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Asaba, Pull! A Construction from an African Fence

Submitted by: Rachel Svenson

Outside Rosemarie Chierici's door is a computer print-out of a T.S. Eliot quote that reads: "We shall never cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time."

As I waited for Rosemarie Chierici to call me into her office in October, I read the quote several times in a row. I was convinced it was there for students with similar agendas to mine, those who showed up, empty-handed, at Rosemarie's office to talk about the experience of travel.

Since freshman year I had known Professor Chierici by her short hair, her direct, piercing gaze and her unapologetically wicked humor. I speculated: maybe other students before me had come on a hunch that the Haitian professor would know how to validate the labyrinth of emotions – disillusionment, gratitude, even anger – that came with returning home from another country. Being in close contact with her native country, the professor made this trip home often. It was *my* first time.

That August, I had finished a two-month construction project in a small village in Western Gambia, during which my group of eight Americans and our Gambian counterparts built a 300-meter chain link fence. Two months after I returned I couldn't seem to settle back into place in New York, with its acres of pristine white fences. I was still making weekly phone calls to the village. I hadn't yet removed my plastic African bracelets, and I checked the weather in the Gambia daily. The approaching winter in Western New York seemed preposterous juxtaposed with the 90 degree

temperatures in Africa; half of me was still in summer there.

The split consciousness made it difficult for me to place myself; T.S. Eliot's wisdom on Rosemarie's door seemed concerned with that same experience of reevaluating your foothold on your homeland once you'd left it, or arriving at the same border only to find yourself fenced out. I boiled with questions about these divides, and I craved a thesis, some kind of starting point from which to explore my own country, and my fence-crossed African experience.

My Capstone advisor, Beth, could see I was struggling as I first tried to force my research into the subject of microloans for African women, and later into the heated debate on female circumcision. The subjects felt claustrophobic, and I was still periodically paralyzed by the immensity of the travel experience, and the disparity between my life at the fence and my life on campus.

"Sometimes I just want to forget about the entire thing just because it would be easier," I told her in frustration. "And sometimes I remember too much, and it seems impossible to organize. Either way this research isn't getting me anywhere."

Beth thought for a second. "You know, you should go talk to Rosemarie Chierici," she said, with a magician's secret nod. When I asked her why, she said only, "I have a feeling about this one." I showed up with a blank notebook at the professor's door. It had to be true, I thought, that this well-traveled professor had some valuable answers hidden away on a high shelf.

Rosemarie's office was indeed filled with high shelves, but they were crowded with books. The professor received me with genuine interest, and waited patiently through my disclaimers of my fledgling Capstone project research, nodding politely. But the questions she asked had nothing to do with microloans or circumcision. She wanted to know about the 300-meter chain link fence.

"Explain the trip to me," she said.
"Explain this fence. What were you trying to keep in – or keep out?"

She smiled, but it wasn't a mocking question, and the idea of shutting in, or shutting out, struck a resonating chord. Everything about building a fence begs the language of containment, protection and boundaries; and yet most of my Crossroads group would swear we were deconstructing these divisive concepts, day by day, as we pounded iron posts into the ground next to our Gambian counterparts.

Regardless, as Americans, Gambians and individuals there must have been some things we each locked in or locked out, staring point-blank across at one another's cultures. I felt my own fences straining in the Haitian professor's office, bursting with what I hadn't considered and what I hadn't found ways to express.

I was assigned to the fence project based on my application to Operation Crossroads Africa 2009, the chapter of a non-profit organization in its 51st year of operation. It had been founded in 1958, and according to JFK became the progenitor of the Peace Corps three years later. The founder, James H. Robinson, dreamt of a "clear, honest, hard-hitting program" in which young North Americans would work at the grassroots level with young Africans.

I had discovered the program online, and as a writer I was impressed by the direct challenge the website posed. "You *must* have a willingness to challenge your values," it cautioned in its requirements. "You *must* be willing to learn from, and share with, both your

fellow Crossroaders and the African people whose community you will serve." I applied with that challenge printed in my brain, as a herald to the type of intensely pressurized adventure I, and most of my friends, had never experienced.

