

MARION'S REPORT OF HER VISIT TO BO, MARCH-APRIL 1988¹

When Janet Alty, (Chairperson OWL) asked me to visit Bo, Sierra of the OWL Health Committee. I responded with enthusiasm.

Never having been abroad before, I was jumping in at the deep end!

Although I have knowledge about Third World countries I went without any pre-conceived ideas which was just as well as it was going to be quite a trip.

The plane was unable to land at Lungi airport (Freetown) due to a blackout - my first night in a foreign country was spent alone in a hotel which consisted of small separate huts 30 kilometres inside Gambia. I was told there had recently been a "coup", I sat up all night with the light on, such was my apprehension!

I was met the following morning by Robert Sam-Kpakra (M.P. for Bo Town II) who was to take me to meet the Sierra Leonean family who had volunteered to look after me for a month.

The family, along with their neighbours gave me a warm welcome. My hosts Senesie and Betty Kawa were both concerned and anxious as to what I would be like as English people have a reputation for being cold and reserved. It was brave and courageous of them to volunteer to look after me.

There were some initial difficulties; my hosts expected to take every responsibility from me - washing my clothes, pouring out my drinks and escorting me everywhere. Betty Kawa wanted me to give my money to her or her husband and ask for it back when I needed it. I felt very homesick, alone and was struggling to retain my identity in this new culture.

As a guest in the Kawa household and an Ambassador for OWL I was mindful of the importance of the goodwill and friendship and the developing knowledge Bo and Leamington would gain from this visit.

It was difficult for all of us at first - the Kawas felt very responsible for me and this was important to their standing in the community which I understood and respected. As we attempted to negotiate the transition between our two cultures, we were always open and honest, and we eventually achieved an understanding.

I appreciate with gratitude the way I was looked after by Senesie and Betty. Betty always made sure my drinking water was boiled and sterilised, and that my food was properly prepared. It is a credit to her that I was always extremely fit and well, and had no abdominal upsets during my stay.

THE FAMILY

Senesie Kawa is an authoritarian man who ruled by fear. I actually got on very well with him; he responded to my gently teasing as he poured out my drinks! At times he despaired of me saying "Mari-on, what am I going to do with you..."

Betty Kawa is a powerful woman, and very demanding. I felt constantly under pressure as I felt she wished to have complete control over me. I was quietly assertive and firm, although it was very stressful. However the situation was eased when she went away to a political convention for a few days.

Senesie and Betty Kawa and their family live on a small compound consisting of 10 one-storey houses, with more in the process of being built. The Kawas are not typical of most West Africans in Bo. Senesie owns his own house and at least two others in the compound. They have a fridge and a tape recorder which they share with their immediate neighbours; - the fridge and a cabinet containing crockery etc was always kept locked. I observed an almost patriarchal and matriarchal way of life on the part of the Kawas towards the other families on the compound. The Kawas are Muslims and Senesie said the people were praying for my safety in all the mosques.

¹ Marion Grimwood. She wrote 6 separate reports on health, medical, schools and other linking.

I lived as the family did; eating the same food (although I must confess I blanched one morning as the fish head floated up from the palm oil in which it was cooked!)

I had my own room which was quite large and well furnished. There was an adjoining room with a wash basin and a toilet.

The family have an outside tap which was accessible to everyone in the compound - this used to bring in piped water until five years ago when the equipment at the waterworks wore out and was not replaced. Water for drinking and washing etc is now collected in buckets from a man made well in the compound - I washed in a bucket of water (the family called it having a bath) washed my clothes then poured the water into the lavatory cistern.

After two weeks the water bowser came and filled the outside tank (not all the families have a tank). The water bowser caused great excitement with the children - as the tank was being filled the children plugged the holes in the pipe!

Being so hot, the family spent most of their time living and eating outside, although I had my food indoors with Senesie and Betty.

My hosts had provided me with a hammock and when I wasn't working I lay under a mango tree - it was bliss!

I spent many hours under the moon and stars (it gets dark by 7:00p.m.) with the Kawa family, the neighbours and their children - I had many visitors also. We exchanged dances, songs and played cards, and discussed our different cultures. They children are not normally included in this social interaction with their parents, it was only because I was there.

The men were very honest about their culture - the women a little more defensive, I felt. It was interested to observe the interactions in the family.

There are no hedges or walls etc separating the houses on the compound and as many people walked by they called out greetings.

