



REPORT OF A VISIT TO SIERRA LEONE 6th MAY-4th JUNE 1983 BY SHEILAGH HOLMES.

I went to Sierra Leone as the Secretary of the One World Link, to learn about the country and meet people involved in the Link there, so that I can do more work more effectively for the Link here in Warwick District. This was the first time I had travelled outside Europe, but I was well prepared by 2½ years of involvement with the Third World Information Centre. Since joining OWL, I had read and learnt a lot about Sierra Leone, seen hundreds of pictures, and talked to people who lived or worked there, so to some extent I knew what to expect, but inevitably there were some surprises.

Freetown and first impressions

The first thing which struck me as I stepped off the plane late on Friday night was a wave of very warm, wet air which I could hardly breathe, and then the warm smell of woodsmoke and vegetable matter which is omnipresent in Sierra Leone.

The next morning I went to look for Lans Chan's house. It was a long walk through side streets in the centre of town, and I felt extremely conspicuous as the only white person. It would have been intolerable if the stares I received hadn't instantly melted into smiles and greetings ("pumwe buua"). I was stunned by the friendliness of people. They wanted to know my name, where I came from, where I was going, and offered to show me the way. This openness was something I'd always missed in England, and it made me feel very relaxed and 'at home'.

I know that some country-dwellers in Europe still act like this, but here it was the norm. I wondered to what extent I was being given special treatment as a white person, possibly wealthy, but I think this hospitality is extended to all strangers and I was simply more obviously a stranger than most. An example of people's affectionate and demonstrative nature appeared even in the chilly air-conditioned 'London-style' offices of the British High Commission, where the smart male receptionist (a Sierra Leonean) walked round the room with a dejected, poor-looking man, holding his hand and patting it reassuringly, I imagined with distaste the comments this would receive in England. Even in places (eg, Immigration Office) where I was warned that difficulties would be made and bribes expected, I found that people responded happily if I was persistently friendly.

Of the few European expatriots I met, most seemed not to appreciate this side of life, and lived and worked well away from the average Sierra Leoneans. It was an exhausting walk up to the hideous blue British Council building, situated 'for the view' in a spot which only people with vehicles could reach with ease, and full of offices cold as iceboxes. I had soon acclimatised, and the occasionally excessive heat, like the mosquito bites, seemed a small price to pay for being there.

There were far fewer beggars than I'd expected, in Freetown and Bo. They were mainly the very old or disabled, and were not unpleasant. Even in Kroo Bay, the poorest part of Freetown, people were cheerful and friendly, though living with the very minimum of facilities. I was surprised by my lack of shock or horror at these conditions - I merely felt that the problems here were different from our own, not worse. They have so much to build up - clean water, good sanit-

ation, health facilities - a comparatively straightforward process if only (an enormous 'if') the country's resources were directed that way, whereas we (in my opinion) have so much to pull down and redesign.

Some things were just the same. I had as much difficulty explaining to the market women on the Krootown Rd why I wasn't married and didn't want to be, as I did to the Russian Consul another unhappy expatriot whom I met on the beach) or to many people in England.

My favourite hours were spent on the balcony of a friend's house in the evening, watching and greeting; tired people coming home from market, or high-spirited people going out on the town seeing the oil lamps on all the little roadside stalls start to glimmer as the sky turned from red to black and the stars appeared. I had begun to understand some Krio - a marvellously rich, flexible, and intimate language, equally suitable for market traders or lovers.

TV last moments in Freetown were magical. At dawn, I stood on a hill listening to the sounds of the city - the calls to prayer from the mosques and the music of Bob Marley drifted up to me in a strange and piquant mixture. I was sorry to leave but excited at the prospect of at last visiting the interior.

#### Up-country to Bo

Exchanging Freetown for Bo was like leaving London for Leamington Spa - the small town seemed very quiet and rural after the big city. People were just as friendly and open - I had expected them to be more shy and reserved. It was on the journey up-country that I began to realise that despite the apparent differences, the essential 'feel' of many situations was the same here or there, for example, driving through the countryside, having nothing to do on a Sunday afternoon, or continually meeting people you know on the street, were the same in Bo as in Leamington.