We built the fence, as I told Professor Chierici, for the women of Penyem village. The Crossroads group, Americans between the ages of 18 and 32, had been requested by the Soforai Women's Association of Penyem on behalf of their failing garden. Roaming cattle and donkeys had taken advantage of young shoots in the women's most lucrative garden project, and even with annual repair the garden's branch-and-barbed-wire fence couldn't keep them out. Over a two-year period the land was overtaken by weeds and mango trees, and by 2009 the garden had grown wild over a valuable and unused system of water pumps. The women's development representative, Nyima Jarju, approached the Village Development Committee: it was outside their budget, but a permanent fence was necessary reclaim this goldmine of a garden.

The Sharon James garden (perhaps appropriately named after a female Peace Corps volunteer), in addition to allowing the women control over its revenue, was easy to access; the women, often laden with a child or a water bucket or both, could save an hour a week going to the Sharon James garden rather than one on the outskirts of town. When animal foraging rendered it unusable, the women were forced back to farther gardens that allowed no centralized control and demanded longer hikes. Often with upwards of ten mouths to feed and a compound to run, the Penyem women had much to do, and time, as I was reminded repeatedly, is the most precious commodity of her day.

My 14-year old shadow, Serreh, often appeared wherever I was working in Penyem, and in the first week she watched me scrub laundry with a kind of palpable compassion, fidgeting with pity in her purple dress. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, she broke in, "No, let me, I can do faster." She took the laundry from my hands and rubbed it together with

blinding efficiency under the soapy water. “You would be washing *all* day,” she scolded me. “You would not have time for anything else.” I sheepishly let her finish the garment, and nursed my raw knuckles as I took note of her technique.

The young girls, I found, were nearly as strong as their mothers, and had nearly as much to do when they weren’t in school. That summer Serreh was on the cusp of puberty, not yet a woman. On the first morning of our arrival, before the fence project began, she and her curious friends had approached us, the three American girls, fascinated by the texture of my hair, by Marissa’s freckles and Emily’s spectacles. Between our new chores, Marissa, Emily and I followed their electric-socket hair and skinny legs on a jogging tour of the town. Serreh became my best guide and translator.

Often she would drag me past older girls on the road, and I smiled at them, hoping to communicate my helplessness and my friendliness simultaneously. In those first few days in Penyem I was unsure of how to interact with girls my own age. Many of them were married and covered their hair with the modesty of their Muslim culture, greeting me with reserved handshakes and murmurs or just watching from a distance. Under their eyes I felt young, and there I was, unmarried, playing clapping games with bare-legged girls and jogging to the Sharon James garden in pants to do the construction work of men. I wondered whether the women’s thoughts leaned toward scorn, or envy, or perhaps just curiosity. It was curiosity and a desire to be accepted that overwhelmed my first nervous impressions; I asked Serrah the Jolla word for “pretty” – oojejek – so I could compliment my Gambian peers on their wrap skirts and head scarves.

Still, I felt perpetually as if I were teetering between the two groups of women and men. Starting three days into our village stay, the group’s mornings were occupied by the three-and-a-half acre Sharon James garden, by the surveying, measuring, digging, rolling, lifting and mixing of soil and concrete. Our group leader Alyson, the oldest of the eight

Americans, often stayed back to work logistics with the elders or the young women who helped cook for us, so it was Marissa, Emily and I who followed the American and Gambian men on the three-minute walk to the garden. Though Emily’s West Point training had left her well-muscled, and Marissa and I were by no means strangers to labor, when we passed the old women in their compounds, they would call us up to their verandas and ask us what in the world we were doing.

“We are working!” we would tell them, miming digging with a shovel. They would laugh.

“Eh-yo! *Borokop!*” they would say, shaking their heads. Work. Mama Nyassi, one of the oldest women in the village at 70, was the most persistent with her jokes and questions.