THE FAMILY SYSTEM

Sierra Leoneans have an extended family system, and it took me a little while to recognise which child belonged to which family. Some children are sent to relatives who take on the children as their own. Grandmothers will look after the children while parents work. Betty Kawa said that Grandmothers love the children more than the parents do and take great pride in looking after them.

The families are very strict with their children and flog them if they misbehave - they were very open about this. I witnessed two young children being flogged on the last morning of my visit.

As the Muslim men can have more than wife, this can prevent a closeness in the married relationships. The extended family also means that a man is responsible for his parents and will also educate his brothers and his sisters.

The women are strong but the man usually has the last word, although this is changing as the women's awareness is raised. There are many broken marriages, and the divorce rate is high. Many children are homeless and ran wild in the streets.

I met several young people who wanted OWL to sponsor them through school as they had been unable to complete their schooling for one reason or another. Betty Kawa said this was sometimes because they hadn't worked and parents weren't prepared to continue paying their fees.

Sierra Leoneans speak English which is taught in all the schools as are all English customs, along with the African culture. All the children wear uniforms, they are very proud of these as are their parents.

The family taught me some Mende (Mende is one of the tribal languages) and everyone appreciated me taking the trouble to learn a few phrases.

THE CHILDREN

The children work very hard helping in the house, cooking, and fetching water from the wells (some have to walk miles). Some children go to the market to sell their goods before they go to school. Every Sunday the children wash and press their clothes and uniforms.

The children on the compound performed their African dances for me - they use their bodies very expressively and are very supple. They were very upset when I was due to leave and prayed for my flight to be delayed and it was!! They are very creative - making toy cars out of wire, with a long steering column for pushing along; the children otherwise have no toys or books.

Some children were frightened of me, not having seen a white person before and it took a little while for them to approach me. Wherever I went the children would come running, shouting "Pum wein" "Pu wein" - meaning "white woman"! After about three days the children around Do were calling "Mari-on" "Mari-on". I would smile and wave and hold out my hands. They loved to touch my skin - everyone thought I was beautiful. I would say "Al-lo" to all the children and they would soon respond "Al-lo". In the parts of Sierra Leone I visited the children now have a new catchword!

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Their cultural activities are very important to Sierra Leoneans. I was in Bo when the Easter celebrations were taking place - there was much dancing, singing which seemed to go on for most of the night. I was also fortunate to see the Bundi celebrations. This is a "secret" society where young women (some very young) are initiated into the art of womanhood, learning about the culture and cultural dances.

There were many groups involved, each group having a different leader (an older woman) and each group wearing a different coloured dress. One member of each group wears a bundi society mask - the only ones in West Africa owned and worn by women. The mask embodies the guardian spirit of the female Sande society, and each mask is cared to reflect a distinct attribute of the wearer

The celebration started at a political convention a week previously and culminated in a celebration and procession on "Women's Day". I was invited to the celebrations where the young women were performing the cultural dances and songs. Robert Sam-Kpakra asked me to say A few words about OWL.

WOMEN

Women play an important part in the economy, society and culture of Sierra Leone - many run small businesses. There are also many women tribal chiefs.

There are many women's groups which seem to be organised and led by men. The women's activities range from practical work, making dresses and shirts, gara cloth, soap and basket making to giving information on infant nutrition and child care. Women are also an important part of the political scene - Betty Kawa was a strong supporter of Robert Sam-Kpakra.

In the schools girls are taught the value of being a woman and the importance in the future of motherhood. The Sierra Leonean women are very relaxed about their sexuality - on the compound the adolescent girls and the women were comfortable without wearing tops, and women breast feed in shops, banks, etc with no embarrassment.

HEALTH (See also Health report)

Since health care is not free in Sierra Leone, many people rely on local preparations and God. The stress levels are very high, however, their physical health is very good.

I was taken to see a child of eighteen months who had just died with gastro-enteritis - he was lying in a shroud on the bed. The mother had felt she couldn't afford to pay for medical care. The tribal chief, family and friends were supporting her - it was a distressing scene.

Women do not appear to suffer from Pre-menstrual tension, or menopausal problems. The older women are very much valued by their society.

I asked about the loads women carry on their heads and if this has any effect on their spines - apparently the spines are strengthened by this.

Family planning is available and women seem to make choices about family planning as and when they need it.

There are many primary health care programmes in Sierra Leone both in the community and in hospitals. Health workers work in the community on immunisation and health education programmes protecting children from tetanus, whooping cough, measles and tuberculosis etc.

