

Report from Bruce Knight on his trip to Sierra Leone (16/12/2002 – 6/1/2003)

I had the idea of a "singing" study trip to Bo way back in January 2002. The community choir, Songlines, that I direct, was going from strength to strength, and it had been a long time since I'd been abroad. Sierra Leone was a natural choice - I had recently become aware of the Leamington - Bo link, and I had always had a vague interest in the country because my mother was born in Freetown back in the late 40s. John Myers and Janet Alty were very positive and encouraging from the start, and gradually a plan started to form. I would travel to Bo and learn local Mende songs, which I would later teach to Songlines for a celebratory / awareness-raising concert.

The following months were spent raising funds, and making preparations and contacts. The seed of an idea began (thanks to regular encouraging meetings with John) to sprout into something tangible and positive. Before I knew it, December was looming and I had my flight ticket in my hand. John's visit to Bo in November had the effect of priming everyone before my arrival, so when I eventually came into town there was a lot of interest and anticipation surrounding my visit.

I was, of course, formally welcomed by the Bo OWL committee, but it was not long before events became far more informal. I had been escorted from Freetown by Alfred Kobbah, the musically talented son of Joe Kobbah. I spent a good part of my time in Bo singing with Alfred and Albert Trye, a choir leader from the Bo Methodist Church. Whilst in Bo, I was hosted by Joe and Saffi, ex-OWL chair Mohammed Lapiere, and by Teresa and Josaya Bangali. Many of my happiest moments were spent sitting out in Teresa's yard, singing English and Mende songs with Teresa, her daughter Manjia, and Teresa's best friend Cathryn. Teresa and Cathryn took me under their wing from the start and made sure I was well fed, looked-after, and supplied with enough Star beer.

It was not long that I discovered that most of the singing in

Bo takes place in church. I probably spent more time in church during those 2.5 weeks than I have in my entire life! Teresa, Cathryn, Alfred, Joe, Albert, and later Father Peter Konteh introduced me to several different choirs and performance groups, and I spent plenty of time making recordings, learning songs and brushing up on my Mende pronunciation.

My experiences were diverse to say the least. I felt like a minor celebrity in Bo, and at times the hospitality could become exhausting. As well as learning songs, I had opportunities to teach. I taught each of the choirs a song or two from the Songlines repertoire, and spent New Years Day as the "special guest UK artiste" at Father Konteh's orphanage-picnic. Teaching 300 children the okey-cokey is no mean feat! My most extreme and unforgettable experience was at Bo prison on Christmas morning. I was let in the prison as a guest, where I was delighted to see 100 plus prisoners dancing and singing a Mende hymn. They taught this to me, and I reciprocated with South Africa's rousing "Freedom is Coming". It's rare I've seen men sing with such gusto and feeling!

All in all, the trip was an enriching and eye-opening experience. I was constantly amazed by everyone's kindness and generosity. I've recently started to go through my recordings, and start arranging appropriate songs to teach Songlines. The plan is to share these songs with a wider audience as part of a fund-raising concert on 16th July. So please keep this date free for now, and I'll keep OWL members posted. If you would like to see Songlines in action before this, you may want to come to their Warwick concert on Saturday March 22nd. They'll be singing all manner of worldwide harmony songs, and this year are delighted to be joined by Coventry's Worldsong community choir. Tickets cost £5 and are available from the Bridge House (01926 776438). Last year's gig sold out so you might need to book early.