# A West African Memoir

**Two years as a VSO in Freetown**

*Jane Leyland*

*Africa, you were once just a name to me,*
*But now you lie before me with sombre green challenge ....*
*Go up country, they said,*
*To see the real Africa.....*
*Is this all you are?*
*This long uneven red road, this occasional succession....*
*Of huddled mud heaps of four mud walls....*

*Excerpts from "The Meaning of Africa" Abioseh Nicol* [1]

Lagos, August 1966

**Foreword.**

In 1965, at the age of 22, I joined VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) and was sent to Freetown, in Sierra Leone, to teach geography at a small Catholic convent school for girls. Fifty years on I was reading the letters written to my great great grandmother by her brother, describing his arrival in New Zealand back in 1841. I found the descriptions of the world back then fascinating and it occurred to me that my own grandchildren and great-grandchildren might find my story interesting. They would have little idea of what the world was like in the 1960s, before the age of instant communication.

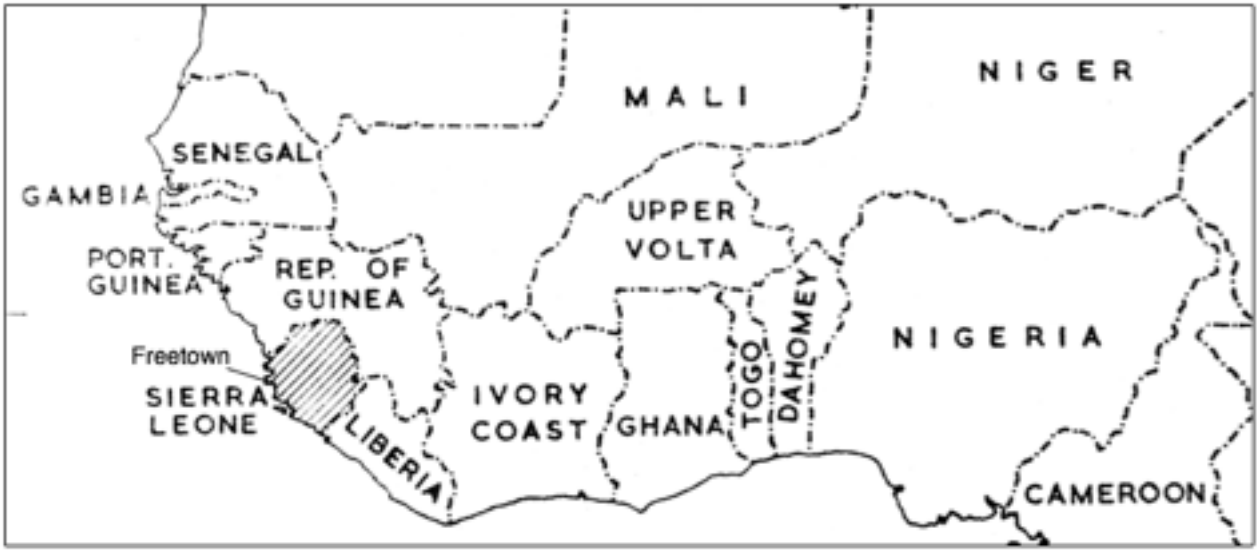
Memory is notoriously unreliable, but I was lucky to still have the very scrappy diary that I had kept at the time, and all the letters that I wrote home to my parents. I have also made use of Wikipedia to fill out the picture of some of the places I visited, the cultures and crafts that I came across, and to fill in the details of the historical and political background to some of the events that I witnessed.

After so many years I have forgotten the names of many of the people I met. I have no problem with those I knew well, and others are mentioned in my diary and letters home. Where it helps the telling of the story I have made some up. In particular, I don't

remember the name of the Yalunka chief we stayed with in Falaba so I have called him Sewa, after his famed ancestor Manga Sewa.

Although I took a camera with me to Sierra Leone I didn't take many photos. Those that I did are not well focused, and generally overexposed. Bryan took some better ones that I have used where appropriate. As they had all deteriorated and become mildewed over the years I have done my best to clean them up using Photoshop Express, and I have also included some photos downloaded from the Internet, and some postcards of West Africa that I bought at the time, to help illustrate my story.

Jane Leyland
May, 2015




Sierra Leone in West Africa

## Chapter 1. Freetown

It's hard to remember what I had expected. I know I had an image of what Africa would be like but that was gone the moment the plane landed.

I flew from London to Freetown in a Britannia, the large, turbo prop aircraft of that era, and got my first glimpse of Africa sitting beside the pilot in the cockpit, as we crossed the coast of Morocco. Soon after that I returned to my seat and dozed for the next four hours as we droned over the Sahara. My next glimpse was as the plane started to descend, and the land below began to emerge from the haze. At first there was just sparse scrub, then the landscape gradually greened, and the occasional village appeared as we flew further and further south. By the time we came in to land we were over rain forest.

The noise and the heat hit me as the doors of the plane opened and we climbed down on to the sweltering tarmac. I had no idea nature could be so noisy. The shrieking of the cicadas[1] was louder even than the sound of the plane's engines still ringing in my ears. I followed the other passengers through Customs and Immigration and out to the coach that was waiting to take us the last few miles into Freetown.

My first impression of Africa was of a flat, straight road through dusty scrub. I remember being surprised by the number of people walking along the road as I could see no sign of human habitation.

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[1] Having grown up in England I had never encountered cicadas before.

Mostly men, all black of course, most in faded khaki shorts and shirts, and many with heavy loads balanced on their heads. Others pushed rickety old bicycles. Of the few women we passed many had babies strapped to their backs, some were bare breasted, and they nearly all had loads on their heads.

I got my first glimpse of Freetown, my home for the next two years, when we reached a wide estuary, some three or four miles across. There it stood on the far shore, nestling under the hills of the peninsula. Sierra Leone - Lion Mountain.

*My first glimpse of Freetown*

We crossed the estuary on a dilapidated, rusty ferry and drove the last few miles into town. As we approached the centre the road was lined with shop-houses with their wide, open fronts, their security grilles pulled back over folded blue doors. There were lots of people now and I noted in my diary the very next day:

> *The very first thing that impressed me was the beautiful posture of the Africans, and their firm purposeful stride, with arms swinging easily at their sides. And how tall, elegant and good looking they are.*

They were such good looking people. Tall and slim, with smooth oval features, and brown rather than black skins. Many of the men wore Moslem gowns and skull caps; others close fitting trousers or shorts, a loose shirt and sandals. The women wore colourful *lappas*[2] and elaborately wrapped head scarves, or floral 'Mother Hubbard' dresses. Many had babies on their backs, and baskets or bundles on their heads. And, even here in town, some were bare breasted.

*Kissi Road*

We arrived in the centre of town, at the old cotton tree, where I was met by Mother Theresa, the principal of St Joseph's Convent Secondary School for Girls where I was to teach for the next two years. I had never met or talked to a nun before and I was overawed

[2] Lengths of cloth wrapped around to form a skirt, like a lava-lava.

by her spotless white habit and wimple, but she was very friendly and soon put me at ease. With her was Duncan, the British Council representative, who was to be my mentor and contact with VSO. After introducing themselves and enquiring about my trip Mother Theresa took me straight out to the house that I was to share with two others: Sandy was an American Peace Corp volunteer who taught Physical Education; and Eve, an English contract teacher who taught French.

I had joined VSO a year after graduating with a degree in geography. I had spent the intervening year in a job in market research, in London, that had turned out to be not only excruciatingly boring but a dead end as well. When my boyfriend of four years unexpectedly dumped me, and after I had got over the worst of the heartbreak, I decided to quit my job and do something that I had wanted to do ever since a friend had come back from being a VSO in Nigeria and told me all about it. As it was September I had missed the main intake of volunteers, but I was interviewed and accepted anyway, and given six weeks to prepare for my departure - to give notice at my job, collect together a tropical wardrobe, get a new passport, and get all the injections that I needed.

In 1965 VSO still took new graduates to fill vacancies in secondary schools in countries like Sierra Leone. A few years earlier they had even taken school leavers to teach in primary schools, but by 1965 Sierra Leone's teachers college was turning out enough graduates to staff their primary schools, and they only needed help filling the gaps in their secondary schools.

The normal VSO term was one year, from early September to late July the following year, to coincide with the school year. Because I

was a late applicant I arrived after the main group and, although I didn't know it at the time, I was to stay for two years. When the time came to decide, in early December, I hadn't been there very long, and was far from ready to think of going home.

Why Sierra Leone? I was sent there. As a late comer I had no choice. Had I had a choice I probably would have chosen somewhere in South East Asia or East Africa, places I knew something about from books and from family friends who had lived and worked there. I had learned about West Africa from Geography classes and text books, and knew a bit about Nigeria and Ghana, but nothing of Sierra Leone. I think I had to look it up in an atlas.

It must have been a Friday when I arrived because I remember that I had the weekend to recover from my journey and get used to the heat. The heat! It was overwhelming - energy sapping. How could one live a normal life, and find the energy to teach in that heat and suffocating humidity? And the ceaseless noise. The cicadas in the daytime replaced by crickets and the croaking of bull frogs at night. But I must have got used to it, because I don't remember noticing the noise or the heat after those first few days.

Our house, which was about a hundred yards from the school compound, stood on a rutted, red laterite[3] road - muddy in the wet season and dusty in the dry. Like all roads in Freetown, it had huge storm drains on either side. These were about six feet deep and four feet wide, and in the rainy season they were barely big enough. It

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[3] Laterites are red soils, rich in iron, that are characteristic in hot, wet tropical areas. They are formed by prolonged chemical weathering of the underlying rock.

was said that people sometimes drowned in them. In the dry season they tended to collect rubbish and become smelly as men often peed in them.

On one side of us there was a wooden Creole house, and on the other a big mango tree and a rough track that led to a compound at the back where several Temne[4] families lived in tin shacks. At night we could see the glow of their cooking fires and hear the murmur of their conversation and sometimes, at the weekends, there was drumming and singing. Across the road were the dusty playing fields of FSSG (Freetown Secondary School for Girls).

*Our house*

The house stood on poles above the ground, with a small garage underneath. In the old days it was believed that malaria was caused by the "miasma" that settled near the ground, and although the theory was discounted in the 19th century, houses in Freetown were often

[4] One of the dominant tribes in Sierra Leone.

still built above ground level. It had the advantage of allowing air to circulate underneath, giving some cooling effect. The house was sparsely furnished, with bare polished concrete floors, and windows that had *tief*[5] bars like all windows in Freetown. The bars were spaced so that no *tief man*[6] could climb through. Each of the four bedrooms had an iron bedstead with a frame for a mosquito net, a small dressing table and a free standing wardrobe. We had running cold water that had to be boiled for five minutes and filtered for drinking, and no fans or air conditioning.

We had a houseboy, Ibrahim, a young Fula boy from Guinea who spoke, read and wrote French, and also read English though he was very reluctant to speak it. For £12 a month he did all the housework: cleaning, cooking and laundry. I commented in a letter home:

> *The situation in Guinea must be chronic if boys like that have to come here to take jobs like this.*

He did the laundry in the bath, in cold water, tramping it with his feet, and then hung it out to dry on a line strung up under the house. In the rainy season nothing dried, and even in the dry season everything, especially the tea towels, had to be ironed to make sure that they were properly dry, and to kill off any lingering germs and mildew.

We also had a night watchman who arrived at dusk and spent the night under the house curled up on an old oil drum, armed against *tief men* with a machete. I'm not sure how effective he was as one

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[5] "Thief bars". Thieving was a major problem in Freetown.

[6] Burglar.

day he came to us begging: "*You borrow me five pounds*". When asked what it was for he replied that it was for a new machete. When we asked what had happened to the old one, he replied: "*De body dun tief um*"![7]

I had arrived in Freetown in late October, at the end of the rainy season, and although it didn't rain, the humidity was still very high. Nothing dried properly, puddles stood everywhere and everything went mouldy. Then, one morning in November, Sandy came to the breakfast table and announced: "The Harmattan has come". The Harmattan is a hot dry wind that blows from the Sahara for about six months of the year in Freetown and, sure enough, by lunchtime all the puddles in the road outside the house had dried up, our towels were dry for the first time, and for the next six months the sun shone from a cloudless blue sky.

A few days after I arrived Sandy and Eve, went into town in Eve's rattly little 'deux cheveux'[8] to do the weekly shopping. I followed on my mobylette, a French motorised bicycle that VSO had supplied. There were two small supermarkets in Freetown: Freetown Cold Storage which specialised in chilled and frozen goods imported from Europe; and the other which usually had a better selection of general groceries. We often had to go to both to get everything we needed, and it wasn't unusual for both stores to have run out of basics such as flour, sugar, butter, soap and toilet paper, and on such occasions we just had to make do until the next ship came in.

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[7] "Somebody stole it"

[8] A post-war, two door Citroen, with a canvas roof and side panels

When we parked outside either of the supermarkets we would usually be besieged by little boys offering to look after our vehicle for a "*dash*"[9]. Woe betide you if you did't choose one of them because, if you didn't, you might come out to find that your tires had been let down, or slashed. Before we left we would often be surrounded by girls clamouring to sell us bananas, oranges or whatever was in season.

We preferred to go down to the Susan's Bay market for our fruit and vegetables. It was situated at the other end of town, down by the port and the railway station, and was approached along a narrow street that was always crowded with hawkers. Skinny Fula men in blue gowns hawked all sorts of things from zips and biros, to underwear and children's clothes, from tiny baskets. Women sat on the bare ground with their goods displayed in front of them on wide, flat baskets, or on pieces of faded cloth that they had laid out on the ground. Tiny pyramids of onions, potatoes, tomatoes, and groundnuts in their shells, as well as pineapples, pawpaw, yams and bunches of sprouted coconuts.

Inside the bustling, noisy market building buxom mammies presided over large, new, white painted, concrete tables that were laden with better quality produce. Huge red beefsteak tomatoes, and glossy green bell peppers; shiny purple 'garden eggs'[10], and green 'butter pears'[11]. Some stalls displayed baskets with all shapes, sizes and colours of chilli peppers. Green, red and yellow ones; long thin ones and tiny fiery red ones.

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9 A tip

10 Aubergines

11 Avocados

Other stalls sold skinny lettuces, cabbages and potato leaves, long green cucumbers as well as pale round apple ones. People here bartered for everything, and the mammies vied for our attentions as we passed as few Europeans came here and we weren't expected to barter. "White man, white man. I gi you good price today" . "That lady she no good. She go cheat you!"

In another section the stalls were piled with fruit. Huge bunches of bananas: long yellow ones, large fat green ones for cooking, and tiny yellow ladies fingers. I had no idea that there were so many different types of bananas. Other stalls displayed green oranges, stringy green mangroves, large yellow pawpaw, coconuts and prickly pineapple still with their spiny green tops

At the far end of the building there was a basket market, and beyond, in another building overlooking Susan's Bay, butchers chopped stringy meat off fly covered carcasses. In one corner you could buy bags of imported, cheap chickens' feet, pigs' trotters and pigs' ears. We seldom went in there as a stench was terrible. We got our meat from the nuns, who were somehow able to access much better quality. Instead we often passed along a narrow alley at the side of the building that was always strewn with litter and rotting vegetables and stank of dirty drains, to another large, open market area beyond.

Here women sold rice, yams, cassava, potato leaves, salt and palm oil from rickety trestle tables. The mammies here were less pushy and more friendly. They seldom saw Europeans here and they were always pleased to see us. Beyond, the market straggled on down the main railway line, and further along you could buy cheap cloth, hurricane lamps, cheap tin cutlery and crockery, and locally made pots and baskets. The hawkers wares were laid out along the railway

*Dovecote market*

*Susan's Bay*

tracks, and when the train came through two or three times each day everything had to be cleared off to let it pass.

When we'd finished in the market that first day we went back to the main street to one of the Lebanese shops. These shops were stuffed with bolts of imported cloth - generally of better quality and more expensive than you could buy in the market - imported clothing, hurricane lamps and all sorts of household goods and appliances. In some shops you could find condensed milk, tinned margarine and ghee, which would do if there was no butter available in the

supermarkets. A few weeks later I even bought myself a very good Dunlop tennis racket from one of them.

That first day Eve wanted some fabric for a new dress, so we went to her friend, Darwish's shop. Darwish greeted us effusively and offered us tiny cups of sweet Turkish coffee and glasses of iced water, and he sent a boy out for an ice cold Coke for Sandy. The formalities completed he pulled out rolls of cloth for Eve to examine. Once she had chosen she showed Darwish a dress that she wanted copied, and he called in the African tailor who sat with his old treadle machine set up on the pavement outside the shop, and passed Eve's instructions to him in Krio[12]. The new dress would be ready the next day.

If we had no more shopping to do we would often head off to the bank to cool off in the air conditioning before heading home.

Sometimes traders came to our door. One was a young girl who came every week balancing a wide, flat basket on her head. She sold us bananas, avocados, green oranges and mangos - whatever was in season. Dressed in a faded, torn frock that was too small to do up at the back, she would wearily climb the steps to our front door, and carefully lower the heavy basket on to the door step, wipe the sweat off her face and ask for drink of water.

"See, good banana. One one cent. Eh bo! I gi you good price"

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[12] The language of the Creoles of Freetown, and the *lingua franca* in Sierra Leone.

For someone who had never been to school she was very quick with her figures. Sometimes, if she had oranges, she would peel one for us with the sharp knife that she always carried, cutting off a thin layer of the green skin, but leaving the pith[13]. She would then cut a neat square hole in the top, push in a sugar lump, and hand it to us on the tip of the knife. We would suck the juice through the sugar lump. It was sweet and refreshing. When we'd finished, and we'd bought what we needed, she would wind the ragged cloth back onto her head, lift her heavy basket up again, and trudge on to the next house.

The trader I most looked forward to was the old Fula[14] who arrived at our door two or three times a year with a huge cloth wrapped bundle on his head and another slung over his shoulder. He would come into our sitting room, spread the cloth out on the floor and lay everything out. Ebony heads and mahogany animals, deer skin mats, camel leather poufs with python skin decorations, and delicate 24 carat gold pendants and ear rings, wrapped in scraps of cloth, from the Congo. He told us that he traded all the way up and down the coast from the Congo to Senegal. I bought my most treasured souvenirs from him. If we ever questioned him about the ebony, and suggested it might be some cheaper wood blackened with shoe polish, he would indignantly demand a match. If it was a cheaper wood, he explained, the shoe polish would sizzle and the wood would eventually smoulder, whereas ebony would not burn or show any ill effects. Although he was very black, and clearly Fula in physique and dress, he claimed to have Scottish ancestry, and perhaps that explained his extraordinary blue eyes.

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[13] The green skin would sting your lips as you sucked the juice. Try it!

[14] A tribe found all along the West African coast. Traditionally nomadic herdsmen, many had become traders

That first weekend Eve and Sandy went down to the beach in Eve's little car, and once again I followed on my mobylette. Lumley Beach was the most beautiful beach I had ever seen, and it soon became my favourite place to go whenever I had time after school, and at weekends.

*Lumley Beach*

It was a mile of glistening white sand that stretched the length of a narrow spit to the rocky promontory at the northern end. It was fringed with low sand dunes, small groves of casuarina and palm tree. We would swim in the cool, gentle surf. It was always so refreshing after a hot, busy, sticky afternoon in the classroom. Sometimes we would walk the length of the beach and, if we had time, scramble up the rocks and explore the headland, and the shell of the half finished hotel that stood there, abandoned, overlooking the beach and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Sometimes we would stay there to watch the sun setting red over the horizon.

If we were lucky we would find a fishing boat pulled up on the beach. These were heavily, built narrow, wooden boats, about five metres long, often with an outboard motor at the back. Half a dozen fishermen would have pushed off earlier that afternoon laying out their long net in a semi circle and bringing it back to the shore. They would then beach the boat and start pulling in the net. It took about two hours to pull in a full net.

