

ONE WORLD LINK

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Home from Home - From Leamington to Bo

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Introduction

It was a great joy to renew my acquaintance with friends in Bo on this my third visit to Sierra Leone. Everything seemed so familiar that I felt that I had never been away.

My purpose was to investigate the effect of the One World Link between Bo and Warwick District, at the Bo end. In addition I had to sort out the halt in shipping our supplies from England to Bo because of a new Sierra Leonian law and I hoped to obtain more free air tickets for Sierra Leonians visiting Warwick District. A bonus to the trip was the depth of insight in to Sierra Leonian life which I gained by living in Tikonko (7 miles from Bo) for four weeks in a Sierra Leonian home.

General Impressions

On previous visits I had stayed with Europeans and had lived a similar life to home. However, in Tikonko in the home of Mussa Conteh who visited Leamington several times last year, there was no electricity, water came from a well, the bath was a bucket and the toilet a box latrine. Except for coffee (which was Sierra Leonian), soap and radio batteries we did not need to buy anything from supermarkets. Food - rice, fish, vegetable sauces, mangoes and pineapples, was all locally produced in Tikonko. It was a simple lifestyle, completely satisfying and formed a contrast with the people in Bo and Freetown who buy all sorts of imported goods from supermarkets at very high prices to themselves and using valuable Sierra Leonian foreign exchange. It was even more of a contrast with my own shopping habits in England where the pace of life makes me dependent on mass produced packaged foods.

Particularly significant about my stay in Tikonko was that for a short time I was in a small way part of the community, known to most of the children because I had visited their school (linked with Brookhurst). Thus I was able to feel just a little what life is like in a Third World Community. Mussa Conteh was a fund of information and explained aspects of Sierra Leonian life which had puzzled me. European expatriots had often told me that Sierra Leonians were workshy and doubted their honesty. However, I saw Mussa's work at the Tikonko Agricultural Extension Centre and I spent a lot of time with his health team, the extension officer, the workshop team and so on. They were very hardworking and it was often the Europeans who were sitting around doing nothing. Whenever I quoted comments from Europeans, Mussa and another Sierra Leonian friend Dr. Nuli Lemoh had very reasonable explanations for all sorts

of Sierra Leonian behaviour. For example, walking through Bo one Saturday afternoon, there were crowds of young people following a rather plasticky looking devil, quite different from what I had seen in villages and the crowds seemed quite dazed. I found this a bit frightening and very foreign to my English eyes. Mussa explained that because the young men were born in Bo without village roots, they had not been initiated in the usual way and made up their own way out societies and devils and took drugs and on the whole would compare with our punks and other young rebellious groups. It all seemed to fit into place then. I listened to conversations between the Tikonko staff about the difficulty of convincing farmers that changed farming practices were to their advantage and I shared their triumph when some farmers asked for help and made their own suggestions about using their new rice swamps to the maximum benefit. This made me realise that changing the way of life of a small farmer is no different from trying to convince the people in England to change their lives and be less materialistic and less individualistic, for their own and everybody else's benefit. Humans everywhere resist change. Every day people would walk into the house at Tikonko either early in the morning or when you were eating in the evening. The greetings were friendly and they made themselves at home not a common occurrence in Britain. Very often these people were calling on Mussa because they had problems, money or work problems; or occasionally they would be paying a social visit. There are so many problems that no one person can cope with them all. Mussa said he could do with a hardship fund because he found it so hard to say "I cannot do anything about it".

I was stopped in the road in Bo by one young man who somehow knew my name. He said he had leprosy but had no money and needed 6 leones to go for treatment. When I saw the ½ inch hole in the sole of his foot, full of puss, how could I say no?

There were many discussions and arguments about the individuals right to amass possession when other people were suffering, about children's upbringing, liberal in Britain compared with Sierra Leonian strictness. The rigid rules which restrict a child's questioning its elders and development of ideas in Sierra Leone also produce a more polite and kindly person, which is better? Should there be tractors to grow food for the town's people many of whom are unemployed and live off their working brothers, or should they roll up their sleeves and be made to grow their own food?

My strongest general impression was that life in Sierra Leone was much more relaxed, congenial, happy and caring than at home. Nobody gets hangups about inessential details and moaning is not the order of the day. When a good young friend (22 years old) heard he had a job after a year's searching and then was told he couldn't have it, so he was going to have to go back

to housework and no independence, what did he do? He had a drink and then returned to the family who joked and laughed until he seemed to have laughed all the misery out of his system and he continued to be a contented member of the family hiding any bitterness that he must feel.

