is it not sweeping the world? Why are more people not queuing up to create and join ecovillages, to help construct in every city, province and village on every continent communities seeking to win back control over their own social, economic and ecological resources? Why is the ecovillage model and concept not at the centre of every government's agenda?

These are big questions. Undoubtedly, a significant part of the answer lies in the realm of political economy. In short, there are powerful interests that derive great financial benefit from the globalisation of the economy and of culture and these are using all their considerable muscle to prevent communities from re-asserting control over their local resources. And yet, the stories that I have told in these letters suggest that, despite this, communities North and South *can* win back a measure of control. The ecovillage movement worldwide is a teeming laboratory for experiments in localising the food supply, pioneering community currency systems, lowering ecological footprints, marrying traditional building techniques and materials with modern, energy-efficient designs, developing participatory, community-level decision-making structures and so on. Wonderful! But, why then is everyone not at it?



This is a research question I have carried with me during my time here. I have come to the conclusion that there are two different answers, one for the new, intentional communities of the industrialised world and another for the already existing, traditional communities of the sort I have been moving in over the last couple of months.

To begin with the industrialised world context, I am indebted to Malcolm Gladwell, whose exploration of the phenomenon of 'social epidemics', *The Tipping Point*, introduces the concept of 'stickiness' as being of vital importance to all would-be big ideas. Ideas that are sticky, he says, are those that are easily adoptable and that transform behaviour. I have come to the conclusion that in Europe and other economically rich countries, the ecovillage concept as it is currently formulated is simply not sticky enough.

An important part of the reason for this, I believe, is that it is simply too hard to put into operation: year on year, the regulations governing planning, house-building, food-processing, retailing, the creation of currencies, banking and so on make it ever more difficult for people to create communities with a high level of self-reliance and autonomy. Our ecovillage training programmes send out committed, informed and energetic agents of change, who generally *still* find it too difficult to actually establish an ecovillage. A key part of our work in GEN (the Global Ecovillage Network) now, I am convinced, is to carefully catalogue and

present in accessible form the paths followed by those who have succeeded, despite all the obstacles that are thrown in their way.

Back to Africa. Here, I do not think the problem is a lack of stickiness. In fact, many development agencies are funding precisely the kinds of activities that ecovillages are undertaking: GEN Senegal itself has had funds from several donors including the UN agency, the Global Environment Facility and there is no shortage of villages that would like to participate in its programmes. The key problem in this context appears to be how to scale up: that is, how can organisations like GEN Senegal find mechanisms for spreading the benefits of the ecovillage model beyond the small number of communities it works with? Senegal has 14,000 villages. GEN Senegal works with 29 of them.

In truth, strength lies in unity. In the face of the many forces ranged against rural communities seeking to gain more control over their own resources (some of which I have written about in this series of letters), individual communities are relatively powerless. It is precisely AAJAC/COLIFIFA's success in creating a geographically-defined network of 350 villages with shared values and programmes that has underlain its success. All of the great community-based movements in the South seem to share this characteristic: Wangari Ma'athai's Green-Belt Movement in Kenya, Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, BRAC in Bangladesh, (Vandana in India) – the list is long and impressive. All have created strong networks of solidarity based on a shared commitment to take back greater control over the communities' destiny.

The creation of such effective networks, I suggest, is at the heart of the task facing the ecovillage movement in the South today. In Senegal, we are working on a plan to achieve this. This will involve the creation of a small number of 'model-ecovillages' – one for each of the principal ecological zones of the country. Each of these will develop over time all of the main features and facilities relevant to its own cultural and ecological context: these could include tree nurseries and replanted forests, restored mangroves, renewable energy installations, permaculture gardens, bee-keeping, biological waste-treatment facilities, food-processing technologies and so on. In addition, each will have a modest training centre and villagers trained as trainers, with access



Beekeeping at Faoune ecovillage (COLUFIFA)

to some specialist external support. The aim is to create a series of community-based research, demonstration and training centres that will act as catalysts for ecovillage development in their regions.

Whatever the nature of journeys to be undertaken by ecovillages North and South, there can be no doubt that there is great potential here for mutual support and learning. As my own contribution to this, I am today launching a fund-raising drive to help bring three West African colleagues over to the Findhorn ecovillage training programme in the spring of 2006. These are likely to be Gordon from Nigeria together with two people from GEN Senegal. At around £2,000 per person for all costs, this means that between us, we will need to raise about £6,000. That sounds like a joyful host of concerts, dinners and other fund-raising

events. If you would like to join in the fun, just let me know. I will be opening a dedicated bank account on my return to Findhorn next week.



Statue to commemorate the end of slavery  
l'Île de Gorée

For seven weeks now, I have been watching the planes rise over Yoff from the nearby international airport before wheeling north towards Europe, all the while thankful for the extended time I have been able to spend here. Now it is my turn to leave – my flight leaves later tonight. I hope I have succeeded in communicating some of the vibrancy, creativity and just plain distinctiveness of this marvellous place. If you would like to get in touch, please feel free – [jonathan@gen-europe.org](mailto:jonathan@gen-europe.org). It would be lovely to hear to you.

Jonathan