By then people would have gathered; the men helping to pull on the

*A fishing boat pulled up on Lumley Beach*

long ropes, the women watching and waiting with their large enamel bowls, until the great bag of the net began to emerge from the sea, and we could see the fish glistening through the mesh. As the fish were untangled from the net the women would descend to buy what they needed for their evening meal, straight from the fishermen. If we had some money with us we'd buy one too, and ask one of the men to gut it and scale it for us with his huge machete, and we'd take it home for our dinner.

The beach was some five or six miles from our house, and the road there wound steeply down into several deep gullies. In the first one, just beyond the school compound, women and girls were often doing their laundry. We'd see them standing, bare to the waist, scrubbing their clothes in pools in the rocky stream.

*Men doing their laundry*

Others would be beating their clothes on the rocks, suds flying. Some would be bathing and scrubbing their hair, tipping buckets of water over each others, squealing and splashing with delight. The surrounding rocks were usually a colourful patchwork of clothes laid out to dry. Sometimes, when Sandy and I drove passed after school, some of the young girls would stop to wave and shout out to us.

"Mees Marteen, Mees Tomtin[15]!" Although we didn't recognise them out of their school uniforms they must have been some of our students.

It wasn't unusual for the traffic to come to a stand still in one of the gullies. Two mammy wagons would have met, head on, in the middle of the single lane bridge, even though they could have seen each other coming down the far side. Sometimes the drivers would just sit there glaring at each other, at others they would climb out of their cabs and start shouting at each other. Passengers would spill out of the wagons, and more people would emerge from the surrounding bush to join in the general chaos. A queue of cars would build up behind the lorries on both sides. Tempers would become frayed, until eventually one of the drivers would give in and back off the bridge, allowing the traffic to move again.

Mammy wagons are the most common form of native transport in Sierra Leone and most of West Africa. Truck chassis are imported and the truck bed and bodywork are built locally, depending on the use to which it is to be put. They are usually brightly painted and with mottos or prayers such as "In God we Trust" or "God's time is better". Many did not have working hand brakes and it was the job of the little boy on the back to leap off whenever the truck stopped and put a rock under the back wheel. Some say they are called mammy wagons because they were originally used to carry mammies to market "along with hens, goats, yams, peppers, tomatoes… and, of course, babies tied with wrappers to their mother's back". The other story I heard was that traditionally they

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[15] They couldn't pronounce my surname - Thornton.

were all owned and operated by women as women generally manage


*A mammy wagon*

the logistics in West Africa, whilst their menfolk palaver.

By the time I arrived in late October Eve had been in Freetown for fourteen months, and had an established circle of expatriate friends. Sandy had been quickly absorbed into the group, and the two of them lived a hectic social life of dinner parties and beach picnics. I had no interest in joining in with them. I wanted to get to know Africans and learn how they lived, and I knew that if I became absorbed in the expatriate community I would have no chance of meeting the locals. I wrote angrily in my diary:

*I came to get away, to get away from the incessant social of London, and from the dullness of England and the English. I thought that people who lived out of England must be more interesting and different, and with a purpose. But I think I was wrong. The English here seem duller than ever - "expatriates" - I know what that means now. Here we sit in the best jobs, on the whole only mediocre people, who wouldn't make the grade at home, and the general atmosphere at the African is inferior.*

In reality it was very hard to get to know the local Africans. The few I did get to know were western educated, professional Creole men. And apart from Mrs Scott, a Creole teacher at school, I didn't get to know any women. We were just too different. My friends were the other volunteers and some of the young Lebanese traders who liked to take us girls out for a drink or dinner at one of the nightclubs on a Saturday night. There were very few single white women in Freetown, and most of these young men eventually either went 'home' to get married, or had a women chosen for them by their families 'back home' and sent out to them.

One I saw quite a lot of that first year was Malik. He would take me to the Cape Club at the end of Lumley Beach on a Saturday night, and sometimes after school we would play tennis up at Hill Station. I told my parents in a letter home:

*I've found a very nice Lebanese boyfriend who feeds me when required, and is very useful for getting things, and getting things done.*


**Sierra Leone**

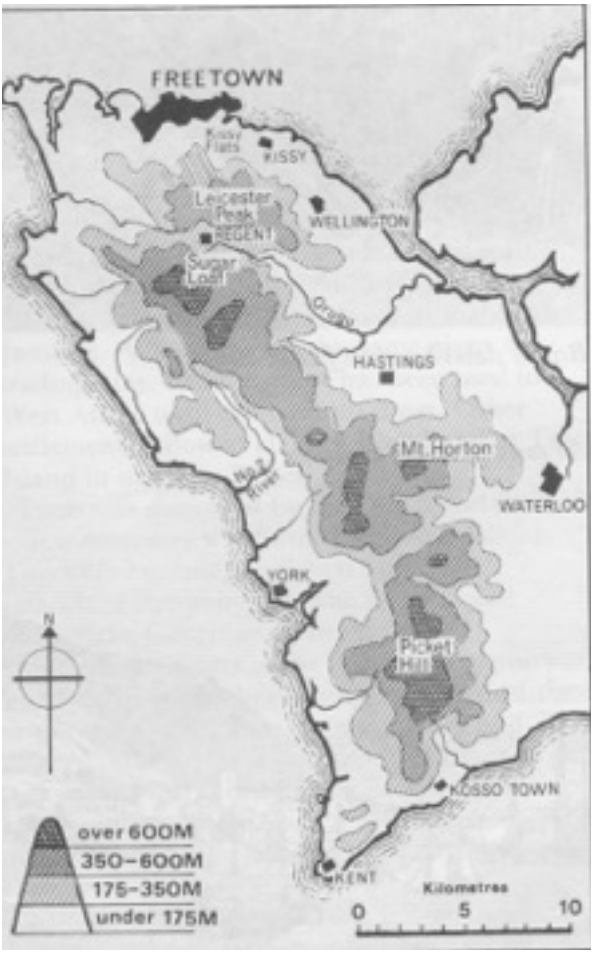
## Chapter 2. Some background information about Sierra Leone and Freetown

Sierra Leone is a small country on the coast of West Africa, almost completely surrounded on the north and north-east by Guinea, and with Liberia to the south-east. Geographically it can be divided into three main areas: the Freetown Peninsula, the flat, swampy lowlands of the South West, and the higher savannah of the north-east. Northern Sierra Leone is the highest point in West Africa west of the mountains of Cameroon, and it is the source of many north flowing tributaries of the Niger River. These highlands are the worn down remnants of the ancient Gondwanaland continent, which explains Sierra Leone's huge mineral resources which include diamonds, gold, tin, iron ore, bauxite and rutile.

Despite its huge mineral wealth Sierra Leone remains one of the poorest countries in the world, due mainly to bad management and corruption.

Situated between 7° and 10° north of the Equator the country has two seasons: the wet season, between May and October, when the south-west monsoon winds blow from the Atlantic; and the dry when the Harmattan, the hot dry wind from the Sahara, blows.

There are two main tribal groups in the country, the Mende and Temne, but there are also numerous other tribal groups - Limba, Susu, Fula, Yalunka to name a few, each with their own language.




**The Freetown Peninsula**

Freetown, the capital, is situated on the northern coast of the Freetown Peninsula, a steep, jungle clad mountain range, about twenty miles long and ten miles wide, that stands, almost an island, off the flat, swampy coast of the country. It is just 8° north of the Equator and, as its mountains block the monsoon winds it receives up to three hundred inches of rain each year, making it one of the wettest places in the world.

The town was founded in the 1792 when a thousand freed slaves were repatriated from Nova Scotia. Another ship bought *"four hundred 'Black Poor' who were living in and around London, some sixty nondescript white women and a few white men"*[16]. Later they were joined by '*a vast number*' of slaves freed from ships captured off the coast of West Africa. Add to that mix the ex-patriate English administrators and missionaries, many of whom formed informal 'marriages' with local Creole women and had families that they left behind when they returned to England at the end of their service.

The Creoles of Freetown were the descendants of these diverse people. Arthur Porter[17], a Creole himself, writes that "*Most of the Negro Settlers ..... had lost their African cultural heritage and had developed new habits to meet the complex situations in the western world. They had evolved a lingua franca composed predominantly of English words, and many answered to western names. They thus constituted a small but significant class of black settlers with values and patterns of behaviour different from those of the surrounding tribal Africans*".

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[16] "Creoledom". Arthur D. Porter, 1963. P. 10

[17] Ibid. P. 11

In the 18th and 19th centuries West Africa was known as "the white man's grave" as 50% of the Europeans who went there died of malaria within the first year of their arrival, and about 10% each year thereafter. It had generally been believed that Africans were immune to malaria so it came as some surprise to the early colonists when the freed slaves died at the same rate as the Europeans. What we now know is that many African children die of malaria in infancy, and those who survive into adulthood have developed a certain amount of resistance. They still get it, but their bouts are generally much milder. By the time I was in Freetown a lot of work had been done to eradicate the disease. Swamps around the town had been drained, and likely breeding places were sprayed regularly. Even so it was very important for us to take our malaria pills, and to sleep either under a mosquito net or in air-conditioning.

As soon as transport improved in the early 20th century the few Europeans living in Freetown moved up into the hills behind the town, to get above the malarial lowlands. Up until then the Europeans and Creoles had lived closely together and intermingled, but once the Europeans moved up to the new Hill Station the two communities became separate.

The oldest part of Freetown, developed in the late 18th century for the returning slaves, is laid out in a grid iron pattern of wide streets, bounded on the south side by the hills and Fort Thornton, and now the location of the Law Courts, and on the north-west by the harbour and the wharf. The modern port is to the east of the old wharf. Native settlements developed higgledy-piggledy along the roads that ran east and west along the peninsula from the original settlement. By 1966 a commercial centre had developed to the east of the old town and ribbons of Lebanese and Indian traders had established

themselves along Kissi Road and Kroo Town Road to the east and west.

Traditional Creole houses are well spaced, two-storey wooden buildings with a wide veranda around the second story, reminiscent of Creole architecture in New Orleans. The family generally lives upstairs, and the downstairs area is used as a store room, shop or workshop.

*Central Freetown; circa. 1970*

In the 1800's British and Creole influence didn't extend much beyond the peninsula. The borders of the country only took shape in 1895 when the British and the French agreed on the border with Guinea, but relations between the Creoles of the peninsula and the disparate tribal groups of the Colony were antagonistic until Sir Milton Margai, a Temne, managed to bring the two sides together to achieve independence in 1960. When Sir Milton died in 1964 his

half brother, Albert, was appointed Prime Minister. Unlike his brother, Albert was not popular and increasingly resorted to authoritarian rule. I remember that whenever he drove past our school the road would be cleared of traffic ahead of him and his limousine would be escorted by a cavalcade of motor bikes and smart black cars.

*Krutown Road*

In recent times there have been large migrations of tribal people into Freetown: Mende, Temne, Susu, Yalunka, Fula, Kru and many more. Some have married into Creole society, but most live in slums on the edges of society. There are also many "Lebanese" traders - Lebanese, Syrian, Armenian, some of whom have settled and married African women, others who keep their close links with 'home', and marry women found for them back in their home countries. There are also a few Indian traders. As a result of all these migrations there

are a multitude of languages spoken in Freetown, but the lingua franca is Krio, the language of the Creoles.

The migration of tribal people into the Freetown area led to huge disparities in wealth, leading to all sorts of social problems. The one that effected us most was burglary. Hence the need for *tief* bars and a night watchman. We heard tales of bold break-ins, particularly in houses with air conditioning where any sound was muffled. We were told that it was not generally a good idea to confront *tiefmen*, or try to catch them, however small they were as, not only might they be armed with a knife, but their bodies were usually well oiled, making them too slippery to hold on to, and they would often have sharp hooks in their hair. Beside breaking in, another common method used by burglars was to use a long pole with a hook on the end to 'fish' through the *tief* bars. The threat of prison was no deterrent as it guaranteed them regular meals and a bed.

Education levels were still very low when I was there in the mid-1960s. The national literacy rate was around 2%. Although Fourah Bay College had been established as early as 1827, "for the training of teachers and missionaries", no more colleges of further education were established in the country until 1963. By 1965 there was still a huge shortage of teachers, particularly in secondary schools. None of the native teachers at St Joseph's had higher than sixth form education, and most had only school certificate. The gap was filled by contract teachers, mostly from the UK, and volunteers such as Peace Corps and VSO.

As VSO's we were employed, and paid, by the Sierra Leone government. Although we were paid more than the highest-paid native teacher, we got only a fraction of what the contract teachers received, as they were paid at UK rates.

Unlike VSO, Peace Corps volunteered for two years. Their salaries were paid by the US government, and they got about half of what we got but, at the same time, they had money paid into their bank accounts back in the USA. To make up for the inadequate diet that was all they could afford, and to keep them healthy, they were fed vitamins each week. The idea at the time was that they should live like the natives, and whilst I was there fridges were taken away from Peace Corps houses. Fortunately, as we were a mixed household of volunteers and contract teachers, ours wasn't.

Despite these very poor conditions many of the Peace Corps boys I knew stayed for a second two-year term, preferring their life in Sierra Leone to the very real possibility of being drafted to fight in Vietnam.

## Chapter 3. Teaching

"Assume they know nothing. Teach them everything right from the beginning, and don't be disappointed if they don't do as well as you expected". That was how Mother Theresa introduced me to teaching at St Joseph's.

St Joseph's was a small convent secondary school, taking girls from the First Form through to the Fifth Form. It was one of four girls' secondary schools in Freetown, the smallest, and the only one without a sixth form. Most of the pupils were day girls, but there was also a small boarding department where some of the girls from 'up country' lived. Most were Catholic, but by no means all. The school complex included two two-storey blocks of classrooms and the convent building, which also housed the boarders, all arranged around a dusty playground. There was also a small primary school housed in two wooden buildings at the compound gate. We could often hear the children chanting their lessons and their times tables. In the dry season there were usually several mammies sitting on the bare ground outside these rooms selling peeled oranges and greasy snacks wrapped in banana leaves. They would sit there all day, gossiping and feeding their babies whilst their toddlers played in the dust around them. Sometimes one of the woman would be feeding two babies, one on each breast. The bigger children would dash up to us as we passed calling "*White man. White man*", or "*White man, how de body*?"[18], to which we would reply: "*Fine-o*".

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[18] Krio for "How are you?"

That first day I was confronted with my form class of thirty four black faces. They all looked exactly the same. How would I ever get to tell them apart? Of course, I did. Within a few days I began to see that there was the same range of physical characteristics, abilities and personalities as in any group of children. Some were very black, others dark brown; some were tidy, their school uniforms neatly starched and ironed; others had faded, ragged, ill fitting uniforms. Some had neatly plaited hair, others had loose frizzy curls. Some were much older, bigger and more mature than the rest as they had started school late. Some were bright and forthcoming, while others hid in the back of the class. And they all smelled of woodsmoke.

There were Creoles in the class with wonderful Victorian names like Eugenia, Adriana and Victoriana. The smallest and blackest girl was called Daisy Smith. The Creoles were Christian, mostly Catholic, the girls from 'up-country' were Catholic or Moslem, and one girl claimed to be an animist. There were five languages regularly spoken in my classroom, and several girls were the sole speaker of their mother tongue. They all spoke Krio, and very basic English. Unfortunately it was a very different version of English than the one I speak, and at first they couldn't understand me any better than I could understand them.

I had problems understanding the family relationships among the girls. Many said they were 'sisters' or 'cousins', but they used those terms in a much broader sense than I was used to. As half of Sierra Leone's population is Moslem, and polygamy is common, a family could consist of a man with up to four wives, and their children, and possibly some concubines and their children as well, so 'sisters' in the same class, with the same father but different mothers were not unusual. There were also 'sisters' in the same class with widely

differing ages. This was explained by the fact that some children started school late, so you could have a fifteen year old in the First Form along with her twelve year old sister. There were two girls in my 2nd Form class who claimed to be 'twins', but they looked very different and had different surnames. I never did manage to to figure that one out.

In my first year I was form teacher to Form 11, the top stream. I took them for English, Maths and Geography. I also took Form 21 for English, Maths and Geography, and Form 41 for Geography.

After my first week of teaching I wrote in my diary:

> *I've just survived my first week of teaching. The text books they use are terrible; they have been taught by reading through lousy text books. They don't understand anything. They have no concept of 'how?' or 'why?'. I haven't made any real contact with the girls in the first form yet, although I'm their form mistress and have taken them seven times. It's distressing seeing all those blank faces. I'm just beginning to appreciate how little they actually understand. The text books they have are quite unsuitable. The second chapter in their English Literature text book is a play about Hereward the Wake, and Olde England. Poor kids, they don't even understand English, even less can they imagine "the courtyard of Weeting Castle at Brandon in Suffolk"! No wonder they never get through their 'O' levels.*

I soon realised that they had been taught to memorise things "parrot fashion", and that they understood almost nothing of what they were learning. They didn't expect to associate either "meaning" or "enjoyment" with school work. Hence many were listless and apathetic.

In order to try to make things more meaningful to them I got my First form class to write something about themselves, and then about their mothers, thinking that writing about something so familiar would make more sense to them. Even then very few seemed to make links with the real world. Most of them wrote something along the line of: "My mother is very fair". Victoriana, one of the darkest girls in the class, wrote: "My mother is very black, and she has lots of boyfriends"! From that exercise I learned how much most of them valued "fair" skins!

I soon abandoned their set textbook and began to read them some simple Sierra Leone fairytales from a book I had found in the local bookshop. As a result some of them did begin to write more meaningful answers to the comprehension questions I set them.

Some time later we were reading Cinderella so, to help them understand it, I got them to act it out. To begin with their reading was very stilted, but as they got into the story things improved.

> *We started with reading ability almost zero. When we went through the play today some reading was really good. I was particularly delighted with Daisy. She showed promise and interest straight away. So today I asked her to be producer, and explained her task to*

*her. She was great - prompting and criticising the others. Her intonation showed real appreciation of the text.*

As there were so few books available, other than the set text books which were no inducement to reading for enjoyment, I wrote home asking my mother to collect some books that would be more appropriate to the age of the children I was teaching. She eventually sent me my brother's collection of old Noddy books, which I then lent to the girls. To my delight some of them read right through them, and then went on to the town library and borrowed other Enid Blyton books. Having discovered the joy of reading, a few went on to borrow other books as well. It was noticeable that these girls made rapid improvement not only in English but in all their other subjects as well. At last English and the written word was becoming meaningful and enjoyable to them.

Sometime in my second year a professor of English from London University came out to Freetown to give some lectures at Fourah Bay University. I was invited to a reception at the British Council to meet him, and I proudly told him of my success with the Noddy books. He was appalled and told me in no uncertain terms that the girls would be better off reading nothing than reading Enid Blyton! I was appalled by his arrogance.

I also took the First form for geography. When I arrived they were studying sheep farming in Australia. They had been taught by reading aloud from their text book, and learning the information by rote. A few questions made it clear that it had no meaning to them at all. I also found that they had no understanding of maps, and couldn't even find Africa, let alone in Australia, on a world map.

The fact that the school didn't possess a single atlas, wall map or globe didn't help! As I wanted geography to become interesting and meaningful to them I quickly switched to a study of Sierra Leone and West Africa.

How little they understood, or expected to understand, was underlined for me sometime during my second year when I was asked to give some extra coaching to two of my third form students. Damvanti and Clare were two Punjabi cousins. Damvanti struggled in class and she was unlikely to do well in her end of year exams. Clare, on the other hand, was quite bright. Although third form exams weren't important in the long term it was important to Damvanti's mother, Mrs Mahboobani that she did well. I remember trying to explain things to the girls so that it would make sense to them thereby, I thought, making it easier for them to learn. But after a few sessions Clare said to me: "Don't worry about understanding, Miss Tomtin. Just tell us the pages in the book and we will learn them". That comment really brought home to me what I was up against. These girls, and probably most of the girls I was teaching, had no expectation that what they were learning at school would make any real world sense to them at all. Education to them was still just a matter of rote learning and reciting what to them was meaningless gobbledygook.