“You are working hard, but where is your husband?” Serrah would translate for us as Mama Nyassi stroked my dirt-stained hand and watched me coyly.

I would tell her I didn’t know, that I hadn’t found him yet, and stir another laugh out of her. But we had to pry ourselves away after from her blessings, to run and catch up with the men, who were already starting at the fence. Leaving the company of women for heavy labor suddenly felt like a statement, a breach of the accepted barrier in order to reinforce our purpose in the village, which despite their teasing, the residents were all well aware of. Emily, Marissa and I laughed with the women and swallowed our pride when our African helpers assigned us to less strenuous tasks, but we later confided to each other that we had begun to approach the fence with a hot-blooded drive to prove our worth as strong, independent women workers.

The definition of productivity in terms of a day’s work, however, became increasingly loose as the weeks moved. We dismantled the old, rotting fence, but before the construction could begin, the new fence materials needed to be collected. Andrew, our project manager, was 29, hailing from the only Christian family in the

village and one of three residents to have secured a Visa and made it briefly to the U.S. Tall and graceful, he spoke English quickly and Jolla even more quickly, and told jokes in a falsetto voice that echoed across the garden or our compound, where he slept near our cots. Having graduated from the International School of Business, Andrew took on the bulk of the responsibility for buying materials. He was frequently on his cell phone with building contractors, arguing the price of iron posts or wire or chain link, which would be paid for by a medley of donations. Emily, an efficient organizer and economics major, often went with Andrew to Brikama, to inquire as to the whereabouts of our materials.

“They will arrive on Tuesday,” the contractors assured us. And then, on Tuesday – “They will be in by Friday, no problem.”

Friday came and went. We learned to make schedules loosely, and to be ready to dismantle them at a moment’s notice. Some had more difficulty with this than others. Three weeks in, Emily stormed up to Andrew, to demand why we weren’t working on the fence.

“We could be getting an entire side done, but we’re sitting here playing cards,” she fumed. “Don’t they *want* the fence finished? At this rate we’ll only have it half-done by August!”

Andrew raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “The contractor doesn’t have the materials yet,” he said simply. “There is no work to do today. We will work tomorrow.”

Emily was silent, and then went back to her notebook, in which she had drawn a diagram of the garden fence complete with tiny measurements and material needs. She pored over this daily, perhaps taking comfort in outlining boundaries. In her cross-cultural interactions, she made the same motions; she made rules for herself, a map for each conversation, seeking a fail-proof routine that would move her from morning to evening. She adopted local dogs and kept them in the yard, training them three times a day to the

bewilderment of the Gambians, for whom pet coddling is a foreign concept.

My group let her set up in peace. I recognized the necessity of those boundaries for Emily’s sanity, even as I struggled to set up and dismantle my own boundaries. As a young white woman unable to fit in with any distinct Gambian group – women or men or youth or adult – many of these fences came ready-made. At the time, I was convinced I could scale them if I worked hard enough. I often fell back on the familiarity of my group members, surviving in the reassurance of their company and the simple action of singing Simon and Garfunkel while twisting wire at the garden fence.

I described the feeling to Rosemarie Chierici in her office, three months later.

“I wasn’t a woman, and yet I wasn’t a man either,” I marveled, trying to illustrate with my hands the divide between the genders. “I was too much in the male community to be accepted by the women, and too much of a woman to be accepted by the men. So I ended up just hovering somewhere in between.”

Rosemarie sat back in her swivel chair, frowning. “You seem confused about your distance from the local culture, but it is perfectly natural to feel separate,” she said. “I would even argue that it couldn’t be any other way. What else could you expect in two months?”

I did not have a good answer for this. She was right, of course; I was expecting too much of myself, and perhaps looking for the wrong kind of acceptance in trying to wedge myself into social groups I’d only just encountered, and to understand cultural relationships instantaneously simply because I possessed the will to learn. Patience, patience, the Crossroads mentors had advised us before we left the U.S; and in my fervor, had forgotten to extend the virtue to myself.