Within a few minutes of my arrival I had the delight of seeing Mussa Conteh again. I was to stay on the 'Reservation' - the old colonial quarter now used by government employees - isolated houses scattered over a large area; lonely, with a very long walk into town for people without vehicles. I had quite a busy timetable of visits for the next three weeks, starting the next day with a 'Field Day' at an important village nearby. It was just like any village fete, with an agricultural bias; there were displays of embroidery and schoolwork, colourful dancing devils taking the place of morris-men; I had my first Sierra Leonean snack - sweet potato and pepper sauce (delicious), tried to speak Mende and met some very nice people.

I spent the next 3 days with Father Koroma, a dedicated Sierra Leonean priest who took me to a few of the villages in his huge and remote parish in a hilly area where the roads are bad or non-existent. The services I attended were conducted in Mende, and the music was played on traditional instruments.

I had a further taste of village life when I stayed in Kponima, a small community near Mambona, with about 350 people. Here I was greeted by the chiefs - the leaders of different ethnic groups in the community, and the Paramount Chief of the area came to see me. At first I was irritated by all this attention as I had wanted to stay in the background (!), but I realised that this was their way of doing things and I should submit to it - they wanted to know who the stranger was and why she was there. It was interesting too, to hear the rhetorical style (very sophisticated) of their speeches - I had a struggle to follow it, let alone reply in an appropriate manner! Their gifts were generous - a chicken, rice, money for the sauce, gain cloth, and country cloth of cotton picked, spun, woven and dyed in the village. There I met Pa Lahai, the Mende chief, a very lively character who took a great interest in what I told him about England. We spent a peaceful evening shelling groundnuts on the porch by lamplight, while the children danced to music on the radio, until a heavy storm forced us inside. Then we worked out how an average weekly income would be spent in our two countries. I was surprised that people often don't pay rent - they help their landlord instead, with food, work on his farm, and other favours. They were amazed at the cost of travel in England when I told them that the train fare to London was beyond my means and that I hitch everywhere I spent the morning watching my host, the teacher, at work in the village school, and then, sadly, I had to leave. I wish I could have stayed much longer to see daily working life in detail, on the farms or small-scale mining operations. I had only caught a tantalising glimpse of the heart of S.Leonean life.

I spent 3 nights in Tikonko with Bob Moran's family and joined the infant classes at the local school for a morning to learn some Mende. Then I visited Njala University, about 30 miles from Bo. It is very small - 500 or so students, quite a few from other African countries.. Many of the courses seemed appropriate to the country's needs - agricultural engineering and extension work, and Home Economics based firmly in the home; I watched students in this department learning about child nutrition, experimenting with the range of foods available in the area, and making gara cloth. Another interesting visit was to Serabu hospital where very good work in both treatment and prevention of health problems is being done. They have set up a network of health committees in villages throughout the area, and train nurses and health visitors. I was shown round the hospital by Sister Antoinette who miraculously seemed to have time to take an interest in everyone as well as working extremely hard. The wards are small and comfortable, and instead of T.V. rooms, the patients and their families can relax in barries, built overlooking the town's main street so that there is always something; to look at or talk about.

My transport to most of these places, and within Bo and Freetown, was by taxi, long-distance taxi or poda-poda. The taxis were fun - often crowded, noisy with music and conversation, and skillfully driven. Most people don't own a car themselves - taxis are everywhere, and a bit cheaper than they are in England. They were very cheap for me and made a pleasant change from trudging everywhere on foot as I do at home. Poda-podas are like large-scale taxis but cheaper, used by people going to market with their produce. 30 people crammed into the back of a Mazda van can't avoid being close to one another and there was often a feeling, of camaraderie - on one occasion someone produced a bag of mangoes which we all shared. Some of the roads are surfaced, some are just dirt tracks, and all are full of potholes, ruts and stones. Obviously, some improvement and regular repairs are necessary, but they still compared favourably in my mind with the unrelieved tarmac, concrete and metal of Coventry by-pass, or choking on petrol fumes as I walk to work. So far in Sierra Leone, the balance seems to have been kept between natural and man-made. It could be seen in household goods too:- traditionally crafted items - a straw broom, sponge or basket live side by side with plastic cups and sandals, and stereo cassette recorders. It surprised me that a friend valued a factory-made, mass-produced bowl (30p from Woolworths here, about £4 there) for its standardisation, and being 'not hand-made'.