Another time, to my surprise, Clare said: "Why do you call my sister Damvanti? That is not her name". Puzzled, I replied that it was the name in the register. Damvanti then explained to me that when she was born her mother had gone to the Registry Office to register her birth but, as she was illiterate, the clerk had to fill in the form for her, and Damvanti was what he wrote. So now officially she was

Damvanti, but her real name was something else quite different! But I've long since forgotten what it was.

One day, as exams approached, Mrs Mahboobani tried to press a large box of biscuits on me when she came to pick the girls up, begging me to make sure that Damvanti passed. Realising that she was trying to bribe me I turned her down, explaining that whether Damvanti passed or failed depended on how she answered the questions, not on what I had agreed to do. I don't think Mrs Mahboobani understood, and I'm quite sure she wouldn't have been alone in her expectation that bribery would help her daughter's results.

The 'O' level Geography syllabus included the option of studying West Africa, so that's what we did. Through the year I hired a *poda-poda*[19] several times and took the girls out on field trips around Freetown and the peninsula. The first one took us up Mount Aureol, on the edge of town. From there we could see the town spread out below us, and appreciate its position, squeezed between the mountains and the harbour, along the long narrow coastal platform. We could see the wide streets, cutting each other at right angles, of the old Creole part of town, and the later streets spreading higgledy-piggledy out from the centre. We went down into the town to take a look at the different types of buildings: the two or three story modern buildings in the commercial centre; the well built, well spaced, wooden Creole houses in the planned part of town; and the jumble of shophouses, rickety wooden houses and shacks in the suburbs.

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[19] A privately owned and operated minibus that will pick up from, and deliver to, wherever required.

On another trip we went out of town and along the peninsula to Lumley and beyond, to study the topography as a way of introducing physical geography. We drove along the raised beaches of the coastal platform and looked at the steep, jungle clad, basalt mountains and considered their effect on rainfall and land use. Back at school we set up a weather station and the girls collected data on daily temperatures and rainfall. Some of them kept that weather station going the whole time I was there.

We also did a trip around the Freetown docks. I had prepared the girls very carefully beforehand, briefing them on what to look for, and showing them how to take notes. They behaved so well, and asked such intelligent questions about what was being imported and exported, that we were taken on board one of the ships that was anchored out in the harbour. We were taken out in a bullom boat, a heavily built, open boat of Portuguese design, used for coastal sailing, and around Freetown harbour. It was the first time most of them had ever been out onto the harbour, and it was the highlight of the day.

I'm proud to say that, after my second year, two girls did pass 'O' level geography, and they did well in their other subjects too.

Maths presented other problems. They had learned their times tables by rote, as most of us did in those days, but they remained meaningless chants to them, and were of little help to them when it came to solving multiplication problems. They had particular difficulty solving problems stated in words rather than numbers. I never did figure out if the problem was with the language, or whether it was making the connection between the words and the arithmetic. One day I took some oranges into my First Form class and gave two

of the girls three oranges each, and asked how many oranges there were altogether. They could all answer that with the oranges there in front of them. But when I changed the question to bananas, which I didn't have with me, and different numbers, many of them still had difficulty.

Geometry caused a lot of problems. Very few of them could understand what a right angle was, and that it was always the same. In their world there were few right angles. Doors and windows seldom had the regular shape that we expect. Without that basic concept geometry was a meaningless mystery, and measuring angles a nonsense.

The girls had many other difficulties to overcome besides the unsuitable curriculum and poor teaching. Most of the girls who weren't either boarders or Creoles came from 'up-country', and lived with Creole families as 'wards'. In return for their board they were expected to do housework, and some were treated like servants or worse, like slaves. All the girls, except the boarders, had to do their 'domestics' before coming to school each day. Some would have been up since 5am fetching water and sweeping the yard. After school they would have to clean the house and prepare the evening meal, which could involve pounding the cassava for *fufu*.[20]. As it gets dark in Freetown between six and seven o'clock, and few houses had electricity in those days, this left little time for homework. Many girls came to school exhausted, often without breakfast, and they not

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[20] A tasteless, glutinous substance that filled the stomach, but which had little nutritional value. One scooped up a small ball with ones fingers and dipped in an accompanying 'soup' for flavour.

infrequently fell asleep at their desks. You got to know which ones they were, and didn't wake them.

The other reason girls fell asleep at their desks was because they were sick, and more than likely had a bout of malaria. Ironically the only time some of the day girls could be relied on to come to school was when they were sick. Their families probably couldn't afford medical care, and most would be expected to do their 'domestics' - come whatever. At school at least the girls could sleep! Also Mother Theresa ran a rudimentary clinic. After morning assembly any girls who were sick would line up outside her office for her to dispense what she had - probably no more than aspirin and occasionally, like when a girl reported with suspected smallpox, medical help was called in. On that occasion the whole school was vaccinated by lunchtime - even those of us who were already vaccinated. As it turned out she probably had cowpox.

New teachers from overseas often found the girls rude. At first sight Krio appears to have no equivalents to 'please' and 'thank you'. The closest Krio has to 'please' is '*do ya, Bo*', which at first felt like the girls were being insolent. That sort of thing didn't bother me too much once I got used to it, but it really upset an Indian teacher. What I did find difficult to deal with was when girls told me they had done their homework when they clearly hadn't. If I then asked them to produce it they would make all sorts of excuses, like: 'My brother stole my book from me' or 'I forgot to bring it. I will bring it tomorrow'. It was explained to me that the African idea of politeness is to tell the person what they want to hear, so if a teacher asks a pupil if she has done her homework the polite and respectful answer is 'yes'. If you then challenge her it causes confusion and 'loss of face'. I never did find my way round that one. Most of the local

teachers would not have had that problem as, although they set homework, they very rarely checked that it had been done, or marked it.

One school rule forbade sharing, which was in conflict with what I understand to be the traditional African norm where things are generally communally owned. As a result some of the more mischievous girls delighted in causing chaos in the class of a new and unsuspecting teacher. 'Teacher, teacher, Imelda done '*tief*' my ruler', and she would snatch it back. Whether you ignored it, or tried to sort it out, a noisy squabble would erupt. Sometimes girls from the next door class, who had been sent out into the corridor for misbehaviour, would look in the open windows, and egg them on.

Like most volunteers teachers in those days I had no training or experience as a teacher but, with the confidence of youth, I never questioned my ability to teach, and to my cost, ignored the advice I was given to be strict to begin with. I had been warned by Mother Theresa that the girls would test me, as they did every new expatriate teacher. The African teachers, most of whom were only minimally trained, kept strict control of a their classes and taught by rote. Their classes were quiet except when their pupils were chanting their 'lessons'. I wanted my pupils to understand and discuss what they were learning. I tried to explain things to them, and only gradually came to realise how little they understood of what I said. I invited questions, but to them it was rude to question adults. It would have been seen as insolence. When they realised I was inviting them to talk my classes frequently descended into noisy chaos - much to the disgust of the local teachers. But after the first hilarity at my strange teaching methods, they soon settled down and accepted my authority, and Mother Theresa always supported me.

I knew I was getting somewhere when some girls from another class, who had been sent to sit in the back of my classroom for misbehaviour, tried to egg on some mischief, but my class failed to respond and told them to shut up.

On two evenings a week I taught an adult literacy class at another school. These classes were part of a project set up by one of the VSOs the year before. I was given some skimpy teaching materials and then left get on with it. I had a class of about ten men in their twenties and thirties, all but one without any schooling. They spoke very little English, and only one had any idea of what was involved in translating what was on the page into language. He was a Muslim and he could read the Koran, so he had some familiarity with the written word. The others seemed to have no idea of what to expect. I rather imagined them wondering if a little gremlin might jump up from the page to whisper in their ear!

The first thing to do was to establish some very basic English, and to show them what it looked like written down. We started with their names, and although some of them were already familiar with what their name looked like, others became quite excited as they began to recognise their own shape. Writing was another matter. Most of them just hadn't developed the fine motor skills necessary to form letters.

Progress was dishearteningly slow, but I did feel I was getting somewhere when, one evening, the word "TAXI" came up, and my Koranic student recognised it and pointed it out to the rest of the class. A murmur went round the room, and the excitement grew as, one after the other, they recognised the word they had seen so often

on the door of a taxi. We spent the rest of that session thinking up other words that they were familiar with in there every day life. I remember that "Coca-Cola" was one of them. At last I thought, they were beginning to get some idea of what was expected of them - what the connection was between the written word and the real world. I don't think I achieved very much that year, but by the end of it they could, at least, all recognise and scribble their own names.

## Chapter 4. Travels around Sierra Leone

After I had been in Freetown a few weeks Malik invited me to go crocodile hunting with him and a friend. Celia, another VSO, would be coming along too. Did I want to go? Of course I did! Although I had no idea what to expect, and didn't really believe that we would really be hunting crocodiles, it sounded like an exciting adventure. You have to remember that I came from England. To me crocodiles were exotic creatures only to be seen in books and London Zoo. And, more important to me, it would be my first opportunity to get out of Freetown, and see something of the rest of the country - something I longed to do.

We set off early one Saturday morning and drove out of Freetown to Mile 47 where we turned off the tar seal. It was already swelteringly hot by the time we got there, so we stopped to buy some pineapples and coconuts from the hawkers at the side of the road. I watched as a small boy very deftly chopped the prickly skin off a couple of pineapples with a machete that was almost as long as his arm. He passed the juicy chunks to us on the tip of his knife, and the sweet sticky juice dribbled down my chin and fingers. Next he chopped open four smooth yellow coconuts revealing the furry brown nuts inside. He lopped off the tops, inserted a straw and handed them to us to drink the cool, refreshing juice inside. Last of all he chopped open the now empty shells and gave us the pieces so we could chew the milky flesh inside as we drove along.

Refreshed, we turned northwards, and jolted along the rutted, red laterite road for many miles through oil palm plantations with their

tidy, straight rows, and through what I took to be rather neglected scrubby bush.

*An oil palm plantation*

There was little traffic except for the occasional dusty, battered Land Rover, and a few dilapidated mammy wagons. There were as many mammy wagons broken down by the side of the road as there were moving. Some were abandoned, others had passengers still crowded around them as someone worked on its ancient, neglected engine with few tools and only rudimentary mechanical understanding.

We passed through several villages of square mud houses, with thatched or corrugated iron roofs, set some way back from the dusty road. There was the odd splash of colour where purple bougainvillea and bright red hibiscus grew. A large, shady green mango tree stood

at the centre of most villages, where the old men sat in the shade, smoking and passing the time of day. Some villages had open sided market buildings where market mammies, in colourful *lappas* and head scarves, presided over laden concrete tables. Hawkers sold drinks and snacks wrapped in greasy banana leaves to the drivers and passengers of the mammy wagons that were parked along the side of the road, and little boys begged; '*White man, white man, gi me dash. Gi me penny*'.

*Passing through a village*

Round about midday we arrived at the house of a friend of Malik's, a Lebanese with an African 'wife'. We were ushered inside and offered water to wash, and cold drinks. Malik and his friend had some business to transact, so Celia and I were left sitting in the sparsely furnished, dark sitting room for an hour or so. Outside

women were busy in the sunny yard, where children were playing and chickens were scratching in the dust. After a long interval we were offered lunch. A delicious chicken stew with 'dry' hill rice. I was really enjoying it until the thought suddenly struck me that whilst we had been sitting there in the cool sitting room the sound of the chickens in the yard had ceased, and that we were probably eating those very same birds.

*A home made canoe*

After lunch we drove on to a Rest House beside the Little Scarcies River where we were to spend the night. Boats of all shapes and sizes were pulled up on the river bank: canoes roughly hollowed out from not very straight logs; various dinghies; and a few dilapidated motor boats. Boys were swimming and diving into the murky brown water, and others were paddling their tiny canoes - some no more than pieces of wood that they stood on, balancing precariously as they paddled. An ancient flat ferry took vehicles and pedestrians across to the other side. Cars and lorries queued for hours,

sometimes for days, as they waited for their turn to cross. Hawkers worked the lines of parked vehicles, and the ubiquitous little boys begged for pennies. On the other side of the river the road carried on all the way to the Guinea border and beyond.

*Waiting for the ferry*

Next morning we piled into an old wooden launch and made our way down the wide, placid brown river looking for crocodiles. The river was skirted by mangroves and low jungle. I had read about mangroves in Geography text books and adventure stories, but had never seen them. I was fascinated by the fact that they grew in brackish water. Malik and his friend were armed with elephant guns, but we didn't see any crocodiles, or elephants. They did take some pot shots at guinea fowl and bagged a couple to take home. I asked

them to let me have a go with the gun, but they were quite reluctant because, they said, it was very heavy. I persisted and, despite being warned, was surprised by its hefty kick back.

After a picnic lunch of bread and cheese we returned up the river to our vehicle, and took a much shorter route back to Freetown, passing the airport and crossing the estuary on the old ferry.

My next opportunity to go 'up country' came in the Christmas holidays. Celia and I wanted to go to the Kenema Trade Fair, and I had heard that one could sometimes hitch a ride on the Diamond Corporation (Dicorp) plane if there were any spare seats. So I boldly walked into their luxurious, air conditioned office and asked if we could have a ride. We were in luck. Looking back I'm embarrassed at my audacity.

Once in Kenema we met up with some of the local Peace Corp and spent the day wondering around the showground with them. They were happy to have some new faces in their midst, and we were lucky to have them to show us around. I don't remember anything about the show but in a letter home I wrote:

> *The Trade Fair was really interesting, we saw the Sierra Leone National Dance Company perform, they are really superb, as well as all sorts of spontaneous village dances around the show field. We saw enough jujus (devils) to last a life time.*

That night, after a supper of baked beans on toast, I remember curling up on a cushion on the floor and listening to the Peace Corp

talking about their travels and adventures. Some of them were living in very remote towns even further upcountry, towards the Liberian border, and some were in their second year there and had travelled extensively. They talked of the places they had been to, and the mammy wagons they had travelled in. How I longed to explore the country like they had.

The next morning, back at the show ground, we bumped into Jean-Pascal, a friend from Freetown and the Coca Cola rep, so we asked him if he could give us a lift home. He said he could, but that he had to go up to Sefadu first, another eighty miles further upcountry in the diamond mining area. Celia needed to get back to Freetown so she decided to catch the train back with our Peace Corp friends who were going there for Christmas and to see a bit of civilisation. I wanted to see more of the country so I asked him if I could go with him up to Sefadu. He said yes, but that I'd have to take a chance on finding somewhere to stay when we got there. He warned me that it might be a very rough ride, as the roads were still in a bad state after the rains, and he told me that he would not turn back if I found it too much, or if I was car sick. Only if the road were impassable.

It was certainly a rough ride. Although the rains had been over for a couple of months, the roads were still very muddy and slippery, with water filled potholes that were so big and deep that, it was said, lorries sometimes vanished in them! One took one's life into one's hands to cross a stream. I remember the Land Rover slithering down a hill, Jean-Pascal wrestling with the steering wheel, hoping that we would hit the middle of the bridge at the bottom, and not the parapet or the river bank. As we couldn't risk braking we just had to hope that there was no equally out of control mammy wagon coming down the other side. Once safely over the bridge we had to climb up

the other side, wheels spinning and red mud flying. At least once we had to find a large stone to put under the back wheel to stop us from sliding back down the hill.

*Approaching Sefadu*

It turned out that the friend Jean-Pascal had arranged to stay with was happy to give me a bed as well. Franz was the local Volkswagen rep, and he had spent so many months in the bush that he was delighted to have some white female company. That evening Franz's steward served us a delicious groundnut stew with fragrant dry rice.

Over dinner Franz told us tales of life in the diamond mining district. Sefadu is situated in the Sierra Leone Selection Trust's (SLST) lease area. Legally all diamonds found in the area belong to SLST but it was well-known that many were smuggled across the border into nearby Liberia. He told us that if an African found a diamond he

would take it to a local trader at night, and negotiate a price that could be anything up to 10,000 Leones[21], or even more, depending on its size and quality. The trader would then go straight to the bank manager, whatever the hour, and wake him up demanding the cash in small denominations. The bank manager, knowing the consequences if the money was not immediately forthcoming, slept with a suitcase full of money under his bed - not a situation conducive of peaceful sleep in this lawless town where break-ins and burglaries were even more commonplace than in Freetown. The trader would then smuggle the diamond across the border into Liberia where he could sell it at a huge profit. Penalties for illegal diamond trading were harsh, but officials were corruptible, and this left the bank manager in a very difficult situation. If an illegal diamond trader became disgruntled it was not unknown for him to plant a diamond in the luggage of a departing bank manager, and then tip off Customs. The penalties for smuggling diamonds out of the country were harsh, and included imprisonment - not an attractive prospect for a retiring bank manager!

Franz told us that the bank manager's job was so stressful that few of them lasted long and he had seen several bank managers come and go in the two years he had been there. The current manager, an Englishman, had had a nervous breakdown and was leaving after completing only six months of his contract.

The next morning Jean-Pascal set off to visit his clients, and told me to be ready to leave for Freetown at midday. With three hours to fill in I set off to explore the town. It was a dirty town. Mud caked Land Rovers and lorries drove too fast down the potholed main

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[21] The local currency. A leone was worth 10 shillings at the time.

street, spraying muddy water everywhere as they went. The huge storm drains that lined the street in front of the row shophouses were already stinking with discarded rubbish. It only took me a few minutes to walk the length of the street, peering into the shops to see the usual selection of cheap cloth, hurricane lamps, tin crockery and canned food.

*The main street of Sefadu*

Some way along I found an alleyway that led to the back of the row. Curious to see what was behind I picked my way up it, my sandals slipping in the mud as I carefully avoided a huge wash out, several feet deep, that made an untidy, ragged gash down the middle of the lane. Behind the shops I found some makeshift shacks, and beyond a huge gravel pit full of murky, yellow water. All around the edge there were men bending over, seeming to peer into the water. Curious to see what they were doing, I moved closer. They were all

holding big pans that they were dipping into the water and then shaking gently to empty them slowly, all the while watching intently.

*The gravel pit in Sefadu*

I walked along a bit, and when one man looked up I asked him "*Wettin do*?[22]" He put his pan down and asked me if I wanted to see a diamond. Naturally I said "Yes", not for a moment expecting that I would, but he opened to his mouth and took out a handful of tiny diamonds! He offered to sell me one for two Leones. I was astonished, and turned him down. I still couldn't believe that they really were diamonds, and anyway I knew it would be illegal. In a mixture of broken English and Krio he explained to me that he kept them in his mouth because that was the only place that the police didn't search when they raided the pond, which they did almost every day. I learnt from him that these illegal digging was so highly organised that the police often couldn't manage them and that the troops were frequently called in.

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[22] Krio for "What are you doing?"

*Panning for diamonds*

After my trip around town I got back to Franz's house at about ten to twelve, only to learn from Franz's steward that Jean-Pascal had already left. I was surprised and indignant as I hadn't been late. Then panic set in. How was I to get back to Freetown? There was only one more day before Christmas, and I had no way of letting anyone know where I was. What's more, Franz had talked of going up to Freetown for Christmas with us. If he had gone then his steward would be taking the days off, and I'd be left all alone in a strange house in a strange town. Some way to spend my first Christmas in Africa!

To my huge relief Franz turned up half an hour later, and told me he was heading for Freetown that afternoon, and I was to go with him.

It was a much more comfortable ride back in Franz's little VW. As he was planning to return to Germany by driving across the Sahara he'd done a lot of work strengthening his car, and it coped with the rutted road much better than Jean Pascal's rattly Land Rover. We got back to Freetown on Christmas Eve, in time to celebrate the next day with Jean Pascal and his friends, with a very merry, traditional Christmas meal and the afternoon on the beach.

