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BO REVISITED - Second Visit to Bo, Sierra Leone, June/July 1982 on behalf of ONE WORLD LINK

Introduction

I shall be forever indebted to Roy Sears of C and S International whose generous impulse enabled me to make this unexpected visit to Sierra Leone.

Last April I visited Bo for the first time to see if the people of Bo District would like to link with Warwick District. It was heartening at the time to find positive response and a small committee was formed at the end of my month's stay.

At our end all went surprisingly well (see Evaluation No. 2) and from what we could gather the Bo end were reasonably happy. Some school links were suffering from no or few letters and some uncertainty was expressed about our and their aims. So it was obvious that at some time, I should return to Bo to bring all the uncertainties together and to find out how our friends in Bo felt about the Link. Were they just trying to oblige us or rather taking part because they really wanted to?

There is nothing like personal contact to give life to such an ambitious idea and I was convinced by the visit that the Link is taking firm root in Bo.

In this report I hope to pass on some of the excitement of my visit and to indicate why I feel the Link is working at the Bo end.

Impressions

I still recall my first tremulous arrival in Freetown last year and my shock at the sight of Bo and, what seemed to me at the time, its squalor. This year Freetown was a place where I could walk anywhere fearlessly and with confidence. As I drove into Bo tightly squashed with nearly thirty other people in a minibus and a chicken pecking my backside, I felt a sense of relief to be back again - like coming home - and it did not seem squalid. I had ceased to see it through Western eyes.

It was hard to adjust from travelling through the overcrowded swarming Kissy Town Road to visit an acquaintance's six year old daughter, Kadijotu (one of seven), with lifeless lower legs, a victim of polio, living in a virtual hovel, to visiting the Aqua Club that evening. At the Aqua mainly Lebanese and Europeans

drink freely and discuss anything from the latest corrupt happening to how does one cook half a hog that someone had shot when hunting? They did also talk with genuine concern about the state of the hospitals and the very poor. So many times I found it difficult to make straight judgements about anything. Meanwhile through Serabu Hospital it may be possible for Kadijotu to be treated free by visiting doctors.

Once in Bo the days were equally varied. Starting in the Methodist School one day, where I tried to explain what life in England is like to youngsters, some of whom had not travelled as far as Freetown - there was not even chalk to write the name MILVERTON on the board (their linking school), quite difficult but the teachers were very keen and the correspondence with Milverton School children over a period should contribute some better knowledge to both schools.

From here I was entertained by the Bo scouts with tea and biscuits, some formal exercises and then informal chat about their ambitions. They described camping adventures where the shelters made with local materials are as adequate as any tent. They were a most impressive group as were the guides who had a lunch party for me. That evening I sat on the balcony of Gerihun Catholic Mission admiring the romantic African night and listening to the comments about Sierra Leone traditions by a priest, Father Coffey, learning many things from him. What I didn't notice were the mosquitoes eating my feet and legs, I could hardly walk the next day.

There were so many outstanding moments but the most moving time was my visit to Golahun Vaama. Anyone involved in the link knows that Mussa Conteh has contributed a great deal in establishing its success in Leamington and he has many friends here. Golahun Vaama is his village and I stayed with his family there. My first long ride by poda truck, intimately squashed without a square centimetre of space available between me and the other twenty six passengers, bouncing over eighteen miles of rutted laterite road, took me to the village. Life here was so simple. There may have been the odd radio around but otherwise traditional life of working hard on one's farm, eating and retiring early with one of one's wives formed the basic pattern. Unhappily one of Mussa's sisters had that morning given birth to a stillborn child and two other children in his family had died since he left. I felt totally helpless at the thought of how this woman could be helped if she had haemorrhaged or had some other side effect? They showed me a small glass bottle with red, yellow and black pills in it, obtained from a dispenser eighteen miles away and asked me if they were alright? I could only guess.

There is no rice (the staple food) in the village, they had to put up with cassava. However, they made me welcome and were full of smiles despite their worries.

At Mamboma village I saw the school building with the whole of a wall collapsed, so now the children are squashed into community meeting places in the village and like other schools I saw two classes had to function in one area back to back. Both here and at the other schools I wondered at the patience of teachers who can successfully teach their pupils anything under these conditions, sometimes sharing eight reading books between fifty-six children.

At Mamboma they were using pencils and paper sent from Alcester School.

The greatest difference between this visit and the last one was that last year, although made welcome, I was a stranger with a new idea, this time I was treated as a friend who was part of a scheme being

happily accepted by all of us. Spending long periods of time in Sierra Leonian homes and workplaces, I felt we all understood each other as good friends and I was often amazed at their enthusiasm.

The climax of all of this was the Bo O.W.L. Committee Meeting attended by fifteen Sierra Leonians. They also brought food and drink and the evening was very lively. The meeting confirmed their happiness to receive two teachers next term, they hope to stage an exhibition about the Link and Warwick District in their library and they hope to build up a membership which would attend meetings in the community centre addressed by themselves or visitors on given themes.