My impressions of the work of the link in Bo were twofold. On one hand, few people seemed aware of it, there had been no widespread publicity, few events, and I felt that the committee were over-cautious about involving new people. However, one has to accept that their way of running the link is different. Certainly, within the link, a firm basis does seem to be forming, and the open meeting was well attended, with a general air of enthusiasm - newcomers seemed to enjoy it too. Many of the individuals involved have a very clear vision of the aims and objectives of OWL, and new ideas to contribute. I had to revise my views of the 'aid' side of the link. Although I still think it takes too important a place, it is definitely a useful and tangible benefit, especially to some of the village schools.

I was impressed throughout my visit by evidence of people rising above their immediate problems - the imaginative teaching in classrooms uncluttered with sophisticated aids (but still decorated with scrape of fine artwork), or the dedication of the football team practicing on a rain-soaked pitch. As I watched a friend, a DJ in a local disco, struggling with broken and substandard equipment, I was amazed at his efficiency and resourcefulness in being able to put on such a professional show. I met so many talented artists who had no outlet for their skills within the structure of the country - materials are prohibitively expensive or unobtainable, and job opportunities simply do not exist. It is a frustrating situation and a real problem which forces people to pervert or divert their talent into other channels.

The air of casualness and spontaneity which pervades every aspect of life in Sierra Leone is most striking. It is combined with a remarkable tolerance (apathy?) of problems. Like everywhere else, the muddle of everyday life goes on - the petrol shortage never becomes a desperate crisis. The resultant 'room to manoeuvre', as a friend described it, is obviously very open to abuse. Many people bribe their way to success, perhaps to the disadvantage of more deserving cases with insufficient funds to do the same. On a more sinister level, it is comparatively easy to pay someone to get rid of one's enemies. Corruption of this sort seems most rife among the police and others in 'positions of trust'. In many

aspects of working life, I was sorry to see that white people were privileged. At Bo Government Hospital we were shown straight to a consultant's office and were instantly offered an appointment in the near future - difficult for a Sierra Leonean to do, or an English person in England. It was easy not to queue in the bank if one didn't want to, or to get the best seat on a poda-poda. However, 'room to manoeuvre' can be wonderfully refreshing, at least for a visitor from England. I loved swerving from one side of the road to the other in a ramshackle taxi with a shattered windscreen and an extra seat over the back wheels (contrary to British Safety Regulations, I'm sure), hooting the horn continually at pedestrians, music blaring out, and all windows open, with four people in the front passenger seat. Perhaps we were fortunate not to have an accident. It is a good life if you are strong and lucky.

One of my fondest memories of Bo is of another balcony which I had to pass on the long way back to the reservation. Friends of mine would usually be sitting there, and they would hail me and invite me up to eat with them, or sit and talk as we looked out over the flame trees and zinc roofs of the town.

It is probably obvious from this highly personal account of my visit, and in any case I freely admit that I am totally infatuated with Sierra Leone. Thoughts of palm trees, fireflies, pepper sauce, good music in the streets, and good friends, make it difficult to settle down to life in England. Without the Link, I doubt if I would ever have visited West Africa, and I hope that my new-found knowledge will become a resource which members will be able to use. I expect the Link to continue to flourish, and hope that in the future it will expand to include new sections of the community here and in Bo, and widen in scope to stimulate interest and action in all development issues.

Sheilagh Holmes 16.6.83