## Chapter 5. Kabala, Falaba and Beyond

Ramadan in 1966 was in January. The Moslems at school struggled in the hot, dry weather. For some their religion was so strict that they couldn't even swallow their own spittle in daylight hours, and they would have to leave the classroom to spit over the balcony. Our houseboy came to us asking for an extra months pay as it was the custom to give Moslems extra at the end of Ramadan. He was not to be swayed by the the argument that we had already given him a Christmas bonus as we thought he was Christian. The joke doing the rounds was about the houseboy who also claimed to be a Hindu when Diwali came around.

The end of Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr, was celebrated in Freetown with a much anticipated lantern parade. All manner of vehicles - lorries, cars, motorbikes and bicycles - were decked out to make floats, with elaborate, colourful constructions of wood, sticks and paper. It was said that some of the more elaborate ones had taken all year to build. The streets of Freetown were crowded as people waited excitedly for the parade to pass. The men wore flowing robes and baggy trousers. Young boys worked the crowd selling snacks and drinks. Sometime after dark the first floats appeared, all lit up with thousands of candles. Flat bed trucks provided stages for scenes being acted out. Decorated cars bulged with people. Each float was followed by a crowd of singing, dancing people from the district, or organisation, that the float represented. After the parade had passed large crowds of people drifted through the town, singing and dancing until late into the night.

My next chance to go up country came in the Easter holidays. Marion, Celia and I decided to go up to Kabala, in the Guinea Highlands, to get away from the sticky heat in Freetown. We agreed to take Marion's steward and plenty of food with us as we had heard that the area where we were going was short of food, and we had no idea where we were going to stay.

As we wanted our own transport, rather than relying on mammy wagons, we chartered a *poda-poda* for a week. The first price asked for the *poda-poda* was L.200, but we eventually fixed at L.60, with the agreement that the driver could pick up other fare paying passengers along the way, and that he would pay for the petrol. As a result, once we had left Freetown, the *poda-poda* was loaded to capacity, and beyond, with people, and their baggage. Sacks of rice, bicycles and a cage of chickens were loaded on to the roof. At one point we even had a goat in the vehicle with us. As we approached the next town we stopped and most of the people got out, much to our relief as it had got very hot and crowded inside the vehicle. But our relief was short lived because, as soon as we had passed through the town and the police check point, we stopped again and everybody crowded back in. There were laws against overloading vehicles in Sierra Leone, but we quickly learned that they were only observed in towns.

Kabala is north of the rainforest belt, in beautiful, open savanna country. We stayed two nights there in a Peace Corp house. Gary left just after we arrived but he was happy for us to stay in his house as we had bought our own cook and food. The house had no running water and no flush toilets. The 'bathroom' was a curtained off corner of the kitchen with a bucket. Before he left Gary introduced us to his friend and fellow teacher, Jallon. Jallon, who was a Moslem, took

charge of us and showed us round the town, taking us to the mosque for the Friday prayers. It was the first time I had ever been in a mosque and I had no idea how I should behave. We sat at the back among the women feeling clumsy and conspicuous. I didn't know if we should kneel like everyone else, or just watch. I needn't have worried because after the service many of the women came up to us to shake our hands and to thank us for coming. Later that day Jallon dismissed Marion's steward for the evening and cooked us a meal of groundnut stew cooked in palm oil, and *fu-fu*[23].

As it was the school holidays Jallon offered to take us up to Falaba, fifty miles further north, close to the Guinea border, where he wanted to visit the homes of some of his pupils. Our driver objected and said that he had only agreed to take us as far as Kabala, but Jallon argued with him on our behalf, and eventually we negotiated an extra payment for taking us further.

Falaba was a very old town and the traditional capital of the Yalunka tribe. It was located close to the border with Northern Guinea and it commanded the ancient trading route between that part of Guinea and the coast. In 1966 the town still maintained its circular shape, and was hemmed in by the tall cotton trees that had been planted in 1884, for defence, when the town was besieged for nine months by invading Mandinka tribesmen. The houses in the town were predominantly rectangular mud huts with corrugated iron roofs.

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[23] A gelatinous, tasteless sticky paste made by pounding and boiling cassava or yams. It is eaten by scooping up a bit with the fingers, and dipping in an accompanying 'soup'.

Jallon took us first to the chief's house, which was a larger version of the other houses in the town with a covered veranda at the front. We found the chief sitting on the veranda with his elders, but when we arrived they stopped their palaver and gave us a traditional welcome with cola nuts and cold water. The chief, Sewa, was an impressive man of about forty, one of only a handful of paramount chiefs in the country, and a great friend of the Prime Minister's. Being a Moslem he had four wives, several concubines and many children. His wives and concubines each had their own house in a separate compound across the road.

*A family group*

That afternoon Jallon showed us round the town as he visited the parents his pupils. Everywhere we went we were followed by hordes of children. Hundred of sticky hands grabbed for our fingers as Jallon proudly showed us the towns new clinic and told us of the plans to build a primary school. The people we saw were very friendly, and looked very healthy and better dressed than most people in Freetown.

*Women pounding yams. for the evening meal A postcard*

Last of all we visited the compound where Sewa's wives and children lived. We were warmly welcomed, thanked for coming and invited in. The huts were arranged around a central courtyard where the youngest children played in the dust, chickens scratched, and

cassava was being pounded for the evening meal. Although each woman did her own cooking in her own cooking hut, the daily task of pounding the yams was communal.

We stayed in Falaba, in Sewa's house, for two days and were royally entertained. His wives cooked us enormous meals in the open kitchen in the yard at the back of the house. They produced stews of chicken and goat which were served with rice, but only his first wife joined us at the table. That first evening we had tinned peaches for dessert. Sewa took a few mouthfuls of his then handed his spoon to Jallon who didn't have one. A few moments later, when I had finished mine, he reached across the table, grabbed my spoon and finished eating his! When we had finished the leftovers were emptied into a single dish and handed out to the elders who had been crowded at the doorway intently watching us eat.

After dinner a crowd of townspeople gathered on the laterite road outside the house. We had been told there would be music and dancing, and we had hoped to see some traditional dancing. To our disappointment the women all came dressed up in their 'best' clothes - *lappas* with garish pictures of the prime minister, and bright, elaborately tied head scarves. The village musicians entertained us with their drums, *congomalis*[24], xylophones and other instruments. Incongruously the first dance was a quickstep and Sewa selected an elder for each of us to dance with and, to our embarrassment, the whole village looked on. We had to dance until Sewa told us to stop.

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[24] These are mentioned in my diary, but I don't remember what they are, and have been unable to find any other reference to them.

Then the music changed to the hi-life, with its rhythmic beat that was familiar to us from the night clubs in Freetown, and everyone joined in. We had to dance with the partners Sewa chose for us and, once again, we had to keep dancing until he told us to stop. Between dances we drank Vimto and 7-Up. It was great fun, but it did go on for a very long time!

The next day Sewa took us on a tour of his chiefdom. Before we left he ordered our driver to wash the *poda-poda*. Our driver, a Mende, was not at all happy to take orders from a Yalunka, even if he was a paramount chief. He had already driven us much further than he had originally agreed to, and our agreement certainly did not include keeping the vehicle clean. We were not paying him enough for that! In the end Jallon had to negotiate with him again, and Marion's steward was called in to help him spruce it up. We eventually set off in Sewa's large, shiny, black Mercedes, followed by the now gleaming, white *poda-poda* packed with "*village elders, soothsayers, musicians and goodness knows who else*", the driver still grumbling that this was not what he had agreed to do.

First we went to an international market, on the Guinea border. Guinea at that time banned all imports from Europe, but Sewa, being very influential, had been able to set up this market which was the only place where Guineans could buy imported goods. In exchange they sold cattle which drovers then took on the long walk to Freetown, passing from the open savannah country into the tse-tse fly infested rainforest belt. By the time they arrived in Freetown they had lost all their condition, and were the pathetic, thin beasts we saw being butchered in the market there. After Sewa had finished his business, and collected his tithes, we drove on a short distance along

the narrow, rutted road to the actual border, and stepped across an unmarked and unguarded line into Guinea for a few moments.

We then drove back some way before heading eastwards, and jolting several miles along a new 'road' that Sewa had very recently had cut through the bush by the local villagers. As yet it was just a rough, narrow track slashed through the bush, with the stumps of trees still sticking up through the grass. It didn't yet even have a laterite surface.

We eventually arrived at a perfect round, stockaded village. Inside the stockade there was a cluster of round, mud huts with tall thatched roofs, arranged around an open space. We were welcomed with cola nuts, music and dancing, and showered with gifts of rice, eggs, and fowl. Jallon told us that not a single person in the village was literate, and hardly anyone had ever seen a white person before. After the welcoming ceremonies were complete Sewa settled down to palaver with the elders under the large mango tree that stood in the centre of the village, and we were allowed to sit in. The women and children hung around the edges, staring intently at us, occasionally pointing at us and laughing.

Long impassioned speeches were made, of which, of course, we understood not a word. I thought at first it was about village development as Sewa had told us that he had plans for them to finish the road and it seemed that bringing us here, in our gleaming white *poda-poda,* was partly propaganda to show the villagers what they could look forward to if they cooperated. But Jallon explained later that it was 'woman palaver'. He told us that the two men involved had swords with them, ready to fight, but I think that might have been a detail added for dramatic effect.

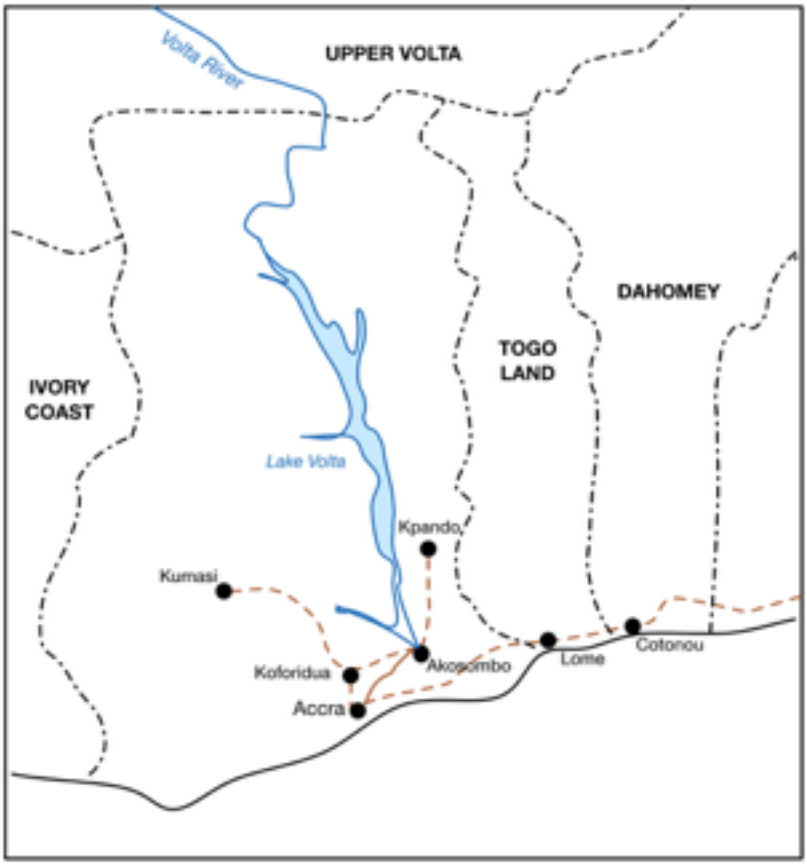
When we got back to Falaba we were offered a very welcome shower. The three of us crowded into a tiny, roofless, brushwood cubicle and given buckets of hot water. We had a hilarious time tipping it over each other, until it occurred to us that, as there was no reticulated water in the town, the women had had to carry all of it about half a mile up from the river in buckets on their heads, and that they had also had to collect the firewood to heat it up from outside of the town boundaries. It was a rather sobering thought.

*Women collecting firewood. A postcard*

In a letter I wrote to my sister at the time I said:

> *So now I've stayed in a real African village, slept in a real African bed, in a genuine mud hut. It was very primitive, and unexpectedly civilised. The chief was like a feudal lord, a benevolent despot, and we all fell madly in love with him.*

Sadly, whilst I was doing some research for this chapter on the internet, I learned that Falaba was completely destroyed in 1990, during Sierra Leone's Civil War.


Volta River
UPPER VOLTA
DAHOMEY
TOGO
LAND
IVORY
COAST
Lake Volta
Kpando
Kumasi
Koforidua
Akosombo
Lome
Cotonou
Accra

**Ghana**

## Chapter 6. Summer Holidays: Ghana, Togoland and Dahomey

The summer term brought the rainy season. At first there was only the occasional shower, and some evenings spectacular lightning storms played on the western horizon. As the days progressed the showers became more frequent, and heavier, until one day, when I was returning from a shopping trip into town, it started to rain very heavily. I stopped and sheltered in a doorway along with several other people. For half an hour we chatted and watched the rain pouring down, until one of the men decided he couldn't wait any longer and stepped out into the downpour. Then, one after the other, over the next half hour, the rest of the people left until I was the last one standing there. After a while I decided I couldn't wait any longer either, so I set off back home on my mobylette, and was very quickly drenched. It was just as well that I did because it was still raining two days later. I remember looking out of the classroom at the pouring rain cascading down past the windows one day, and wondering how on earth one could possibly breath out there. The rainfall was so intense it looked solid.

The rains would continue unabated until some time in September, and it was said that it could rain non-stop for fourteen days and nights. Nothing dried, everything got mildewed, the road outside our house turned to mud, and the storm drains were full of turbulent brown water.

As it was the end of the school year, all my VSO friends, and some of the Peace Corps were returning home, and I had to decide what to do with my school holidays. Staying in Freetown in that weather

was not an attractive option, and most of the Peace Corps who were staying over were planning to travel to Kano in Northern Nigeria where the climate was drier. Marion and I decided to fly to Ghana, where we would spend a week together, then she would fly back to England, and I would carry on alone to Nigeria.

We flew into Accra at dusk on my twenty-third birthday, and found our way to the Peace Corps hostel. The hostel was already quite full as local Peace Corps volunteers were gathering there to wait for their flight back to the USA. They had all been working in Ghana for the past two years, and as many of them had travelled extensively they knew the country well and were able to give us a lots of ideas about where to go, how to get there, and where to stay.

The next morning we set out to explore the city and were surprised at how large and modern it was compared to Freetown. There were many, modern multi-storey buildings, and wide dual carriageways that swept in and out of the city. There were suburbs of substantial detached houses set in walled gardens with trees and flowers. Although there must have been slums, makeshift tin shacks were less evident than in Freetown.

The people we saw were much better dressed and cleaner than we were used to, and fewer people wore ragged and torn clothes. The girls wore their hair cropped short, rather than the cornrows that were common in Freetown, and many more of the men wore native costume, especially the colourful togas made from the native Kente cloth. But what struck us most, even as we were driving in from the airport the evening before, was that some people were reading newspapers on buses, and as they stood at bus stops - something we never saw in Freetown with its very low literacy rate.

We did notice a lack of European goods in the grocery shops, but in the market the local food and fruit appeared to be more plentiful than in Freetown, and the market mammies looked more prosperous.

Ghana's wealth had been based on surging cocoa prices in the late 1950s and 60's. Kwame Nkrumah, who had led the country to Independence and become its first Prime Minister, had used this wealth to modernise the country and develop its infrastructure and industry, More recently his ideas had become more and more grandiose, well beyond the countries means and pushing it in to debt. Since the *coup d'état* that had deposed him earlier that year several of his projects had been cancelled and, as a result, some of the new buildings and projects now stood unused and empty. The magnificent £8 million building commissioned by Nkrumah to serve as the headquarters of the Organisation of African Unity had been used only once, and now lay empty. Black Star Square, even today the second biggest square in the world after Tiananmen Square, with its magnificent Independence Arch, Black Star Gate and huge parade grounds, seemed at that time to be a white elephant.

Despite the country's wealth and prosperity, we learned that unemployment was beginning to occur as a result of the cancellation of some of these more ambitious and expensive projects. The cost of living was high, and rising, and the poor and the newly unemployed were beginning to suffer.

On our second day there we caught a bus out to the University of Ghana, on the outskirts of the city. It was set in beautiful park like surroundings. Well spaced, modern whitewashed buildings, with red tiled roofs, climbed a low hill to the Clock Tower at the top. From a

distance it reminded me of a Tuscan hill village basking in the bright sunlight. There were trees and gardens with well tended flower beds everywhere. Each of the halls of residence had a large well laid out quad, with lawns, colourful flower beds and goldfish ponds.

The university, which had been founded as a college of the University of London in 1948, had been built for 10,000 students, but in 1966 there were only 2000, and in many departments, it was said, there were more lecturers than there were students. We were told that academic standards were very high - higher even than at London University - and that they weren't prepared to lower their standards to fill the place up.

Whilst there we had lunch with two very interesting VSO's. One, Norman, was doing research into the fish possibilities in Lake Volta. The other lectured in English. My diary comments: "*What a glorious VSO situation!"* I was very envious.

Another day we caught a bus out to the beach, but it was very disappointing. Nothing like Freetown's beautiful, golden Lumley beach. It was dull and grey, with crumbling cliffs and dirty, grey sand. There was a heavy surf that day, and a continual haze of blown sand and spray. We were hot and sticky after our bus ride and we had planned to swim but the waves were too big. The day was made worse for us when two local boys befriended us and offered to carry our bags as we walked back up to the bus stop. Despite the heat I kept tight hold of mine but Marion, being more trusting than me, let one of them carry her open basket as she walked along chatting to them. It was only after we had said goodbye and got on the bus, that she found that her wallet had gone, along with all of her traveller's cheques.

After that experience we'd had enough of Accra, and decided to head for Kpando the next day. Marion had to go to the bank first to sort out her money, and when she got back we made our way down to the lorry park to catch a bus to Akosombo, the first stop on our way.

This was my first experience of a West African lorry park. It was so enormous that I wondered how on earth we would ever find the right bus. But everyone was very helpful, and if they didn't speak English they quickly found someone who did, and we soon found the area where the buses to Akosombo waited. We were lucky because there was one ready to leave in ten minutes and, what's more, it left on time - which was just as well as it took us about two hours to get out of the lorry park! The buses were packed so tightly that it was almost impossible to move. I doubt if an English driver parked in a similar situation would have even tried! But our driver had endless patience. He drove a few feet, stopped, got out and went and asked a few other drivers to move their vehicles, then he got back in and drove on another few feet. The process was repeated, until we eventually got out of the lorry park and were able to get on our way.

The road to Akosombo was new, having been constructed only a few years earlier to provide access to the Akosombo Dam and the Volta River Project. Not only was it tar sealed all the way, but it was dual carriageway out of Accra, and planted along the median strip with colourful flame trees and bougainvillea.

We got to Akosombo at about lunch time and found our way the next few miles to the newly completed dam. I remember coming round a corner in the road, under a tall, black rocky bluff, and seeing the towering grey concrete structure straddling the valley up ahead. It

was the first big dam I had ever seen and it was an impressive sight. We had been given a lift there by one of the site engineers and he told us all about the project and the power station at the foot of the dam. The scheme, which had been commissioned and opened the previous year, was one of the biggest hydro electric power projects in the world at that time, and the cornerstone of Nkrumah's development programme. The newly created Lake Volta behind the dam was still filling, and would eventually be over three hundred miles long, and the largest man made reservoir in the world. Although the idea of the scheme excited me I found the engineering details of the power station extremely boring. The Adoni bridge, a suspension bridge further downstream, that we later crossed, was much more interesting to me.

From Akasombo we managed to get a lift with a local lawyer who was heading to Ho, the next big town. He dropped us off at the turn off to Kpando where he assured us we would be able to pick up a lorry.

The Volta region, the homeland of the Ewe tribe, is lush, hilly farmland, with the Togoland hills to the east, and the rising Lake Volta to the west. From a distance Kpando looked rather like an English country village, dominated as it was by the tower of its Catholic Church. As soon as we arrived in the lorry park the driver found someone to take us to 'the VSO house' as, being the only white people in town, everyone knew where it was. Paula and Jean were delighted to see us as they had few European visitors, and we stayed with them for the next four days.