The Bo Government Hospital has a maternal and child health clinic. The children's ward has colourful murals on the walls - health education being used effectively to encourage oral re-hydration and fight death from diarrhoea. There is a midwifery unit, and if a woman goes into hospital, all the women in the family go and give support.

DIET

Rice is the staple diet, and seems psychologically important to their well being. Rice is imported which means that the price escalates. In a letter from Senesie Kawa, I learnt that the cost of rice at the end of June was 1100 Leones a bag, which is about £20. However, the salaries are very low (approx £18 per month) and paid infrequently, so a family of five would spend half that amount on rice alone. The people grow most of their vegetables: maize, sweet potatoes, peppers etc. also cassava, which is the second most important food to rice and both the leaves and the tubers are eaten.

They also eat chicken and fish, the chickens are very small, running freely, most die of during the wet season, but some survive. A lot of natural ingredients are used in cooking - e.g. palm oil. The oil palm is wide spread throughout Sierra Leone. It is used for both palm oil (made from the husk) and palm kernel oil. It also provide palm wine, and many other products. The palm oil is thought to protect the heart. Coconuts, bananas, mangos are among the wide variety of fruits grown in Sierra Leone. I tasted a young coconut full of liquid which is rich in potassium - the white part of the coconut was very soft, and called "jelly".

EDUCATION

All education has to be paid for - if parents can't pay the children do not go to school. The children work very hard and many hope to come to England to further their education and return to Sierra Leone especially those interested in agriculture - some say they would never return as they don't think anything will change in the future.

The children sit an examination to gain a place at Secondary school, if they do not obtain the appropriate grade, they stay in primary school, even if that means staying until they are fourteen. Eventually they go to a secondary school which is of a lower standard.

I visited some schools in Bo - OWL sends text books, exercise books, to some of the schools that are linked with schools in Leamington. The children exchange letters learning more about each others' culture. The 5 schools are very short of equipment and they are desperately appealing for help. The schools have a drugs problem and some children have emotional problems. In some schools there are trained counsellors to help these children.

RELIGION

There are many different religions but predominately Muslim. The mosques are very beautiful. A new mosque is being built in Bo funded by the Arab countries. The people have a great belief in their religion, and in respecting each others' faith. They did not ask about my beliefs - they assumed I was a Christian from the kind of person I am.

HOUSING

When people build a house they choose a plot not matter who their neighbours are. Cement is very expensive at present. People make blocks from suitable soil, which hardens after being allowed to dry in the sun. They then put on a corrugated iron roof (known as "zinc"). "Zinc" is now becoming very expensive. In some parts of Sierra Leone "thatch" made of palm fronds is used.

TRANSPORT

The transport is limited to cars and small lorries. The drivers squeeze in as many people as possible - some hanging from the sides, and back. Some lorries are decorated with slogans such as "God go wit you" and "It's hard being a man" and the one I liked best "In God I trust" with the occasional addition "All others cash"!

The roads are in a terrible state - broken with big pot-holes. There are no pavements - you take your life in your own hands, the drivers are mad!!

There are many motor bikes, but no one wears a crash helmet, possibly because they can't afford one - I don't know if it is even possible to buy one. I once saw two young men on a motor bike with a young babe in the front.

VISIT TO SENESIE KAWA'S VILLAGE

I stayed over-night at the village of my host's family; it was on the way to this village that I had an encounter with the Police. The village was in another Province and there were many road blocks both army and police. At one particular Police block they were a little more thorough - I hadn't got my passport with me (the first time I had forgotten it) - I also had some English money for my return trip to England. The Police, including the Chief of Police read the riot act to me saying that I had committed three felonies which was very serious. I felt very frightened and thought I would never see my family again, but eventually they decided that I was genuine.

The village was very primitive with pits for sanitation, and nearly all the children had eye infections although they looked physically well. As usual I was made to feel very welcome by the chiefs and the elders - the children crowded round and as they couldn't speak English we communicated through songs.

The villagers have formed themselves into an association and have built two classrooms - there is a headmaster and two helpers - one classroom is very dark with one small window and a door; very little air circulates and several groups use this.

The people have used the land, which is plentiful, planting rice in the swamps and growing vegetables. The plantation is strong and healthy. The village can grow enough rice to feed the whole village population (approx 500) with some left over.

The people want to develop the land further but money and shortage of tools is a problem. They also would like to build a health clinic and improve the sanitation. The natural spring well from where the people get all their water needs to be improved. This is quite a remote village where there are no health facilities. The infant mortality rate is very high. When the people learnt that I had fractured my collar bone after my return home, they all prayed for my recovery.