Since then a suggestion has cropped up that just as we shall be organising study groups to read and discuss African writer books here, if we can get books on Development and Brandt issues to Bo, they might like to discuss those there.

Stories and News

Father Coffey complained bitterly about thieves and described how two daring young men stole a generator from the Gerihun Paramount Chief and took it to the Bo Police Station. The Police used the generator themselves and the Chief eventually had to pay 200 leones to get it back.

There was the first ever armed bank robbery in Bo while I was there. Quite frightening for the customers, 47,000 leones were snatched and the Police although alerted could not find transport to get there on time - so the thieves escaped.

I stood in the lorry park in a corrugated iron hut about four feet square filled with expensive Sony recording equipment with Mr. Moseray of Mamboma. He was recording his pupils singing and drumming most impressively for Alcester. Suddenly there was a violent rush of people and in front of them a man being beaten thoroughly. They cornered him in a poda lorry. He was a thief.

One evening, Dr. Jenny Gibson of Bo hospital sat in her elegant summer dress with her hair in rollers and her legs in heavy black boots, defence against the mosquitoes. She was writing the following limerick.

"A lucky old doctor in Bo
Has friends we would all like to know,
They send drugs from afar
Via Leamington Spa
And shower her work with their dough."

This was in response to one from the Leamington Medical Group. Her comment was "I wouldn't be here would I if I weren't mad".

"O" level examination papers were leaked through Sierra Leone this year, what a blow to genuine students trying to make progress.

It is impossible to relate all the incidents which moved me so much. I met old friends and made new ones like Father Koroma with such a twinkle in his eye, the Bob Moran family at Tikonko and the teachers there, Mrs. Tanawalli at the Community Centre who works harder than seems possible, Hannibal Kamara who taught me a lot about weaving and so many more.

The Bo End of the Link

The fact that the staff at Serabu Hospital talked for two hours of

their valuable time about what the people of Warwick District could do to join them in their work showed me that the Link is now accepted as useful by these fine people.

Father Coffey admitted to some apathy on his part after my departure last year because other important matters took over, but by the end of my stay, he and the Mamboma School staff are enthusiastically awaiting the visit of Anne Parker (Head of Alcester Infants).

Many members of the Bo O.W.L. Committee sought to see me more than once to discuss more arrangements and to confirm their interest. Mrs. Kamara who has enthusiastically steered the Bo Committee through its first year suggested teacher exchange for a term at a time and dismissed all my doubts about the Link.

When Mr. Songur Williams (Head of the Hospital) turned to Sister Hilary as we toured health facilities in two towns and discussed their lack of any ether or ketamine for anaesthetics at Bo Hospital and then turned to me and said "Can Leamington help?", I thought the Link really is working. Less than a week after I returned, a local pharmacist bumped into me in Sainsbury's and said "I have some ketamine for Bo".

There are many problems in Sierra Leone, rice costing as much as a month's salary, corruption, dishonesty, a badly run economy which

is vitually bankrupt, frustration that elections have no effect, etc. etc. Our link cannot impinge on this but as Father Coffey said "When life is hard the fact that Warwick District takes trouble to care and to want to know is a comfort" and we all have so much to tell each other. Mr. Boya, Vice Principal of St. Andrews Secondary School said that only by people at our level working together would effective change take place. There is still a strong feeling with many people that life in England is the panacea and that organisation under the British works. Like our society, much of Sierra Leonian perception is governed by the media and it will only be through our direct contacts that a truer picture of life at each end will emerge.

There are new links to develop like the Universities of Njala and Warwick and various ideas for mutual trading and there is all the growth of the existing links. As one of the Leamington Librarians said "There is no going back now and we are all delighted that Leamington is one of the first Libraries to have a Link with a Third World Library.

Final Conclusion

Some Sierra Leonians may see the Link as a means towards a visit to England or to obtaining material benefits but I think the majority I met saw way beyond this. If some leading members leave the area, continuity could be a problem. However, with well timed visits to both ends and with the genuine commitment that I find developing at both ends, I do not think this will be too serious or difficult to cope with. I strongly recommend that everyone involved with the Link continues confidently but with an annual review. I look forward to seeing more people from Warwick District visit Bo to form their own conclusions. I hope the publicity work and the discussion meetings will grow in Bo so that the maximum benefit can reach as many people as possible. Hopefully our Committee will try and obtain tickets for up to three visits from Bo in the next two years. The sincerity the laughter, the politeness and warmth of all the friends in Bo and Freetown remains with me. My thanks to them all for hospitality, gifts, accommodation and lifts and the privilege of meeting them all.

19th July, 1982

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JANE KNIGHT,
Oxfam Regional Organiser