The first morning the girls took us down to the market. It was very friendly, and we were greeted everywhere we went with a smile and

a cheery "Yahwho!", the equivalent of "White Man!" derived from the German greeting "J*ahwohl*!", which was how the early German missionaries and settlers had greeted the local people. As Jean spoke a smattering of Ewe the market mammies warmed to her, and laughed and chatted to her as she haggled for what we needed.

Besides the usual fruit and vegetables there were other areas of the market where traders sold cloth, beads and locally made pottery. Most of the cloth was high quality printed cotton cloth from Holland, quite distinctive in its colours and designs. I have a picture in my mind of Ewe women in handsome pink or red *lappas* with tasteful designs of leaf like patterns, some with borders to frame the shape of the skirt. I learnt that some colours and designs had specific meanings. Some indicated that a young woman was looking for husband, and others that the woman was menstruating and was therefore unclean. I bought a length that I hemmed that evening to make myself a *lappa* which I wore a lot on the rest of that trip, and which I still have to this day.

Other stalls were laid out with slave beads that had been used historically to purchase slaves, and which were still said to be used as cash and as a way of storing wealth. These were sold threaded on strings as necklaces, or to be used to hang "the red cloth" when menstruating. Most strings were a random collection of all sorts and colours of beads, and broken bits. I bought one that had a few genuine chevron and mille fiore beads that would have been made in Venice for the slave trade, some sand cast beads made locally from powdered glass, others made from melted down bottles, and the odd plastic one. I treasured that necklace and eventually got it restrung when its original string wore out, but unfortunately it was stolen a few years ago.

There were also slave bracelets: C shaped bracelets made of German silver, a mixture of copper, zinc and nickel. Some were probably genuine slave bracelets once used to buy slaves, but others were of more recent origin, crafted locally for decoration. The bead stalls also had necklaces and bracelets made from strings of old coins, and it was always worth hunting through them for a rare, genuine silver Maria Theresa coin, but I never did find one.

*A string of chevron beads. Internet photo*

A large section of the market was devoted to selling the locally made pottery. There was a wide range of household pots, bowls and water containers made in red and black clay, both glazed and unglazed.

Even then Kpando was renowned for its pottery, and since then the women have been gathered together into a collective, and their pots, still made by the traditional methods, are marketed world wide. It was, and still is, a cottage industry carried out exclusively by women, and it is surrounded by ancient rituals. No uninitiated girls are allowed to be involved, neither are women wearing the "red cloth", as they are both considered to be unclean. The clay for the pots was

traditionally dug up from pits on the river banks, and more recently, from the shores of Lake Volta. It is then mixed with old broken pottery and water, and pounded into a workable consistency in a giant mortar and pestle. It is coiled and shaped by hand without the use of a potter's wheel.

*Glazing the pots. Internet photo*

That afternoon Paula and Jean took us to visit one of the potters that they knew. We watched as women squatted on the ground and rolled out long ropes of clay which they coiled into pots and dishes. These were then smoothed and polished with stones, before being left to dry in the sun. We were shown a very simple, primitive charcoal oven where other pots were being fired. For each firing a fire was built in a hole in the ground, and the pieces placed over it. Then a

small brick kiln was constructed over everything. Once the firing had finished, and the kiln had cooled, the oven was pulled apart to extract the pots. The ones to be glazed were then put in a heap of wood shavings and burned again to produce the lovely black finish characteristic of Kpando pottery. The quality of the finished articles was very variable but, we were told, they were all sold for the same price.

Later that afternoon we visited some kente cloth weavers. Kente cloth is a traditional Ashanti cloth. It is made from cotton and silk, and has intricate, multi-coloured, geometric designs, and it is woven exclusively by men using the traditional four inch looms. Each strip is about a metre long, and to make a toga for a man many strips, each costing about £2, have to be sewn together. A finished garment could cost between £50 and £100, which was a lot of money in those days, but any man who was anyone in Ghana owned one.

*A sample of Kente cloth. Internet photo*

As Paula was planning to visit some of her pupils' families in Amedzofe, a hill village some twenty miles away, she suggested we

go with her. So the next day we left early for the lorry park, and found an ancient mammy wagon, already full and ready to leave. But there's always room for more people in an African mammy wagon, and everyone shuffled up to make room for us to squeeze in. We set off to rattle our way up the winding hill road. The backless wooden seats that had looked so inadequate when we had climbed in turned out to to be remarkably comfortable, and I enjoyed jostling with the mammies, and holding their babies as they clambered in or out when we stopped at villages along the way. Everyone was friendly and seemed very pleased to see us.

Amedzofe had been established as a hill station by the early German missionaries and settlers. Being higher than the surrounding plains it had a cooler climate and was above the malarial lowlands. We stayed overnight with another VSO, Morag, whose house was high above the village and which must have had a fantastic over the valley and the Volta plains beyond, but as it was raining the whole time we were there we never got to see it. She was the only European for miles around and I commented in my diary that she lived "*twenty five miles from the nearest bread supply!*"

That afternoon Morag took us to visit the local graveyard. It was sobering to learn from the inscriptions on the headstones that, even up here, so many European settlers had succumbed to malaria within their first year of arrival.

The next morning Morag suggested that Marion and I visit "the waterfall" whilst Paula visited her pupils. Following her directions we set off along a fairly adequate bush path, but soon had to stop and ask an African farmer the way. He led us through his cocoa farm,

and then along an overgrown track that he cleared as he went with his machete. My diary describes:

> *...about 2 miles of mud. We took our shoes off and went barefoot, and talked loudly to frighten the snakes! We got to the top of a waterfall, but alas the path had been washed away, and from where we were we couldn't even see the water falling, though it looked a mighty long way down into the valley below! So back again, singing loudly as we went. We dashed him (the farmer) two shillings worth of palm wine - enough for about ten people.*

We got back to the house in time for lunch, and then set off back down to the bottom of the hill, this time walking, carrying our luggage. It was eight miles of steep downhill walking, and our luggage was not only heavy but very awkward as we had tennis rackets with us as well! Paula had had the great idea of playing tennis whilst we were up in the cool air but, as it had rained the whole time we were there, we never did get to play. After a while I began to appreciate why Africans carry heavy loads on their heads. It was much easier to carry my suitcase that way - but I did have a very stiff neck the next day.

Two of Paula's pupils walked down with us and as we went one of them told me a bit about the area. He told me that his people had moved up into the hills when they had been attacked by the more aggressive Ewe. The hills had provided excellent protection,

especially as the valleys run parallel to the main line of hills, and therefore are invisible from the plains. Unlike in most of West Africa land is individually owned, and when the people first moved there those who worked hardest cultivated the most land and became rich. He told me that his ancestors had been lazy so his family were poor and there was little scope for him in farming. Instead he was determined to get himself a good education.

From the bottom of the hill we caught a lorry for the rest of the way back to Kpando. I noted in my diary:

> *There's no necessity to go hungry here, you can buy all sorts of foodstuffs on the roadside. In fact you can buy whole cooked meals of rice and stew if you have a dish to put it in.*

The next day Marion and I took a taxi to the shore of Lake Akasombo. It took us some time to persuade anyone to take us there because the road was so atrociously bad that nobody wanted to take it on, and they couldn't understand why we would want to go there anyway. In the end we had to pay thirty shillings for a three mile return trip.

In the previous year the lake, which was still filling, had crept up about ten miles and it still had a few more miles to go. As a consequence all the roads and everything else in the area had been neglected.

After a very slow, bumpy ride, with our driver grumbling all the way, we arrived at a cluster of very primitive grass huts, where some of the fisherfolk who had traditionally fished in the Volta River eked out a bare existence. Although they had been offered modern houses,

built for them by the government, several miles away and above the eventual shoreline, they had refused to move. Instead they lived in appalling conditions, shifting their rickety grass huts back yard by yard as the lake rose.

We managed to borrow a dugout canoe and paddle ourselves out into the lake. For the first quarter of a mile or so we wound our way between the grey tops of trees that had been killed by the rising water. The canoe was heavy and quite a handful to paddle. It was quite exciting trying to avoid getting tangled up in the branches of the exposed treetops. Eventually we got out into open water where the still, silvery grey lake stretched to the far western horizon. By then the sun was already low in the sky and heavy clouds threatened rain, so we turned around and threaded our way back through the trees to the shore, and the impatiently waiting taxi.

According to my diary we set off at five thirty the next morning for Koforidua and Kumasi, on the other side of Lake Volta, but I have no memory of that trip, and I wrote nothing more about it in my diary. The only thing I do remember is the tall, green walls of dense jungle towering over the road. I do know that we never got to Kumasi. I think it must have been further than we expected, and by the time we got to Koforidua we realised we didn't have enough time to go all the way as we had to get back to Accra for Marion to catch her plane.

On 26 July, after a week in Ghana, I said goodbye to Marion and, with much trepidation, set off on my own to the now familiar lorry park. At the entrance I was besieged by men wanting to know where I was going. As soon as I said I was going to Lome, in neighbouring Togoland, so many hands grabbed my bag that I was in real fear of losing it. I was eventually installed in the front seat of a smart Benz

minibus from which another, less favoured, passenger had been evicted. I spent several anxious minutes questioning those all around me to make sure that I was in the right bus.

It took two hours for the bus to fill, but the time passed quickly chatting to Mike, the friendly Ghanaian Air Force mechanic who had vacated the front seat for me. By the time we left the bus was so full that Mike had to share the front seat with me after all, making my splendid '1st class' seat more uncomfortable than any of the packed seats in the back.

Leaving Accra we had to pass through a police checkpoint, but before we got there the bus stopped and Mike got out and squeezed back in under my feet. After we'd passed the checkpoint we stopped again and Mike unfolded himself and got back onto the seat, and we carried on our way. We arrived in Lome at dusk, and the driver found a boy to take me to the Peace Corps hostel.

The next day I was miserable and spent most of the day in bed with a headache. I think I had scared myself sick leaving Accra on my own, with little idea of where I was going, and six long weeks to do it in. I felt so terribly alone and so far from home. But it was a good place to have a melt down as it was:

> *.. a very comfortable hostel, with hot showers, and very good French cooking for four shillings for a three course meal of enormous proportions.*

The Peace Corp staying there were friendly and, as in Accra, shared their ideas on where to go, how to get there, and where I could stay.

The next day, feeling better and ready to face the world again, I borrowed a bicycle and went to explore the town. Lome had a distinctly French feel to it, with pretty boulevards lined with stucco buildings. Although Togoland had originally been colonised by the Germans the French had taken over administering it in 1918, after the 1st World War. It had gained Independence in 1960.

It was a cool, windy day, but the sun was shining, and I soon found my way to the market. It was very different from the one in Kpando, with very little local produce and many more cheap imported goods. There was plenty of cheap cloth, but very little of the quality and design that I had been so attracted to in Kpando. One section of the market was devoted to traditional medicine and the things needed for *juju* [25] - fetishes, *gongons*, and *gris-gris*[26].

After leaving the market I cycled through some pleasant suburbs, but the roads were in a poor state of repair. There were no pavements, and there was sand everywhere. I noticed that there were no storm drains either, which was strange as the climate must be quite as wet as Accra. In the poorer parts of the town the sandy streets were straight and dull, and lined with blank, windowless compound walls. The people I saw were not as well-dressed as in Ghana, but some did look distinctly francophile, despite their black skin. Bicycles, mobylettes and small scooters seemed to be the universal mode of transport for young men, and even some women - something I'd not seen in Freetown.

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25 Black magic

26 Neither of which I can find in Wikipedia

The next day I joined up with another VSO, Diana, to travel to Lagos. First we took a *moto,* another name for a minibus, to Cotonou in Dahomey[27]. The road to Cotonou hugged the coast with mile after mile of beautiful golden, sandy beaches. The road was lined almost continuously on the sea side with tiny fishing villages, casuarina trees and coconut palms. The village huts were arranged in square compounds, each surrounded by beautifully woven grass panels Narrow alleys between the compounds gave us tantalising glimpses of the sparkling, blue sea. We stopped at every village on the way to pick up and drop off passengers and mail.

Crossing the border into Dahomey, we Europeans held up the bus for half an hour, as our passports and visas had to thoroughly checked and our luggage searched.

We arrived in Cotonou at dusk. By now I knew how to find my way around a strange African town. You ask the driver, a friendly fellow passenger, or a passerby who speaks English, for advice on where to go, and an animated discussion generally ensues with everyone, including bystanders, joining in. Eventually someone offers to lead you to your destination, and if you're lucky, he will load your luggage onto his bicycle, or a small boy will be summoned and instructed to take you to where you need to go - for a small '*dash*'.

This time we were taken to a small African hotel. It was almost clean, and rather more expensive than the Peace Corps hostels we were used to, but the proprietor was very friendly and helpful, and after showing us to our room, he directed us to a small restaurant where we could get a European style evening meal. There we were

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[27] Now called Benin

befriended by two young Dahomian men who offered to give us a tour of the town in their car after dinner. One of them was very French in his manner and appearance, and he told that us that his first language was French which, he said, they even spoke at home. The other was ill at ease, spoke little French, and was much more African in both manner and appearance.

Cotonou, which is the commercial centre of Dahomey, is situated on a narrow spit of land between Lake Nokoue and the Atlantic Ocean. It is split in two by the 'Lagoon', a canal which was cut by the French in 1805 to provide a link between the lake and the sea. Once a fishing village, it had been established as a the French trading post in 1851, and later the port was developed to help the French defend the hinterland from the British.

The more salubrious part of the town was very French in appearance, with wide tree-lined boulevards and French style houses. In contrast, the sandy unpaved streets of the poorer parts straggled along the edge of the dirty "Lagoon". We finished our tour at a nightclub, where we danced to the hypnotic, familiar beat of the 'Hi-Life.

The Peace Corps we had met in Lome had advised us to visit Ganvier, a village standing on stilts in the middle of Lake Nokoue, whilst we were in Cotonou. So early the next morning our hotel proprietor drove us down to the lorry park, where he had arranged for a taxi to take as to the lakeside village, four miles away, where we could hire a canoe to take us out to Ganvier.

Ganvier, sometimes called "the Venice of Africa", was first inhabited in the 18th century by people taking refuge in the swamps around the

lake to evade slave traders. Nowadays the inhabitants are mostly fishermen, and in 1966 there was already a small amount of tourism.

That day was market day in the village where we embarked, and the creek was full of dugout canoes - some tied up to the jetty, others pulled up on the shore. and yet others returning to Ganvier loaded with yams, rice and firewood. They were all being paddled by women, most with another, younger, woman accompanying them.

We set off, in the rain, at about 10 o'clock, surrounded by loaded canoes. There was a festive atmosphere, and we were greeted from all sides with a cheery "White man, white man!" "*Yawho*!" Once we left the creek it was about three miles across the lake to Ganvier. The water was silver and still, and the distant shore was fringed with green. It was beautiful, even in the rain.

Once out in the open water we found ourselves surrounded by barriers of twigs that broke the silvery surface. These were fish traps, and here were the menfolk. Some were fishing from canoes, others were standing in the chest deep water, casting their nets, or mending their traps. Even in the rainy season and in its deepest parts the lake is no more than about two metres deep.

It took about an hour to paddle across to the village. At first the stilted bamboo platforms were fairly spread out, but as we got closer they became more and more closely packed. Each platform was an island, surrounded by water, and supporting a complete compound. The only way to leave each one was by canoe. The compound walls, and the huts inside, were all made of woven grass, and all household activities took place on those rickety platforms, even the the pounding of the cassava and yams, and the cooking. I did wonder

what life must be like, perched there above the water - how often they had fires, and how they coped with small children.

As we paddled deeper into the village the place became more crowded and squalid. The water was filthy. Besides the rubbish, it was clear that all human and animal waste went straight into it. The only clean drinking water available was from fire hydrants three miles away on the lake shore, so most household chores, like washing and cooking, were undertaken using the filthy lake water. In places black, soggy ground broke the surface and water hogs wallowed in the mud. The children we saw were ragged and dirty, but they were friendly, waving, smiling and begging, holding out their grubby hands: "*Oui, oui. Cadeau*[28]*, cadeau, cadeau*" - a cry that echoed all through Dahomey.

*Ganvier. Internet photo*

[28] Gift

When we returned to the shore some time after mid-day the last stragglers were still returning from market in their laden canoes. The whole trip from Cotonou, taxi and canoe ride, had cost us Fr.800 (£1) each.

We got back to Cotonou and were ready to leave again by 2pm. We found a taxi in the lorry park almost ready to leave for Lagos; they just needed two more people to make up a pay load. Once our luggage had been loaded on to the roof, and Diana and I had squeezed into our seats, we were ready to go.

Just as we were pulling out of our parking place a shout went up round the lorry park: "*Guerre en Lagos*![29]" Our fellow passengers erupted into excited discussion. Suddenly no one spoke English, or even French, any more. The taxi stopped and everyone got out and carried on shouting and waving their arms on the pavement. Passers by were waylaid and asked for news. Diana and I had no idea what it was all about, except, that there was trouble in Lagos. We didn't know if we would be able to get there that day, or if were we stuck here in Cotonou. We didn't know what to do.

Eventually a fellow passenger, a Nigerian, explained to us that everyone was debating whether or not to leave. The driver didn't want to make the two hour trip to the border and risk being turned back as he didn't have enough petrol to get all the way back to Cotonou. He usually relied on filling up in Lagos where petrol was cheaper. The Nigerian, on the other hand, wanted to take the risk. No way did he want to get stuck in Dahomey. Once the border had

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[29] War in Lagos!

closed, he said, there was no knowing when it might open again. It might be days, or even weeks.

After a while two of the passengers left. They didn't want to risk forfeiting Fr.700 if we did get turned back at the border. "Those stupid bushmen" muttered the Nigerian.

After waiting around for an hour or so, wondering what to do, three cars arrived from Lagos with the news that "it was all over", and that the border was open again. By now our taxi driver had given up and gone, and it took another hour to find another taxi willing to take us. By then we didn't have much time to get to the border before sundown, when it closed for the night, and our Nigerian was concerned that once it closed it might not open again the next day. So we set off at great speed, and took a 'shortcut' along a bush road. I don't remember that journey at all, but my diary says:

*What a road! Not a journey I would want to repeat.*

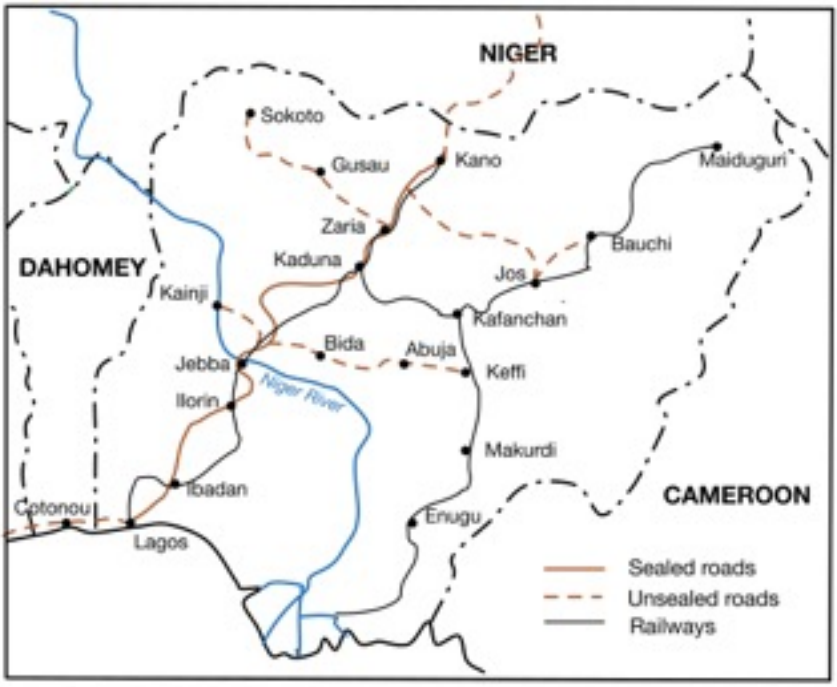
We reached the border at 6.30, with half an hour to spare before it closed. But there were further delays because a previous passenger had left some luggage in the taxi. The surly border guard insisted that we could only take through what belonged to us but, at the same time, he wouldn't let us leave the ownerless suitcase behind either. He insisted that we wait until the owner arrived to collect it. The minutes ticked by, tempers flared, and the guard obstinately refused to reason with us.

