

VISIT TO BO October/November 1982 by Bob Crowther

This is meant to be a general report on my visit to Bo with Ann Parker but I am going to concentrate on some things about schools and children.

To begin with some generalisations, however, I must emphasise what a happy three weeks we had, how welcoming and generous was everyone we came across and how well organised we were by the Bo OWL Committee.

The heat took some getting used to and I feel grateful to have been there at the end of the rainy season and able to use water fairly freely for washing. Particularly considering the effort that is involved I was constantly impressed by the care people took of their dress and appearance generally. There are other impressions: of the stalls along all the streets lit by little oil lamps at night; of the abundance of fascinating insects and gaudy birds, and the lizards scuttering across the ceilings and walls chasing mosquitoes; of careering from side to side of the road in a taxi, avoiding the potholes with the pedestrians wisely standing well back and Bob Marley accompanying all from the carts tape player.

Our first few days programme gave us an insight into the variety of Dots activity: Do Teacher's College, the new S.O.S. Village designed for destitute children, the Bunumbu Press with its publication in various languages of the country and its adult literacy programme, Hannibal Kamara's weaving, the Cheshire Home, the Library and the administration, chiefdom, district and provincial.

Then as we started our school visits we met numerous intelligent, resourceful and caring teachers at work with limitation in terms of basic resources which left me full of admiration for their dedication. With Ann, I visited Taiama Primary and Secondary Schools, St. Pius and Tikonko Methodist

primaries and Christ the King College (C.K.C.) Ahmadiyya Muslim Secondary, Bo Government and St. Andrews (V.C.C.) schools. Alone, I went to Bo Methodist Primary and the Agricultural and Vocational Secondary School (AVSS) Gerihun and peeped in at the primary schools in Gerihun and at Yakaji and Mrs. Awada's nursery and primary school in Bo.

Many primary schools are well established, Bo Methodist is nearing its centenary, However, there is great pressure on existing schools so new schools have been established in the town and more village primaries are growing up.

Entry into Class 1 is normally at about 5 years. A statutory fee of 1el per year is charged in Class 1 and Class 2 (this would buy about 2 exercise books.) The rest of primary education is officially free. However, the schools are chronically short of money and resources and parents are expected to provide exercise books, pens and pencils. Children who came without would be sent home. This can be confusing for parents who have been told that the schooling is free.

The schools all have uniforms. At Bo Methodist, the girls wear blue dresses trimmed with pink and the boys wear khaki shorts. They take this quite seriously to the extent that one girl who was not in uniform declined to be photographed.

Normal school hours are from about 8.00 to 2.00 p.m. though Bo Methodist, in common with some others in the town, operates a two shift system. The 900 odd children are taught at two separate schools with their own staffs. Mr. Braima heads the IX Shift from 8.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. with classes 1, 2, 3 and 7; then from 1.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. Mr. Kondo takes over the headmaster's chair with classes 4, 5 and 6. That second shift in the

hottest part of the day is really hard going, especially since the children have not been idle in the morning. They will have been working at home or in the market, for instance.

The children come to school speaking Mende as their first language usually, and Krio, they are then pitched into English. Learning English goes hand in hand with learning to read. There is an exception, here, in the Methodist Primary, Tikonko where they are involved in a trial scheme of learning to read in Mende first (incidentally, the strategy used in the Bunumbu Press adult literacy programme.) The Head, Mr. Danda, felt that it was advantageous to learn the process of reading in the mother tongue before tackling English. This might not work so easily in Bo Town where there could be a significant number of non Meande speakers in the class.

Another new development is the promotion of the K ELT scheme for teaching English. Teachers were attending course in Bo. The scheme, essentially designed by an ex-patriot "English as a second language" expert, is being promoted by the Ministry and involves building up the language through patterns and phrases rather than formal grammar. Feelings are mixed about this change. Mr. Braima felt that the children needed to understand the grammatical framework whereas some younger teachers felt the new methods would help them to understand the meanings quicker.

In the early years, particularly, a lot of the teaching is oral, involving repetition, rhymes and songs. Their singing in English is charming but when they were singing in Mende their rhythm, pitch and harmony, together with the mimes, which were an essential part of the songs, were far in advance of what our children achieve at, say, six (or perhaps ever.)

Two highlights of our visit were the "cultural shows". The first was at our welcome at the Methodist Community Centre where H.R.S. and Q.R.S. girls performed traditional songs and dances. Mike Downham kindly taped this performance which drew in hundreds of local people to cram the hall. Then, towards the end of our stay, we were treated to a show by the Tikonko school children which included, as well as dancing, and singing and the appearance of two "devils", Nafali and Gaboi, three plays devised by the children and performed in Mende and Krio. The skill of the actors in movement and expression made explanation of the plots hardly necessary. One sad note was that one of the girls from Q.R.S. who performed for us died later of Lassa Fever.

I really could not communicate with the younger kids. Until about Class 4 their English was not up to it (and my Krio non-existent) but in the compound they came to grab my hands or just grin and smile at me.

The style of teaching is essentially class lessons with the blackboard as the principal aid. Right through the school the need to clarify English words and phrases came into lessons in all subjects. In a Geography lesson in Class 6, Mr. Momoh was teaching about the Highlands of Sierra Leone. As a preliminary it was necessary to clarify "high" by getting the children reaching up and so establishing a clear meaning of high lands.

The teaching makes much use of question and answer with the class chanting "Yes" or "No" as appropriate (and falling about when they find half have yelled the one and half the other.) For the younger children, and less able, Krio is used to explain work and overcome difficulties in understanding but English is still used for regular instructions; for instance, in every class there seemed to be someone ready to call "Class Stand!" whenever a visitor appeared.