When I addressed the membership of the One World Link in Bo I urged them to have more confidence in themselves and not to look to us for leadership because their culture and way of life had so much to teach us and some of them seemed surprised and pleased that Europeans might want to learn from

them.

ONE WORLD LINK IN BO

When I had my first meeting with Joseph Cooper (Secretary) and Mrs. Kamara (Head of Queen of the Rosary School), it was straightaway evident that they were as committed to the Link and as much part of it as any of us at the Warwick District end. There are very real problems of communication in particular and then there is the difficulty of choosing visitors to come to England. On top of this how could they get more members, how could they get enough help to put on exhibitions, set up a resource centre, just even to co-ordinate all the linking people?

Unlike our end of the link where our secretary and myself have time and office resources available for the link, everything is done by volunteers. It was so impressive that with an acute shortage of petrol members often had to walk long distances in the heat after a day's work at school to attend an O.W.L. meeting. But they came and were very keen to see the link advance. They all appreciate the material goods we have sent but more they value the information they can get through the link and the friendships which are building up, They think it is important to understand each other's culture. This was stressed over and over again. 34 people turned up for the last meeting with Sheilagh and myself and showed a very animated interest in the link. Every time I mentioned the sort of information we have about global issues, the abuses by multinational companies e.g. selling high tar cigarettes in Third World Countries, selling 245T pesticides freely when they are known in this country to be dangerous, our Bo friends said they knew nothing about these things. Many of the people I met think England has a certain perfection because it is developed but they really do not know anything about our daily lives, the cost of living, the loneliness that many people experience.

On the whole it was much easier to raise interest and commitment to the Link idea in Bo than it is in Warwick District. One group of women (the Bo Hospital League of Friends) were particularly concerned about some correspondence they had had from here which showed loneliness of life of our old people whose families have moved away and who often rely on pets for company. This is unheard of in Sierra Leone.

The schools which had had actual exchanges were particularly strong with their link. At the Methodist School in Bo the notice board was covered with pictures of their children and the children of Milverton Combined School in Leamington. Simeon Moseray, headteacher of Mamboma School received an overwhelming welcome this month at Alcester Infants School as did

Ann Parker last October at Mamboma. Even without personal exchanges there are more examples of happy relationships between schools. One important aspect of the Link is the moral support we all get for the -ideas we develop about our own and the Bo communities' way of life. There and here if you think along different lines from the norm you can feel isolated, so the feeling of solidarity between the two ends of the link is a very important benefit to us all. One teacher commented "We the Third World people pray that the Anti Nuclear Campaigners will succeed in their effort because any Third World War will spell nothing less than total global destruction. We pray that the voice of reason will prevail".

This is one form of solidarity, Another example which I found very moving was a family in Bo who said that they were having a Mass said for the wife in their link family in Leamington who had been seriously ill.

Dr. Lemoh described the link as a relationship and Father Veal described it as a means for enrichment of human beings. Such intangibles cannot be evaluated but there is no doubt that there is a very happy relationship building up between both link communities and some lives have been enriched. 'What is more many seeds are being sown in the minds of hundreds of children at both ends which should contribute to their wider perception of the world when they are adults.

One practical benefit of the link for the Common Entrance exam children in Bo, was a question "Write a letter to your penfriend in the U.S.A. describing your life in Africa". Well of course the link children had had plenty of practice at this and their teachers were delighted. It was also said the Link gives them a practical use of their English learnt in school but not used at home.

There have been disappointments, some links, like Hannibal Kamara the weaver, the guides and scouts, have never taken off and it was hard for me to explain the lack of interest, here in England. There have also been disappointments in Leamington when letters have gone unanswered. Nevertheless the balance is on the positive side. While I was in Bo a new health care group was started at Bo Hospital, new school links were requested as well as a request for a teaching college link, a sewing circle, church, youth and adult literacy links and even a football team link. Another breakthrough was the fact that the Bo Committee felt

they might be able to offer Sierra Leonian accommodation for visitors from Warwick District. Certainly from my experience this time, this would be a rewarding experience.

CONCLUSION

Sierra Leone's economy is in a critical state, foreign exchange is scarce, petrol is so difficult to obtain that no real planning is possible and this can be demoralising for the grass roots development workers. Despite all this people keep going and the link grows too.

The Minister of Finance gave his blessing to us by making it possible thorough Choithrams for us to continue sending supplies and Sierra Leone Airways gave us a free air ticket. It is up to us in Warwick District to keep this link alive and well for many years to come for all our sakes. As one headteacher said "Long live the One World Link".

Jane Knight

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