At zero hour another, more senior guard, arrived and the problem luggage was found and removed to the guard post. Our vehicle was then very thoroughly searched, and our suitcases emptied right down

to the dirty underwear at the bottom, before we were allowed to go. We raced the next hundred yards to the Nigerian border post, which we passed without any further palaver.

Those first Nigerians looked so tall, so clean and so friendly. It was a relief to be finally leaving poor, crowded, dirty Dahomey behind.

We reached Lagos without further ado.


NIGER
Sokoto
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DAHOMEY
Kainji
Kafanchan
Bida
Abuja
Jebba
Keffi
Niger River
Ilorin
Makurdi
Ibadan
CAMEROON
Cotonou
Enugu
Lagos
Sealed roads
Unsealed roads
Railways

**Nigeria**

## Chapter 7. Lagos

As we drove into the outskirts of Lagos that evening, 30 July 1966, people were dancing in the streets. Handsome Yoruba women, wrapped in their fine woollen lappas, and their elaborately tied head scarves, danced with arms waving over their heads, ululating and chanting "*Awolowo! Awolowo! Awolowo*!" We had no idea what it was all about. It certainly didn't look like trouble.

Our taxi driver kindly dropped us off at the Peace Corp hostel as there was a curfew and by then it was too late for us to catch a bus or a taxi. We were relieved to find the door still open, as our driver had been concerned that it might already be locked. We were warmly welcomed, and soon surrounded by tall Americans curious to know where we had come from, and how we had got there so late at night. As in Accra, most of them were volunteers who had been working in Nigeria for two years and were now waiting for their plane back to America, but there were also some familiar faces among them who I knew from Sierra Leone. They had travelled directly from Freetown with the intention of catching a train up to Kano, only to find themselves grounded in Lagos.

It was here that I began to learn what was going on - what 'the trouble' was about. I did know that there had been a failed coup in Nigeria earlier in the year, carried out by junior army officers disillusioned by the corruption of their politicians. I didn't know that tensions had continued to simmer since then. We didn't get much international news in Freetown. We didn't have a radio, and cell phones and personal computers hadn't been invented in 1966. We

occasionally saw the local Sierra Leone Times, when the nuns passed it on to us, but it was only a local paper with very little international news.

What I now know is that the earlier coup, in January, had been put down by Major General Ironsi, an Ibo from eastern Nigeria, who had then taken over as head of state. In May there had been bloody riots in northern Nigeria, when many Ibo had been massacred. Then on 29th July, the day before we arrived in Lagos, northern soldiers at the Abeokuta Barracks, just north of Lagos, had mutinied, killing many senior Ibo officers, including Ironsi. The following day, when we were held up in Cotonou, Lieutenant-Colonel Gowon, a northern Christian, had led a successful counter coup. That was the "guerre" that had briefly closed the border. One of Gowon's first moves had been to release Chief Awolowo, the leader and hero of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, from prison. The people we had seen dancing in the streets were celebrating his release and anticipating that he would be installed as the next prime minister.

All I knew at the time was that there had been a successful coup, some soldiers had mutinied and some people had been killed, and that Lieutenant-Colonel Gowon was now the head of state, and that 'it was all over'. and that 'things would settle down now'.

It was then that I began to hear, for the first time, harrowing stories of what had happened in northern Nigeria earlier in the year. On the night of 29th May thousands of Ibos and other easterners had been rounded up and slaughtered, right across the whole of northern Nigeria, in what appeared to be a very well co-ordinated massacre. Several of the Peace Corp I met at the hostel had lost students that night, and I heard of one, who had been teaching at a girls' boarding

school, who had woken the following morning to find her whole class had been butchered in their beds. She was so traumatised that she had had to be repatriated home to America almost immediately, suffering a severe nervous breakdown.

There was a historical background to the northerners resentment of the Ibos. The northern tribes, predominantly Hausa and Fulani, had a long history of Islam and, when the British colonised Nigeria, they had rejected Christianity and western education. As the British developed infrastructure they needed western educated people to run their administration and they bought in willing Ibos, who having never been Moslem, and who traditionally had a much less authoritarian social structure, had taken readily to western education. The Hausa and Fulani educated their boys in *madrasas*, and they didn't educate their girls at all, so when the British established schools all over Nigeria those in the north, particularly the girls' schools, were attended almost exclusively by Ibos and other non-Moslem southerners. As the Ibos had gathered wealth and influence the Hausa-Fulani resented their presence more and more until, when Ironsi took power and installed many of his Ibo cronies in positions of influence, tensions spilled over, culminating in the massacres on the night 29th May.

The first thing I did on the morning after I arrived was to go to the British Council, to let them know of my whereabouts, as Duncan had asked me to do. The councillor I met was very friendly and interested to hear where I had been so far, but he was not so happy with my plan to continue through the middle belt of Nigeria as the situation in the country was still quite unstable. To underline his point he told me that all Peace Corp had been forbidden to travel until further notice. The risk, he explained, was not to me as a

woman, or a European, but in the possibility of being caught up unwittingly in violence. I could, for example, find myself on a bus or lorry that was attacked. He advised me against my plan, but added that he had no authority to stop me. He asked me to, at the least, wait a few days in Lagos, until things had settled down.

I left the British Council and caught a bus into town where, I had been told, I would find a bank where I could cash my traveller's cheques. I had barely enough money left in my wallet even for the bus fare.

Central Lagos stands on an island in the middle of the Lagos Lagoon, and the only access in those days was across the Carter Bridge. As the bus approached the bridge the traffic got heavier and we slowed to a crawl. I noticed that people in the street were standing staring ahead, towards the bridge, and the people around me on the bus seemed to be getting agitated. They began to stand up and shout, and soon the bus conductor was imploring everyone to sit down and keep calm. I had no idea what was going on. As we crept further, some of the people in the street were beginning to move away, looking behind them anxiously. Others were standing, still staring along the road. Hawkers were packing up their stalls and hurrying away. Shops were closing, their shutters being pulled down and their iron grills pulled across. I asked the man next to me what was going on, but his English had deserted him. All of a sudden I felt I was an unwelcome intruder on someone else's drama.

Now people were moving towards the door of the bus and getting off, even though it was still moving. Some of the people on the street where running, others were still standing staring. Some men were even moving towards the bridge. The atmosphere was electric.

I felt the panic even though I didn't know what was going on. And I didn't know what to do. If I went to get off I could be caught in the crush at the door, and anyway I had no idea where we were, or where the hostel was. I didn't know what bus I should catch to get back, or if indeed there would be any buses, and I only had 10d left - not enough for another bus fare.

The man next to me finally explained to me that there had been some fighting up ahead on the approaches to the bridge, and there had been some shooting. Then he too stood up and left. By now the bus was almost empty.

We crept on until we reached a large roundabout at the approach to the bridge. In the middle there were soldiers crouching in various positions, guns cocked and ready. There was a tank and a small armoured car, and on the ground there was a tarpaulin, with two lumps underneath.

When we did eventually get onto the bridge the traffic sped up, but on the other side the streets were deserted. and the shops were closed. I was panicking. What if the banks were closed? What if there was more fighting and the bridge was closed so that I couldn't get back? I knew no one here, no one knew where I was, and I had no money.

As we got closer to the centre of the city things began to look more normal. Shops were open and the streets were once again crowded with people going about their business. I finally began to relax a bit.

The bus dropped me off in Broad Street, and I almost ran the last hundred yards to the bank. I tumbled in at the door, and even then

was afraid that it might be closed, as it was so empty. But I got my money, and stumbled out. I spent the rest of the morning wandering around Lagos in an uncomfortable daze, still not sure what had happened.

Later that morning I bumped into Diana, and it was only then that I began to feel safe again. She was so calm and normal. She had come into town some time after me and wasn't even aware that that there had been any trouble.

Lagos was so different from Freetown, or any other West African city that I had visited. Broad Street was lined with modern, multi-storey buildings. Shops had plate glass windows so unlike the familiar African shophouses. After browsing along the street for a while and peering in at the stylish window displays Diana took me down to the lagoon, just a short distance from Broad Street, where we ate our lunch. The shore was fringed with trees and narrow gardens. Tall buildings, that housed public services and large international firms, peeped through the trees. The beach was lined with small boats and canoes, and others floated at their moorings. There was a marina further along, home to all sorts of shapes and sizes of yachts and launches. Across the lagoon the distant shore was lined with ships, and the cranes, factories and warehouses of Apapa, Lagos' industrial port. The water was brown and peaceful. It was a lovely spot, so we found a bench to sit down and eat our lunch. But no sooner had we sat down then we were besieged by beggars. After year in Africa I was used to beggars, but I was shocked by the number of crippled and emaciated people who crowded around us, and disgusted by their persistence.

We were about to give up and leave when two young men approached us and shooed the beggars away. They asked us where we were from, and if we liked Lagos. This wasn't unusual as educated young men not infrequently approached us, ostensibly to practice their English. These two told us that they were students, and offered to show us around Lagos University.

I remember stark concrete buildings, in the tropical modernist style that had been adapted from Le Corbusier's international style, and landscaped with tall coconut palms.

The boys then invited us back to one of their homes for refreshments. I would have turned them down, as something about them made me uneasy, but Diana had already accepted the invitation before I had said anything.

They drove us to a pleasance suburb of smart modern houses, somewhere on Lagos Island. I remember a palatial house, with modern white painted walls hung with art works, large French windows opening onto a generous patio. And I remember wondering who his father might be.

After serving drinks my uneasiness turned out to be justified, as the boys became amorous. In general I felt completely safe with African men., and I had concluded that to most of them white women were untouchable, but just occasionally I had come across wealthy, educated young men who seemed to believe that all unmarried white women were promiscuous. On this occasion we immediately insisted that they take us back to the hostel, which they did with an ill grace.

Later that evening it was confirmed in the evening paper that there had, indeed, been an incident on the bridge that morning. Two soldiers had been killed just a few minutes before we passed which probably explained the two lumps I had noticed under the tarpaulin. It must have happened whilst the bus was held up in the traffic jam.

The next morning Tim offered take us to a native market where we could buy souvenirs much more cheaply than in Broad Street. Once again we caught a bus to take us across Carter Bridge. The part of town he took us to was a maze of narrow streets, tin shacks, open drains, craftsmen and smells. He took us to a covered market, so different from the elegant shops on Broad Street. It was housed in a large black, corrugated iron building, built around a muddy courtyard. Here, at least, the beggars weren't so persistent.

Inside the market we found the bead sellers I had been looking for, and I bought a string of beads. Those Yoruba market mammies were hard nosed businesswoman and I paid far too much for them, even after some hard bargaining. I paid 5/- for a string of beads that a few days later I found I could have bought for 1/- in Bida.

There was some interesting native spun cloth, but the price was too high and the mammies were unpleasantly aggressive, so we moved on quickly. I eventually bought myself a white Yoruba blouse, that I thought I had got for a fair price but, which I found later once I had got it outside into the light of day, was dirty and second-hand.

After we left the noise, heat and squalor of the market we wandered on down the street until I noticed a narrow lane where hawkers were selling the characteristic fine woollen cloth that the Yoruba women used for their *lappas*. Here they were much more friendly and

anxious to serve us. I found some light blue cloth with a large check patterns that I liked and, after discussing how much I needed to make a *lappa* and blouse for myself, and negotiating the price, I enquired about a tailor. The woman took me along the lane to a tailor's shop where she organised for it to be made up for me whilst I waited, all for the princely sum of 3/6. She then found me a stool at her stall and we sat and chatted, and watched the people strolling by, until it was ready. The mammies in the surrounding stalls were chatting among themselves in their soft musical language, bargaining quietly with passing customers, and occasionally speaking in English to include me. It was a very pleasant way to spend the late afternoon.

Apart from Diana and me the only other non-Peace Corp staying in the hostel was a Time-Life photographer from America, and as we got on very well he asked me if I would like to go with him on a trip into the eastern Nigeria, where he wanted to take some photos of the situation that was developing there for the magazine. I still had very little idea of the broader issues behind the unrest, and of the trouble brewing in the east, and I turned him down. By then I had set my mind firmly on visiting central Nigeria. I do wonder to this day if I missed an opportunity to witness history in the making as the unrest in Nigeria at the time culminated in the very bloody Biafra war that broke out a year later, when eastern Nigeria attempted to secede from the federation.

I wanted to travel through central Nigeria because I had learned in my Geography studies at University that it was the part of the country most adversely affected by the slave trade. Over the centuries it had been raided from both the north and the south, to feed both the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic slave trades. I understood that it was a depopulated and forgotten part of Nigeria,.

Something about that fascinated me, and I wanted to see it for myself.

## Chapter 8. Heading North

After a couple of days the Peace Corps were given the okay to travel again so I decided it was time for me to move on. Diana said she wanted to come with me. I had learned that there was a daily train to Kano that left at midday, and that the local newspaper, the Daily Times, had a lorry that left at 4pm each afternoon. As the lorry was free, with only the expectation of a tip for the driver, it seemed like the best option, so the next morning I set off to the Times office to arrange for the lorry to pick us up at the hostel that afternoon. When I got back Diana was in a terrible state and had bitten her nails right down to the quick. She said she was scared, and asked me if I would go alone. When I said 'yes', she decided she would come with me after all. But by the time she'd finally made up her mind we had missed the chance to catch the lorry.

I resolved to catch the train the next day, with or without Diana. In the end she didn't come with me and I never saw her again.

When I got to the station I found that I should have booked, and that there were apparently no spare seats left. Fortunately I spotted Tim and some friends already on the train and together we managed persuade the man at the ticket office that I was traveling with them, and that there was room for me in their compartment. I eventually got my ticket and boarded the train with five minutes to spare.

Twelve hours later my initial relief at finally leaving Lagos had been replaced with anxiety. The train was due to arrive at Mokwa, where I

was getting off, at 3am. What would I do until the morning? Where would I go?

Sometime after midnight the train stopped for a long time at Jebba, on the south bank of the Niger River. The Jebba Bridge was the only one for hundreds of miles up or down stream. In fact there were no further bridges upstream, and the only one downstream was at Onitsha, several hundred miles away in eastern Nigeria. It had been built in 1910 when the single track railway line was pushed through from Lagos to Kano. It now served the main North-South road as well, and it was the only crossing point for nomads with their herds of cattle. The bridge was so narrow that everyone had to take their turn crossing and, I was told, cattle had priority. A large herd could take hours to wander cross, so there was often a very long wait.

We eventually got moving again and trundled slowly across the bridge. As it was dark, to my disappointment, I couldn't see anything. About half an hour later we pulled in to Mokwa station, and I clambered off onto the unlit platform. I stood for a few minutes watching the train with my Peace Corp companions pull away, feeling unbearably lonely and wondering what to do next. The stationmaster bustled by with a hurricane lamp, but he was busy and didn't stop when I asked him where I could go until dawn. As my eyes adjusted to the dark I noticed that were plenty of people on the platform – traders, beggars, children sleeping on rolled out mats, and maybe a few thieves - I didn't know - so I decided it was best not to sleep, and sat down disconsolately on my suitcase. As I was the only person who had got off the train I did wonder if everyone else there was homeless. In retrospect I think many of them were probably Ibos waiting for a train south.

Eventually the station master returned and kindly opened the Waiting Room for me. I sat down to wait for the dawn. A few minutes later he came back and offered me his prayer mat, supposing that I would want to sleep. Thanking him, I rolled myself up in my new, blue checked lappa, and slept remarkably well on that dirty, hard floor!

I awoke as dawn was beginning to break and asked the station master to direct me to the town. He told me that it was a "mile" away, and assigned a porter to show me the way. The porter put my suitcase on his bicycle and, as we walked along the dewy track in the growing light, he told me that he was on his way home after doing the night shift. It turned out to be a very long "mile". As we approached the village the cocks were beginning to crow, and the first wisps of smoke from cooking fires heralded the coming day. By the time we reached the main road my feet were quite sore.

The porter took me to the 'chief's' house and explained to him that I was heading for Bida, and asked him to arrange transport for me. The 'chief' was a small, old man with a twinkle in his eye. There were several women in the dark depths of his house who I assumed were his wives. I was offered a chair, and one of the women offered me a cup of tea. I was hungry, having not yet eaten that morning, and the thought of tea was very welcome, but when it came I wasn't so sure. It was grey and murky, and I had no way of knowing if the water was fit to drink. The last thing I needed was diarrhoea so far from anywhere. But I did want that tea, so I reassured myself that the water would have been boiled, crossed my fingers, and gulped it down. It tasted of woodsmoke, but it was wet and very sweet - and fortunately I had no after-effects.

I don't know how long I sat there. No one spoke any English, but they were friendly. The women peeped shyly at me from the depths of the house, and every now and again one of them would indicate towards me and say something, and they would all laugh. I had no doubt they were talking about me. At one point the 'chief' offered me a bag of silver coins which, he indicated, was mine if I would stay with him as his 'wife'. He took my refusal quite cheerfully.

Eventually a lorry came by and the 'chief' waved it down. It took some negotiation for the driver to agree to take me the hundred miles to Bida, as he was heading along the main road to Kaduna. Going through Bida would mean a long detour along side roads, but he eventually agreed to take me for ten shillings, a sum that included a 'dash' of two shillings for the old man.

As it wasn't a main route the road to Bida was laterite and badly potholed and, I learned, liable to be closed after heavy rain. About sixty miles from Mokwa it did rain, heavily, and we were stopped at a village to wait for the road to dry out. But the driver was impatient. He took me to the village chief and told him that I was a missionary teacher from Mokwa on my way to Bida for hospital treatment. He said my car had broken down in Mokwa so he had agreed to take me. I did my best to shiver and look ill, and to my surprise they believed us, and we were allowed to carry on. I did wonder if that was the tale that the old man had concocted to persuade the driver to take me so far out of his way.

The driver dropped me off in the Bida lorry park soon after noon. The first person I asked to give me directions to the VSO house detailed a small boy to take me there. There were so few Europeans living in Bida that everyone knew where he lived.

Bob was out when I got there, but his steward invited me in and offered me a cold drink and some lunch. When he got back Bob told me that he was leaving the next day on his own travels, but that I was welcome to stay as long as I liked, so long as I paid his steward when I left.

That evening he took me to the local club. The Bida Club was a relic of the colonial days when there were British District Officers and other colonial administrators in the area. By 1966 its membership had been widened to include Africans, and it was there that the few Europeans living in Bida met for a drink and to socialise. Imagine my surprise when we walked in and there, propping it up the bar, was a friend from my university days! It was somehow very comforting to see a familiar face from 'home' after my long journey. Greg had studied geology at Birmingham, and he and his flatmate used to come round to our flat on Sunday evenings to play cards. What made the coincidence even more extraordinary was that he wasn't working anywhere near Bida, but 200 miles away in the oil fields of the Niger Delta. He had come up to Bida for a long weekend to get away from heat and humidity of the coast, and to see a bit more of the country.

The next morning I set out together to explore the town. I found the boy from the day before waiting outside, and he offered to act as our guide.

Bida is the old capitol of the Nupe kingdom, the predominant tribe in this part of Nigeria. In 1966 it was a very African town of small round mud huts arranged in walled compounds. All that was visible from the road were the thatched roofs peeping over the high

compound walls. There were very few European style houses in the town then.

The Nupe are good looking, slightly built people with "fair"[30] skin and, being strict Moslems, their women are confined behind their compound walls. They are renowned throughout Nigeria as skilled craftsmen with well established craft guilds. In particular Bida was known for its brass and bead workers. In the past the town also traded slaves who had been gathered from other tribes in the hinterland.