On a Wednesday of the third week in Penyem, the village held a belated but official welcome ceremony for the Crossroads group, set at a communal garden separate from Sharon

James. Andrew instructed us to line up facing the large group of villagers. The men sat or stood on top of a small knoll, and the women sat apart from them on its incline, propped up and leaning into the slope. I recognized some of the women, but many more were unfamiliar. I felt again underdressed in my dirty capri pants and sneakers, with my hair uncovered, but the ceremony proceeded.

The men spoke first. Sanna, the village teacher, translated with the practiced inflections of an orator, and in the silence his words took on great weight. An old man, Modou Nyassi, welcomed us first into his village. He didn't have much, but he insisted that anything we needed was ours without question. His home was our home, and his family our family. They were proud to offer anything they owned, to answer any questions we might have, and to receive us as guests. Above all, Modou Nyassi stressed, he wanted thank us for taking on this project, and being willing to learn about the culture of his people here in Penyam.

The other men nodded emphatically. Several more, each of them elders and obviously widely respected, stood and repeated Modou Nyassi with matching solemnity and fervor. I smiled at them, too overwhelmed to thank them out loud. After a time, all the men were silent. Then a woman stood up.

"Now the women will speak their piece," our translator announced.

I didn't recognize this woman, and her response was brief. She put her hands together and pointed toward our motley, attentive line.

"You have come to save us," Sanna translated.

The statement broke off from the rest and hung there. "The women need this garden," she continued; "And you are here to help us build a fence for it. On behalf of the women I thank you." Then she sat, and there was a general murmur of approval.

She was the only woman to speak, and it was last speech made that day. As the kola nut,

a bitter caffeinated nut used for traditional ceremonies, was distributed to each of my group members, I looked for her. She had disappeared again into the group of women who were now shifting, some of them retying babies onto their backs with cloth.

Her response had jarred me with a clash of inspiration and discomfort. Not until this point had such a massive fence been raised between our line of Americans and the villagers on the knoll. In that moment I was more than acutely aware of my expensive sneakers, my healthy teeth, the brand name Chap Stick in my pocket, and of my own power, which the woman had just named. "You have come to save us," she said. My privilege was, I knew, a power I already carried and would continue to carry, and which I somehow recognized when I applied for this volunteer experience. It is a power of mobility, of choice and circumstance, a divide I will never cross.

Rosemarie Chierici cried when she went back to Haiti for the first time. She clutched the steering wheel of her car as she drove down the poverty-stricken streets, doubled over under waves of questions. In her swivel chair, the professor sat very still as she related the story to me, in the last minutes of our October conversation.

"I saw at the lives of the people from my car window and I wanted to shake them," she told me, holding her hands in fists. "I wanted to ask them, 'Why do you plant flowers? Why do you play? Why do make love?' I wanted to tell God just how badly he had messed up."

Sitting across from the professor, I wanted desperately to hear her say more; I wanted a clearer picture of that young woman in Haiti, punching the steering wheel in rage that couldn't be directed at anything in particular. I could not presume to feel the same things as the professor; among the many differences, she was exploring her roots in Haiti, while I strayed far from mine in the Gambia. But during that half-hour conversation something *had* dropped from the professor's high shelves into my lap.

I could construct an anthropology of West African female circumcision, traced through the women of Penyem. I could outline the benefits and myths of microloans to African communities. When I knocked on the professor's office door I was looking for the gate to the most complete story, the most accurate access point of those hard-hitting themes of cultural exchange, a bore-hole to Penyem from my Western New York college campus. But the action of this story, as it was pulled through those attempts, makes this a project of continual construction, and in my head is punctuated by Andrew's commands on one particular work day at the Sharon James garden.

"Asaba! PULL!" he shouted down the fence line, sparking fifty hands to tug wire through twenty-five individual fence posts, and we completed the next step toward that elusive goal of 300 meters.