GBOTIMA DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

I was in Bo as the guest of the Gbotima Development Association (a self-help consortium). Gbotima is a Mende word meaning "help the people". Gbotima Development Association is a registered social welfare service organisation based in Bo. It is a non profit making organisation whose sole aim is to promote development and self reliance. One of my briefs was to evaluate the Gbotima clinic and pharmacy to see how OWL could help in its development. (See Health Report)

ROBERT SAM-KPAKRA

During my stay in Bo I was in the overall care of Robert Sam-Kpakra. He transported me to visit various people in Bo and to visit the villages where satellite health clinics have been proposed

He also took me round the 10 natural spring water wells which they people hope to improve with help in support and funding by OWL. (See Natural Spring Wells Report.)

It was interesting to observe how the people felt about Robert Sam-Kpakra. The chiefs and elders praised him for bring me to them on behalf of OWL. They felt that was all due to the magic of Robert himself - this is inevitable since he is the only M.P. who has shown any interest in the people.

He works very hard, aid gives so much of himself, that the people love him. In Bo they think he is the next best thing to rice! He also organises women's groups and literacy programmes in Bo. It is inevitable that he benefits politically.

Without Sam-Kpakra I wouldn't have been able to visit the wells and the villages on behalf of OWL. I am grateful to him for his concern for me and the care that he took of me in Freetown when my flight was delayed - without him I would have been stranded with very little money. I know there is some concern about the political aspects of his involvement with OWL and I can understand this.

Sam-Kpakra suggested that if OWL has any problems with sending goods to So they could be sent to the

United Christian Council

P.O. Box 404

King Hannan Road

Freetown -- marked c/o Robert Sam-Kpakra and for the attention of Gbotima Clinic

Whilst I was in Freetown as a guest of Robert Sam-Kpakra I was invited to a thanksgiving celebration in honour of a Rev Dr Eustace Renner on the presentation of the award "Officer of the order of the Rokel" - an award given for outstanding work in the community.

The President of Sierra Leone and his First Lady were present and I sat next to them. I was presented to them by Robert Sam-Kpakra after the ceremony and spoke to them about OWL and its relationship with Bo.

LINKING

When the people in Bo got to know me I had several requests to make to OWL for:

- a) Linking more schools
- b) linking with villages and towns in England
- c) second hand clothing and books

On returning from Bo other requests have been asked for - and outlet for:

- a) crafts
- b) gara cloth and shirts
- c) also personal requests for shoes, satchels, cameras etc

ECONOMIC SITUATION

The political scene seems stable, however, the fluctuation of the Leone (currency) the low salaries, irregular payment of these, the high cost of food, (particularly rice), clothes, and other commodities, the cost of health care and education all make it very hard for the people and sometimes they despair. This situation has worsened in the last five years.

I read a glossy book about Sierra Leone in 1900 - the reality of 1988 is quite different - at present the people have the energy to cope but if the situation worsens it will be too late!

The people will be in a downward spiral of despair where all their energies will go into surviving. Despite that they are happy and supportive to each other - they also have hope in themselves, in God, and, they feel, in the shape of Robert Sam-Kpakra!! But they also need help and support and friendship from the Link.

The One World Link also needs more Members - at present there are about 100 members, but only a small core working very hard. Please join OWL - the people of Bo need your support and friendship. It isn't just about the materialistic country giving to the poor - it is about a two-way exchange.

TALKS AND EXHIBITIONS

I have spoken to individuals and groups about my visit to Bo and shown slides and photographs.

The photos of the wells are now mounted and ready for display: the slides are also available for anyone wishing to use them.

I talked in a programme on Mercia Sound about OWL and my visit to Bo - available on tape.

FUTURE TALKS AND DISPLAYS

Family service and youth group at Wellesbourne Church

Health Visitor Groups

Doctors and Nurse colleagues

Negotiating a display in MWCPE Library

Negotiating a display at St Nicholas Church, Warwick

Writing an article for Nursing Journal.

SUMMARY

Despite some of the stresses that arose during my stay in Bo which was partly due to adapting and adjusting to a new culture, I enjoyed my month with the people. (It would have been helpful to have had someone to talk to in those first few days when the Kawas were seemingly insensitive to my problems.)

In retrospect I think I was very brave - I was indeed an innocent abroad! But I felt very safe in Bo, the people were friendly and concerned about my welfare. I was moved by the fact that so many people were praying in the churches and villages for me and my family. The Kawas, their neighbours and friends were very interested in my family, my husband, children, and grandchildren became quite important to them.