Progress through the classes depends on passing end of year tests, so as they move up through the school, what with the late entry of some and others repeating classes, the age range in the classes becomes wide. In Class 6 there was a girl of sixteen when the youngest were ten or eleven. This presents problems in teaching the same lesson to pupils with different levels of maturity. While discussing this with Mr. Lahai he pointed to a parallel problem regarding reading books, As the children progress in reading is slowed by the need to learn English at the same time their reading level is generally behind an English child of the same age. Consequently, English publications designed for their reading level are too young at interest level. Some of the books we had sent he was using to read aloud to the class rather than for them to struggle with themselves.

The accommodation in primary schools is generally in single storeyed concrete buildings, often with several classes in one room separated by low screens. Even in the confusion of noise the children were able to concentrate on their own class work. Being open for the circulation of air the rooms allow the intrusion of a lot of outdoor noises, too.

Class 7 is in for really intensive cramming for the Selective Entrance Exam for secondary school which will take place in May. Each child must have a passport sized photograph certified by the school to prevent impersonation in the exam. A pass rate of about 20% is the first hurdle, then the cost of secondary education can be quite a burden for the family. Fees are Le 8.20 per term plus additional charges, then there are the uniforms, shoes, text books, exercise books etc. to provide, and often accommodation with hefty examination fees at the end of it all (average monthly wage 50 leones.) One boy had passed the S.E.E. three times but was still at the Bo Methodist Primary hoping to find the money to take up a secondary place.

There was some feeling that the expansion of secondary education, and consequent concentration of many parents and teachers on getting the able few through the S.E.E., was detracting from primary education as an end in itself, which it must be for the majority for the time being. Similarly secondary education was criticised as being too biased towards academic subjects and aimed solely at exams and those students who would pass into higher education.

The number of secondary schools in Bo reflects the long establishment of some and the consequence that students come from all over the province and the country. Most secondary schools in the town have boarding facilities and many other students are staying in the town with relatives etc.

The need for materials and equipment restricts—the amount of practical work done in sciences, for instance, and at C.K.G. art has been removed from the curriculum for lack of materials. Most schools have some provision for agricultural science. A.V.S.S., Gerihun has plots of land, plantations, hen houses, piggery etc. but even there the pressure from the students is to drop agriculture in favour of academic subjects in the later years. Amongst the fourth and fifth forms there, was only one boy who hoped to follow agriculture as a career, most wanted to be lawyers or doctors.

A group of sixth formers we talked to at E.K.C. showed themselves well informed and we were interrogated penetratingly about Northern Ireland, racial prejudice, and the British Nationality Act, as well as corruption in public life. Many of these youngsters would have liked to come to British universities and colleges and it was sad to realise that current policies on fees for overseas students will make this impossible.

by the cancellation of ten of the subjects due to widespread cheating. To the schools there is the problem of trying to accommodate the fifth form repeaters in already crowded premises. To the families there are the fees and exam fees to find again.

Football and other sports play an important part in the youngsters' interests. Unfortunately passions have tended to rise too high in inter school league matches and the league has been abandoned for this year. Popular music particularly reggae, is widely heard from cassette players, and there are the cinemas, with mainly Indian films, and dances.

Children are expected to work. When I asked some of Class 6 (at Bo Methodist School) what they had done in the morning before coming to school for the P.M. Shift they replied "Carried water swept the house washed clothes fetched wood sold things in the market prepared food." When I asked what they would do after school one girl shouted "Eat" and this was adopted as the sensible reply. I had earlier been struck by the sight of youngsters with assorted filled bottles, bunged with paper, in trays on their heads calling "Kerosine", by others hawking a few stock cubes about the market and by a lad who appeared about the school with a bundle of pencils to sell.

With Form 6 at A.V.S.S. I had a long, and much more personal discussion than with the CKC Sixth Form. At one point we were talking about food and a Liberian boy asserted that he had three meals a day at which the others seemed generally indignant and said they usually ate one meal, in the evening after the school day and often work on the family farm in the afternoon. All schools had their group of women selling oranges, bananas, peanuts and home made sweetmeats nearby.

The 4th formers were discussing their religious beliefs and were not so much shocked as concerned on my behalf to find I had no religion. They displayed the friendliness and respect which goes beyond tolerance that the Moslems and the Christians seem to have for each other. Schools are not permitted to discriminate in selection on religious grounds but seem to expect all students to attend religious assemblies etc. There are numerous mosques and churches in Bo, and Koranic schools as well as the conventional schools.

Toys are not commonly seen and Dr. Nuli Lemoh, the pediatrician at Bo Hospital, regretted this in the case of young children. He has odds and ends in his office to encourage them to play and is getting toys for the children's ward.

Older children make their own toys. I saw leaf and paper helicopters made and ingenious cars fashioned from wire and bottle tops etc. Improvised iron hoops were bowled with wire guiders and where a ball was not available a bundle of rags did as a football. I showed children at Bo Methodist how to play conkers and in return they taught me how to play some of their games including "stone cup" which involved demolishing and rebuilding a tower of old tin cans.

There were many dogs about, and some cats, but the only real pets I noticed were a monkey at Gerihun which was tethered to a tree; a sparrow sized yellow bird captured by the little sons of Pa Curry, a Lebanese trader in Gerihyn, which they kept in a cardboard box and fed with oddments scrounged from the shop; and finally a big coackraoch, tethered by its leg, which was kept by a boy in Gbalehun.

We are writing short reports for the schools involved in the link and I shall toll the interested people in Birdingbury about my visit to Yakaji.

I have come back full of impressions from my stay and hoping to be able to continue, even at this distance, the many friendships I have made.