Our guide first took us to the brass workers quarter. The workshop we visited was in a *katamba,* a small round hut that served as the entrance to the compound, and where the head of the household traditionally met his visitors. Besides serving as a meeting space the *katamba* also sometimes housed a workshop, a shop, or even goats. Inside the one we visited two men were working in the dingy light. I watched as one beat a sheet of brass into the shape of a plate, whilst the other decorated a dish using a hammer and nail to create a traditional dot decoration.

Next we went to the bead maker's quarters where I found the workshop we visited much more interesting. Inside the dark interior of the *katamba* three men were working around a central fire. The older of the three men, who I assumed to be the master craftsman, stepped forward to greet us and invite us in. As my eyes adjusted to the dark I could see that the workshop was littered with tools, broken bottles of various colours, and other raw materials. The walls were festooned with strings of colourful beads that looked quite different

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30 Brown rather than black.

from the sand cast ones I had seen in Kpandu. Broken bottles and old beads were being melted down in a pot over the fire, which was being kept red hot by a small boy working some ingenious double bellows, made from two goatskins, that he compressed alternately. As we watched one of the men drew some glass out of the pot and dripped it on to a rod held by the other, and the old man deftly shaped it into beads with paddles. Then, with a pair of tongs, he delicately decorated the beads with a thin trail of white glass taken from another pot. He finally knocked the beads off the rod and into another pot to cool.

With help from my guide the old man told me that traditionally beads had been made from locally manufactured glass, the Nupe being the only people south of the Sahara with the skill of glass making. When he was young they had made beads from glass that they had manufactured themselves, but now all the glass they used was made by melting down old bottle and, sadly, the art of glassmaking was being lost. He also told me that they had recently had to put up the price of a string of beads, from sixpence to a shilling, because they now had to pay sixpence for bottles that they used to get for nothing.

After I had been watching for some time the old man invited me through the *katamba* into the main compound. We emerged into a sunny yard with a beaten earth floor where I was introduced to his senior wife who showed me around. On the far side of the yard two young women were rhythmically pounding cassava in a large mortar made from a hollowed out log Their pestles were rough poles about five feet long. Nearby several small children were playing in the dust. There were chickens, a goat and a couple of mangy looking dogs. Around the edge of the yard there were several round, thatched huts. But the largest one, the old man's, was rectangular and whitewashed with a heavily carved door which, he told us, was not

normal for a Nupe house. It had been a gift from an Ibo friend. The door posts and lintel were decorated with colourful, floral tin plates. Each of his wives had a hut of her own, each with a similarly decorated doorway. The senior wife showed me into her hut. Inside there was an iron framed bed with a mosquito net, and three piles of decorative clay pots used for storage. Ordinary pots and crockery, for every day use, were stacked on top of each pile. In one corner of the room there was a loom on which she wove the traditional Bida cloth. It hung vertically down the wall and was about twenty inches wide. It produced the widest indigenous cloth I had seen so far in my travels.

*Two of the beadmaker's wives*

As I showed some interest in her loom she took me to one of the other huts where one of the younger wives was weaving some bright

red cloth. She was sitting cross legged on a mat on the floor in front of her hanging loom, with a baby sprawled in her lap. As there was no shuttle she was laboriously threading each row of the weft through the threads of the warp by hand. On the floor beside her there was a piece of finished cloth that she had patterned with blue and yellow thread. When she stood up I saw that she was a very pretty, small slender woman. Her hands, feet and cheeks were stained red, as was her naked baby, and her clothes were bright and gypsy like. She wore the traditional long cloth headdress that hung down to her shoulders. I commented in my diary that "*she was a beautiful sight to behold*".

It was a fascinating morning, spoiled only when my young guide demanded a five shilling "*dash*": Three shillings-for the bicycle which he said he had hired - quite unnecessarily as far as I was concerned - and two shillings for himself. I did manage to persuade him that two shillings was more than enough, but he fought hard and it left a sour taste.

That afternoon an African colleague of Bob's called round to see if he wanted to go with him to visit one of their pupils whose family were farmers living some distance from Bida, up on the plateau. Bob was busy as he was leaving that afternoon, but he suggested I go instead.

After leaving Bida the road crossed the lush green flood plain of the Kaduna River, through rice paddies and small stands of oil palms, then climbed imperceptibly up to the plateau where the savanna vegetation was much more sparse, and where the farmers grew sorghum and millet, groundnuts, shea nuts and cotton. The compound we visited was a stockaded cluster of round, thatched mud

*Rice paddies outside Bida*

huts. The only people there in the middle of the day were a couple of women, and some children. I was shown inside one of the huts. It was dark and sparsely furnished with a beaten earth floor, and few of the comforts of the huts I had visited earlier in the day.

On the way back we made a detour to look for an abandoned Fulani settlement that my companion had heard about. We walked for some way along a narrow track through the low scrub until we eventually came to a clearing where there were three-small grass huts about six feet high. As the Fulani are traditionally nomadic herdsmen, these would have been quickly built and easily abandoned when the family moved on.

Later that evening, after eating supper by myself, I sat down to read, but I was distracted by the large insects that were flying in the window, banging into the hanging light bulb and dropping dead to the floor. A couple of toads were waiting there ready to pounce on

any that moved and gobble them up. As I watched a pile of dismembered wings steadily grew on the floor beneath the light. I remember thinking that snakes ate toads, and wondering what I would do if one should come in. The steward had gone home by then and I was all alone in the house.

*Inside a stockaded village*

The next morning I paid the steward, thanked him for looking after me, and made my way down to the lorry park, with the intention of catching a lorry to Kaduna. Instead I found a lorry waiting to go to Abuja, another hundred miles further east. I had heard that Abuja had an interesting pottery, and that it would be easy to get to Jos from there so, on the spur of the moment, I decided to go there instead. It took an hour for the lorry to fill up, and as I sat waiting I began to wonder if it would ever get to Abuja as it was becoming

seriously overloaded. By the time we left the load on the roof was so heavy that it was beginning to sag. Beside the luggage there were two men up there. Once we got going the roof groaned every time we went over a bump, and I couldn't help thinking of the British Council man's warning. It wasn't violence that concerned me, but the very real possibility of an accident or a breakdown which, as I well knew, were very commonplace on African roads. I felt very vulnerable so far from any modern medical or other facilities. If anything did go wrong no one in the world knew where I was, or would miss me for several weeks.

*Guinea savanna on the road to Abuja, with an inselberg in the distance*

We did get there safely and I found my way to the house of the American Methodist missionaries who Bob had told me about. They reluctantly agreed to let me stay. They already had a visitor, and for the first time I began to feel unwelcome and to question my temerity, just expecting people to put me up and feed me.

Abuja was a pretty town, set in a green valley and surrounded by inselbergs[31] and waterfalls. In those days it was very small, and not at all the modern capital city that it is today. It had been established in 1951 when an English potter, recruited by the Nigerian colonial government, set up a pottery training centre. He chose Abuja because it was in the middle of the country and, as the area was so sparsely populated, it would be easy for trainees from other parts of Nigeria with different cultures to fit in.

I visited the pottery that afternoon but I don't remember much about it. I noted in my diary that it was "*really rather dull*". My fascination was with the traditional ways of doing things, and I had been hoping to see another cottage industry like I had seen in Kpando. This was a much more modern set up, with potter's wheels and a wood fired kiln, not unlike what I remembered from the pottery classes I had been to as a child in England.

I had intended to find a lorry going to Jos the next day but the missionaries advised me against it as the road was still very bad and muddy after the early rains. Instead their visitor offered to take me on to Keffi where I could catch a train to Jos. There were some Peace Corp girls there who would probably be able to put me up.

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31 Isolated hills rising abruptly from their surroundings.

The girls were very surprised to see me when I did turn up on their doorstep the next day because, as far as they knew, all volunteers had been grounded, and they were expecting to leave at any moment, when the Peace Corps truck turned up for them. They were all packed up and ready to go. Fortunately they managed to find a blowup mattress for me, and although there was very little food left in the house, they managed to feed me. As we went to bed that night they warned me that, if the Peace Corps truck did turn up, I would have to leave too, whatever time of the night or day it was.

Before we turned in we had arranged for a taxi to pick me up at six the following morning to take me the last thirty miles to the railway station. As it was the taxi didn't turn up, but a teacher from the college where the girls taught took me instead, only to find that the train was running six hours late. Not wanting to hang around waiting that long I decided to return to Keffi and take the chance that the girls would still be there, and try again the next day.

We got back to Keffi before nine, and they were still there. Now the whole day stretched ahead of me with nothing to do. The girls went in to the college to tidy up a few things, and I wandered into the town, but there was nothing of interest there, no market explore or local crafts to investigate. It was a new town that been set up as the British administrative centre for the area. The girls came back for lunch and suggested that I do them a favour and take their pony for a ride up the track behind the house. They had been too busy and preoccupied to take it out for some time, and who knew when it would next be exercised if they did have to leave. They told me that if I followed the track up the hill I would eventually reach a village where some of their pupils lived.

I never did get to the village. As I remember it it was a very dull ride, on a very slow unwilling pony, who only perked up once I turned round and headed back home. Later that evening I wrote in my diary.

> *I'm kicking myself now* (for not waiting for the train) *as I'll only have the same experience tomorrow, after spending the first really boring day of my trip.*

I left Keffi early the next morning. This time I didn't wait for the taxi to pick me up, but hitched a ride to the lorry park and joined it there. The taxi was over an hour late leaving, but it didn't matter as the train was six hours late again. Whilst we were waiting an old bushmen was ushered into the taxi, and his three shilling fare taken. I was a bit surprised as no one had asked me for my fare. Ten minutes later it transpired the poor man wasn't going to the station after all, and that the man who had collected his fare wasn't the driver either, nor was he anywhere to be found by then.

> *5 September, 1966.*
> *Six hours on a small Nigerian railway station isn't much fun. There was nowhere to sit, except on my suitcase which wasn't up to it. Nothing to drink or eat and no toilet.*

The platform was crowded and by midday it was very hot. Somehow I learned that the train was late because it had been stopped at Makurdi, where it left eastern Nigeria and crossed the Benue River, to be searched for arms. Once again I began to get worried. What if there was trouble? As far as I knew I was thirty

miles from the nearest European, and nobody, least of all my parents, knew where I was. I was hot, dirty, bored and, for the first time since leaving Lagos, frightened.

I didn't buy a ticket straight away as I wasn't at all certain that the train would come that day, but when eventually I did, things changed and I was offered a seat in the station master's office.

When the train did pull in and slow to a halt I spotted a white face in a carriage near where I was standing, so I quickly climbed in. Wimmie was a strange, fair haired Dutch girl and, although I shared a room with her for the next three days, I hardly got to know her at all. She'd been teaching in Ghana for seven years and living on her own. She told me she seldom bothered to cook, but lived on bread and cake. She spent the holidays travelling, and had just spent twenty four hours travelling up from Enugu, and had thoroughly enjoyed it, so much so that she was thinking of carrying on all the way to Maiduguri, which was even further beyond Jos than she had already travelled from Enugu.

The train was slow, dirty and uncomfortable with wooden slat seats, and it stopped at every station and several places in between. We eventually reached Kafanchan at about four thirty that afternoon, where we stopped for a long time. As I hadn't eaten since leaving Keffi that morning I was very hungry, so I bought myself some chicken and rice wrapped in a sticky banana leaf, from a hawker. Not for the first time I wished I had bought a tin bowl and a fork with me. The chicken was hot and good, but the rice was horrid, so I eventually gave it and the chicken bones to a very grateful beggar who wolfed it down as if he hadn't eaten for days.

There were so many beggars on that station. The one I had chosen had elephantiasis in one leg. He propelled himself along the platform using his one healthy leg, and the other knee. His thigh was enormous, and his calf and foot dragged behind like a huge, misshapen balloon. His huge foot stuck out at an angle, with his horrible bloated toes splaying out from the end.

After four hours of waiting another train pulled in. This, we learned, was the "limited" from Lagos, going direct to Jos, and our train, which stopped at every station, couldn't leave until it had gone. So we quickly gathered up our luggage and clambered across. This train, unlike the previous one, was clean and comfortable, with a restaurant car and usable loos. The people were different too - better dressed and, judging by the fact that many were reading - better educated.

We walked along the corridor until eventually we found a nearly empty compartment with only three white Americans in it and, to my delight, one of them was Gary in whose house Marion, Celia and I had stayed when we were in Kabala four months earlier. The boys had come directly from Lagos and were planning to spend a few days in Jos, and they were very happy for us to join them.

Before the train pulled out of the station a very lively group of Nigerian students joined us as well. They all spoke good English and they told us that they were on their way home for the holidays after studying in Lagos. They were quite tipsy after twelve hours on the train, drinking. I particularly remember one them, a tall, good-looking Muslim boy, wearing a red skull cap and a long yellow gown over his trousers and shirt, who lamented that he didn't know how to

love, and that all he wanted was to meet the girl who could teach him how.

## Chapter 9. Northern Nigeria

We arrived in Jos just before midnight. Even at that hour the station was crowded. The foyer was packed with women sitting on their piles of luggage with their children sleeping beside them on the the ground. There were mattresses and even a bedstead among the baggage, and everything was being guarded by armed soldiers. We had to step over people and luggage as we made our way to the station exit. These, I later learned, were Ibos fleeing the violence in the North. There was a three-day wait to get on the train south, and when they did manage to get on it was so packed that the menfolk had to sit on the steps of the third class carriages with ropes to hold them in, or on the roof. It was said that some men were traveling down to Kaduna and boarding the upcoming training in order to keep seats for their families for the trip back south to Enugu. These trains were being stopped, sometimes for days, at Makurdi to be searched. There were horrific stories circulating of menfolk being dragged from the train and beaten, and worse. It was rumoured that not all made it home.

We spent three days in Jos, staying in the student's quarters at the Museum. Each room was a small round hut with a tall thatched roof, and as I lay in my comfortable bed I could look right up into the bamboo rafters. We ate at a restaurant, called the Bite of Benin, that was built in the style of the Oba[32] of Benin's palace - a square, red mud building, with fluted walls and a thatched roof, and a tiled tower over the entrance. The tables were arranged around two shaded,

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32 The traditional ruler

open courtyards where frangipani blossom scented the air and decorated the tables. It was more like a resort hotel restaurant than anything I was used to.

Jos had been established as the British colonial administrative centre for Northern Nigeria, chosen for its its central position and its pleasant climate, situated as it was 1,238 metres above sea level. It had had the added advantage of a very sparse native population so, as in Abuja, it was relatively easy to bring in and settle a work force from other parts of Nigeria without causing inter-tribal strife. It had grown very rapidly after 1904 when the British had started extracting tin. Well paid work in the tin mines had attracted large numbers of migrants, mostly Christian Ibos and Yoruba from the South, as well as some European settlers. It was, in fact, the only place in West Africa where European had settled in any numbers.

I found it a very dull town, with its rather English main street of shops and, as in Keffi, no market to explore or native industries to investigate. It didn't help that it rained most of the time we were there, and it was so cold that I had to borrow a jersey from Gary. I found the surrounding plateau countryside more interesting. The granite and volcanic basalt had been weathered into tor like structures, separated by deep narrow valleys. Gary and I explored the area one cold, rainy day and it felt like we could have been in the Yorkshire Dales except for the prickly cacti growing everywhere.

One day we hired a taxi for £10 to drive us to Bauchi, 120 km away to the north-east. On the way I wanted to visit the 'platypus people' who I had heard lived somewhere on the plateau. It took sometime to find where they might be as they are nomadic hunter-gatherers and they moved around in the remotest parts of the plateau and were

hardly ever seen. No one could understand why wanted to visit 'those no-good bushmen'. As I understood it, they were a relic of a much earlier, more primitive population that had been pushed up into the remote and inhospitable highlands when the more advanced Hausa farmers had migrated into the area several centuries earlier.

The plateau was a wild place. I noted in my diary that it was "*not unlike Dartmoor*". The taxi eventually pulled up by the side of the road, and we made our way along a narrow track through scrubby bush, until we came out into a dusty clearing. There we found a few women and children wondering around listlessly, and one old man sitting under the only skinny tree. The women were so thin that they reminded me of the Modigliani figurines I had seen in Tate Gallery in London the year before. They were naked except for a small bundle of twigs and leaves tied around their waists to hide their genitals. Several had babies on their hips, slung from their shoulders in goatskin pouches. They had wooden discs, as much as 5 cm wide, in their lower lips and ears. One old woman had long ears hanging down almost to her shoulders. I had seen plenty of poverty in my time in West Africa, but this was by far the worst. Most distressing was the listlessness of those women. Their eyes were dull and vacant and they ignored us completely as if we weren't even there. The children all had pot bellies and snotty noses. Flies swarmed around their noses and mouths, and around their open, weeping sores. Most had umbilical hernias and the reddish hair characteristic of kwashiorkor[33].

Our driver went over to the old man and negotiated an appropriate dash for us to give him, but my American companions thought he

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[33] A protein deficiency disease

was asking too much and complained about having to give them anything at all. All in all the whole experience left me with a very unpleasant feeling, and although in a way I was glad to have seen them, I felt we had been very intrusive. It felt like gross voyeurism.

Driving on we eventually came to the top of the rocky escarpment at the edge of the plateau. Beneath us the sun drenched plain spread out into the hazy distance, punctuated only by the occasional inselberg.

An hour or so later we arrived in Bauchi. Bauchi is a relatively new city that had been established in the early 19th century, as the capitol of the Bauchi Emirates, after the Fulani conquered the ancient Hausa States. The Fulani were traditionally nomadic herdsmen. Their original homeland was far to the west in what is now Senegal but, as they had spread eastwards through the western Sudan, many of them had settled peacefully among the local farming tribes. Some had settled in towns and become the Muslim intellectuals, gaining high positions in the courts of the Hausa kings, and becoming extremely wealthy. As devout Muslims they had become increasingly concerned about the religious laxity of the Hausa, and by the early 19th century this general unrest had become focused around an elderly Muslim scholar, Usman dan Fodio. Dan Fodio became the religious leader of a jihad that eventually swept away the Hausa kings.

I have no memory of the town itself, and there's nothing about it in my diary, but I do know that we spent most of our time there in the market. It must have been a Friday as there was a cattle market, and Fulani herdsmen had come in to town to pray at the Mosque and to trade their cattle, and their horses, donkeys, goats and camels. I have

a picture in my mind of men in flowing white gowns and turbans, the more wealthy riding horses. I see ancient, flat bed lorries piled high with dusty sacks of groundnuts, rice, millet and maize; and coolies, in tattered shorts and singlets, bent under the heavy sacks as they unloaded them from the lorries.. I can still smell the scent of the dust from the grain.

*Girl carrying carved calabash bowl*

I see beautiful, proud, erect Fulani women with their magnificent headdresses; their necks, arms and ankles loaded with silver hoops, and other silver jewellery. Some had so many that there necks looked unusually long and they could barely bend or turn their heads. They seemed to be carrying their family's wealth on display for all to

see. I remember delicately carved, honey coloured, gourds and calabashes, some for sale as household water containers and bowls, others being used to hold the grain and groundnuts that the market women were selling. I particularly remember huge bowls of warm, foaming milk - goat's, cow's and sheep's milk -, bowls with curds still floating in their whey, and the smell of fermented milk.

On the way back to Jos, late that afternoon, we paused to look back from the top of the escarpment. The whole plain below was covered in a pall of smoke from innumerable cooking fires.

Early the next morning Gary and I set off to hitchhike to Kano. We arrived at the Peace Corp hostel there in time for dinner. We were greeted by many of the people I had got to know in Lagos, most of whom had travelled there directly by train, and were curious to know where we had been in the meanwhile, and what we had done and seen.

Next morning we hired bicycles for 5/- a day, and set off to explore the old city. Kano has been the southern most 'gateway' to the ancient trans-Saharan trade routes for many hundreds of years, dealing in textiles, leather, grain, groundnuts and slaves. As early as the 14th century it was well connected with cities in North Africa and southern Europe. It was one of the seven cities of the historic Hausa city states, until it was conquered by the Fulani in the 19th century. The British made it their capitol of Northern Nigeria when they occupied it in 1903. Unlike in the rest of Nigeria they had left much of the Fulani ruling structure in place, insisting only on 'good government and justice'[34].

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34 'The Story of Nigeria'. Michael Crowder, 1962

The Peace Corps hostel was situated in the Sabon Gari - the 'strangers quarters' - some distance outside the walls of the old city. The Sabon Gari was a relatively modern town, with straight paved streets and modern two and three-storey buildings. It was separated from the old city by a wide green that was studded with stunted bushes. Here cattle, goats and the occasional camel grazed, and nomads pitched their tents. Across the green the dun coloured mud walls and domes of the old city basked in the morning sun. It looked so serene and peaceful that morning.

*A typical house in old Kano. A postcard*

We entered the city through a narrow gate that was just wide enough to allow horses and camels to pass, but not wide enough to allow motor vehicles. Inside was a maze of narrow, dusty, sun baked streets, lined with square, domed adobe houses. Just inside the gate we found a guide, or rather he found us, and he took us to the tourist market, which we would never have found on our own.

I remember a narrow street, like all the others, but with the houses serving as shops. We were taken to several leather shops. Some were full of horse tack; saddles and bridles, woven girths and decorative head bangles. Others had all sorts of leather goods of varying quality for sale: belts, wallets, shoes, all sorts of beautifully tooled bags - handbags, briefcases, holdalls - and pouffs decorated with python skin. I particularly liked the honey coloured camel leather, and that first day I bought some much needed sandals for 6/-. Further along there were shops full of beads, bangles, slave bracelets, Fulani amulets, and beautiful shiny, tawny brown agate beads. Others sold ebony and ivory carvings and locally woven cloth.

We were glad of our guide on that first day, but on subsequent visits we weren't so pleased to find him waiting for us inside the gate as he took us to the same leather shops again and again, and although he didn't ask for a dash we guessed he got a commission for anything we could be persuaded to buy.

After that first visit we bargained hard for everything we bought because we knew that prices were inflated for Europeans. As volunteers we weren't well off and we wanted to get things as close to the 'local' prices as we could. If we knew that we were being asked too much for something we just walked away. Then the shop keeper would often follow us down the street calling: 'What price

you wan pay?', and the bargaining would begin all over again. We learned that if we returned at dusk we could get what we wanted at much better prices as, by then many of the merchants were desperate to get some cash to pay for their evening meal. I eventually bought a beautiful, camel leather hold-all. The first price asked had been £8, but I eventually got it for £1.16. I later posted it back to England, along with some other things I had bought, but unfortunately the parcel never arrived.

On Friday we visited the mosque to watch the men praying. I described the scene in a letter to my mother:

> *It was a fantastic sight. Thousands of robed men all flocking to the mosque to pray to Allah in the vast square around the mosque. The vast crowd all kneeling and bowing their heads to the ground as they prayed together in complete silence.*

Another day we managed to organise a trip to the satellite tracking station that was located near Kano. Gary was fascinated but I found it very boring.

> *Just a whole stack of machines receiving signals and relaying them back to the States.*

After a couple of days Gary decided it was time to move on. He planned to travel north, up into Niger and to the edge of the Sahara desert at Agades, then westward to Niamey and on to Ouagadougou in Upper Volta[35] and, finally, south through Ivory Coast to Abidjan where he could get a plane back to Freetown. I wanted to go with

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[35] Now Burkino Fasso

him, and he had no objection but he warned me that it would be a tough, uncomfortable trip, and that I couldn't expect him to look after me, or to wait for me if the going got too tough. I should expect to sleep on the ground, under lorries, with no privacy at all. Also, if I was to go with him, I would need a visa for Niger, something he had organised for himself back in Lagos. I would have to try to get one at the border.

The next day we hired a taxi to take us the fifty miles or so to border, and Tim and a friend came along with us for the ride. As we drove north across the sun baked savannah the vegetation became noticeably more sparse, with stunted cotton bushes and groundnut vines straggling across the parched ground.

At the border post the friendly guard looked at my passport and pointed out that my visa for being in Nigeria had expired, and that I would have to get it renewed before he could allow me to leave. When I asked him if he could do that for me he told me that the nearest office where I could get it done was in Lagos. Clearly that was out of the question so I pleaded with him but to no avail. My impression at the time was that he could make an exception, for a price, but I knew that it was one I was not prepared to pay. So I had to say goodbye to Gary and return to Kano with the others who, fortunately, had kept the taxi waiting in case I did need to return with them.

I did meet up with Gary again a few weeks later, back in Freetown, and he told me that it had, indeed, been a very tough trip, and that it was probably just as well that I hadn't gone with him.

After Gary left I teamed up with Cathy, a Canadian volunteer working on an agricultural project in Sierra Leone. In the mornings we continued to explore the old city on our bicycles, but by midday, when it was really hot, we would retreat to the Kano Club where, for a small fee, we could get temporary membership, giving us access to the swimming pool, cold drinks and snacks, and English and American newspapers. Although by then membership of the club was open to anyone who could afford it, the members were still predominantly European. There were a few Lebanese, and the occasional wealthy African, but around the pool, in the middle of the day, there were mostly European women with their children. After a year in Sierra Leone, and being part of the volunteer community, it seemed odd to see white children!

Cathy and I, as young, unmarried white women, were a rarity and we were soon besieged by young Lebanese men wanting to chat to us and invite us out on dates. We ignored them as best we could, but one pair were particularly persistent, and on the second day we gave in and agreed to be taken out to dinner, as long as we could take a couple of friends with us. We thought we should share our 'good fortune', and also that it would be expedient to have chaperones. Although the hostel provided breakfast, we had to find our own lunch and dinner and, as a result Tim and his friend were quite hungry because, they told us, they could only afford to eat out every other day.

That evening the four of us had steak - more meat than any of us had eaten in a year, and the boys then had a second helping - all at the expense of our Lebanese 'friends'. Our 'chaperones' did prove to be quite useful, and neither Cathy or I felt guilty about the way we had treated our hosts as we had made it very clear that we didn't want

their company. We had tried to fob them off at the poolside and to refuse their invitation but they had been unpleasantly persistent.

After a week in Kano I was becoming restless, and decided that it was time to move on. By now I had learned quite a lot about the history of Nigeria, and the background to the *coup* and I wanted to visit Sokoto, in the far north western corner of the country, and the heart of the old Fulani empire. It was a centre of Islamic learning and had been the home of Dan Fodio, the leader of the 19th century jihad. It was also the home of his descendent, Ahmadou Bello, the first premier of Nigeria who had been assassinated in the first coup earlier that year.

As Cathy had arranged to meet a friend in Kano a few days later she couldn't come with me so, not wanting to go alone, I asked if anyone would like to come with me one morning at breakfast. To my surprise, Carl spoke up. Carl had accompanied us on some of our forays into the old city but, as he was very quiet, I had hardly noticed him. He was teaching in Kenema and, although I didn't remember it, he said he had met me six months earlier when I went up to the Kenema Trade Fair. He turned out to be a very useful travelling companion as he was a historian and very much better informed, and more alive to the political situation, than I was. He knew enough about the local history to be able to ask questions that dug out a lot more information than I could ever have done on my own.

## Chapter 10. Sokoto, and back to Lagos.

We set off at six the following morning, before anyone else was up, and made our way to the outskirts of the Sabon Gari, and the main road south. We were picked up almost immediately by a Pakistani water engineer. who was on his way to Kaduna to fetch his wife and the rest of his household to take them up to Maiduguri in the far north east. He assumed we were a couple and spent the next few hours expounding the differences between Muslim and Christian marriages. My impression at the time was that he seemed to be trying to justify the fact that he had two wives. He told us that the Koran says that a man can have more than one wife so long as he treats them equally. Thus, he argued, if his first wife no longer satisfied his sexual desires, he was free to take a second wife and, in these circumstances, they were being treated equally. It did seem to me to be a rather male perspective, and I felt rather sorry for his first wife.

He dropped us off at the Sokoto turn off, just outside Zaria, in he heat of the middle of the day. This time we weren't so lucky getting a lift. We were hungry and thirsty and we both became quite irritable. As we walked along, lugging our heavy bags, hoping to find a stall where we could get a drink and something to eat, Carl grumbled that he thought hitchhiking was a dumb way to travel and in the future he would stick to native transport.

Late in the afternoon, just as we were wondering if we'd have to spend the night by the roadside, we got a lift as far as Gusau in a US Army truck. The driver was an Ibo on his way home. He told us that

his family had been in Gusau during the May riots and, as Easterners, they had feared for their lives. When the area where they lived had been threatened by a rioting mob he had taken his wife and children to the railway station, where they had been given army protection.

They had to stay there for three days without food or water, except for what some Hausa friends had been able to bring to them. He also told us that one of his friends had returned to his house, with the protection of some Hausa friends, to collect some of his possessions, but that they had been stopped by soldiers who had been instructed to shoot on sight anyone carrying household goods, as a precaution against looting. They had all lost everything they possessed except the clothes they were wearing and what little they could take with them when they first fled. His wife and family had eventually been able to get a train back to Eastern Nigeria, and he planned to follow them once he'd found himself a job there.

He dropped us off at the Gusau Teachers College campus where there was a Government Rest House. Rest Houses were a remnant of the colonial era when they were set up for the British colonial officers who often had responsibility for large areas and had to travel great distances. Unfortunately there were no single rooms available that night and, as twin rooms were strictly for married couples, we had to sign ourselves in as Mr and Mrs Cheney - a situation that I found acutely embarrassing at the time!

The next morning we had no luck getting a lift to Sokoto, and by midday Carl had had enough of standing by the roadside, so we retreated to the college cafeteria for lunch and a cold drink. We were joined there by an American couple who were on the staff of the college. They told us that they too had been in Gusau during the

riots and, although they had not been in any danger themselves, they had been very concerned for their Ibo steward, and worried that other Ibos might seek refuge on the campus putting everyone at risk. When an angry Hausa mob did enter the campus Clive had very bravely managed to stop them and reason with them. He was able to get them to agree that all the Ibo stewards would be removed from the campus and put under police protection. With that agreement the mob finally left peacefully.

Clive told us that the night had been very well-planned. For example, Hausa stewards had put branches of green leaves on the dashboard of the cars of all the non-Ibo staff in advance, as a sign that they were not to be targeted. For some reason he had had to drive into town that evening and, at one point, he had been stopped by a group of Hausa who asked him not to proceed any further, but to return in half an hour when they had finished what they were doing. He only found out the next day what they had been up to, when he read about the massacre that had taken place in the newspaper.

Later that afternoon we were picked up by an Irish engineer who was travelling to Sokoto with his Cockney wife and two bored, squabbling children. This couple had a very different perspective on what had taken place that night in May. The woman was convinced that "they dislike us as much as they dislike the Ibos". She declared that if there was any more trouble she, for one, was going straight back home. On the night of the riots they had been told to shut their Ibo steward out in the garden - and if they didn't their house would be burned down. "What would you do?" They never saw their steward again. I was shocked at their callousness, but at the same time had to wonder what I would have done in that situation, faced with that choice.

We got to Sokoto in the late afternoon, and were dropped off at the VSO house. Sue and Anne were delighted to see us, as they had very few European visitors being so far off the beaten track. They rustled up some dinner and found a couple of blow up mattresses for us to sleep on, and we talked far into the night. Before they said good night they apologised that they would not be able to show us the town the next day as they had to leave early for a school meeting, but they would leave us one of their Hondas so that we could make our own way into town. They recommended that, as the next day was Friday, we find our way to the mosque before eleven o'clock to see the crowds of people flooding in from the surrounding savanna for their weekly prayers. After that we should explore the market, which was always especially busy and interesting on a Friday.

We set off early the next morning, and following their instructions, made our way into town. Although Sokoto had been one of the cities of the Hausa states what we saw of it was nothing like Kano. We saw no sign of any walls, or of a densely packed city centre. Instead in my diary I described it as "more like an overgrown bush village" It stands on a small hill overlooking the Sokoto River. On the far side the hot, dusty plains stretched away to the north.

We went first down to the river, making our way against a tide of people hurrying up towards the market place. Men in white robes carried huge loads on their heads, others were leading little donkeys weighed down with vast panniers. There were haughty Tuaregs on fine horses, with their inky dark turbans almost covering their faces. The women we saw were swathed in drab navy cloth, their hands and faces stained blue with the indigo dye. Many had their heads and most of their faces covered, and they carried their goods in large

calabashes on their heads. These women were less distinctive than the Fulani women we had seen in Bauchi, with less elaborate jewellery. This, we later learned, was because any woman of any wealth or standing here would be be kept behind purdah walls, and the women we were seeing were "bush women". I remember that some of the women seemed scared of us, and averted their eyes as we approached, and then ran past us with a funny flat footed gait which I assumed was a result of the heavy loads they were carrying on their heads.

*Donkey transport. A postcard*

We pushed our way across the bridge against the crowd that had converged on it from all directions to the north. Men greeted us with smiles and hearty shakes of a clenched fists. "*Sanu*", "*Sanuku*", "*Yaowa*". It was such a beautiful, fresh morning that we kept on

going up onto the plateau, much further than we had intended, and by the time we turned round we were too late to get back to the mosque in time for the prayers.

After a quick look around the now empty mosque we made our way across the huge square that half an hour earlier would have been full of kneeling men, and past horses and donkeys that were tethered in the shade of the trees that bordered it, to the market beyond. The first part we came to was dominated by rows of rickety stalls laden with the produce we had seen being carried into town earlier that morning: piles of rice, onions, and groundnuts, sacks of sugar and cartons of cigarettes. What was different about this market was the almost complete absence of women. All the hawkers and, most of the people browsing among them were men. Nowhere to be seen were the proud, stately Fulani women I had seen in Bauchi, nor the confident, businesslike Yoruba mammies of the Lagos market, or the friendly, chatty Ewe women of Kpando. The few women we did see, judging by their dress and demeanour, were "bush women" or household servants.

In another section blacksmiths were sharpening knives and hammering blades into shape over small forges. Here they sold knives of all sorts, shapes and sizes: huge machetes, and scimitars with elaborately decorated handles, vicious looking daggers in leather or brass holders, horse whips with long plaited leather thongs and handles that concealed nasty looking skewer shaped blades. There were stalls that sold an assortment of household knives and, at the far end, a farrier was shoeing a horse.

Further along men were selling cloth, and we watched as a customer fingered the cloth feeling for quality. They haggled over the price

but, once an agreement was reached and the purchase completed, the cloth was handed to a tailor who sat at the back and quickly whipped up a gown on an ancient treadle machine whilst the customer waited.

*A cloth merchant. A postcard*

Beyond, separated by a tall hedge, we found the women's section. Here Fulani women, in their drab navy clothes and leather charms, sold cows' and camels' milk from beautifully carved, honey coloured calabashes. At the far end there was a large pottery section where Adarawa women sold a wide range of locally made earthenware: plates, mugs, bowls, water carriers and cooking pots of all shapes and sizes. In my notes I mentioned seeing calabash stands and even drainpipes.

*Native pottery. A postcard*

In another corner of the market, farthest from the women's section and from the mosque, there was a lively stock market where cattle, donkeys, horses and camels were changing hands. We sat for a long time on a small knoll watching the proceedings. Men were trying out the paces of horses. and haggling over the price of camels. We watched with amusement as one buyer tried out a donkey. In front of a crowd of onlookers he clambered on and the owner gave the animal a whack from behind. It took off at a gallop, showing its best pace. A few minutes later animal and rider returned at a much slower pace. We watched as large sums of money changed hands - as huge fistfuls of grubby notes were carefully counted out.

We got back to the house soon after midday to be told that a colleague of the girls was driving down to Zaria that afternoon. I would have liked to have stayed longer, but Carl was concerned that

we shouldn't be a burden on our hosts so we accepted the offer of a lift. I have no memory of that trip, but I do know that we were delivered to a Peace Corps house - or was it a hostel? - on the outskirts of Zaria. I remember that there were several Peace Corps already staying there, and they were from all over Nigeria, as well some from Zaria. That evening we listened to more stories about the riots, and were able to get ideas of what we should see whilst we there.

The next morning we were once again lent a Honda and we made our way through the narrow streets, to the centre of the town. Zaria, like Kano and Sokoto, was one of the ancient Hausa cities. It was not unlike Bida with its closely packed red adobe houses, each with their windowless compound walls and *katambas* giving no hint of what lay behind. We parked the Honda in the market square and continued on foot through the leather workers quarter, towards the Beggar's Gate. But we never got there because we turned down an alleyway and, to our surprise, found ourselves in an open area with small plots of guinea corn and a muddy pond. Even this city was just an overgrown village, quite unlike Kano.

We followed a track that led through the corn, and on the other side came upon a most unusual looking house. It stood all alone on the edge of the field, and although it was built of red adobe like all the others, it was of European design. It stood behind a white painted picket fence, in a garden full of flowers, and it had a front door facing the lane and neatly framed windows. As we approached a tall, untidy looking man, with tousled hair and bare feet, stepped up to his garden gate and invited us in.

Despite his appearance he turned out to be very a interesting character, and very well educated. He had been a professor of history at Zaria university, and he and Carl immediately hit it off. The old man took great delight in the opportunity to talk to another historian. With very little prompting from Carl he told us the history of the town and its people. He told us that Zaria, one of the seven cities of the old Hausa Empire, had originally been called Zanizan after its founding queen. It had become an important slave trading centre, with slaves captured in the south being sold to North African traders, for the trans Saharan trade, in exchange for salt.

He told us that the town had once been much larger but a hundred years ago, when it had shrunk, the walls had been rebuilt. Since then it had shrunk even further and this explained the patches of open land.

As we showed so much interest in the city, and its history and way of life, he took us to visit a friend of his, an old Fulani who was the town ruler, and who lived in a typical town compound.

The entrance to the compound was through a bare *katamba*, which opened into a courtyard where, we were told, the slaves had once lived. From there we went into another *katamba* where the old man traditionally met his callers and dealt with town business. Visitors were not generally allowed passed this point. But he took us on through into another yard, and then through one of the several *katambas* that led off it and into a neat yard which was surrounded on three sides by several free standing rooms. Each of his wives had her own room and we were proudly shown into each one. Inside they were very comfortably set up with a bed covered with the

traditional rug and a mosquito net, a traditional loom hanging from the wall, and several other luxuries.

From this yard a door led through a wall into an orchard where all kinds of fruit were grown. And all of this was contained within the walls of the single compound.

When we returned to the wives' yard we met his four wives, the wives of his sons, his younger children, and his grandchildren. When Carl asked to take a photo they all dispersed with great excitement to put on their best clothes. For the photo they carefully posed themselves with the old man sitting with his four wives standing behind him, and around them were the wives of his sons. Sitting on the ground in front of them were his younger children and his grandchildren. It made such a pretty picture with them all dressed in their colourful best. Unfortunately, despite his promise, Carl never did send me a copy of that photo.

We set off again that afternoon, heading south. By now we were beginning to count the days until we needed to be back in Lagos to catch a plane back to Sierra Leone for the start of the school year. We were soon picked up by two English engineers who said they could take us as far as the turnoff to the Kainji dam site, some hundred miles further south. As Carl showed a lot of interest in the project and asked lots of questions, they offered to take us there and give us a tour the following morning.

The Kainji hydroelectric scheme was started in 1964. It was the first in Nigeria as well as the first on the Niger River. It was completed in 1968 so when we were there, in 1966, they were halfway through the project. I remember that the dam was almost complete, and that

we were shown around the power house where our engineers were installing the turbines and generators. Carl was fascinated and asked lots of questions. I was bored.

Our tour finished, we found our way to the local lorry park and managed to get a ride to Ilorin, another couple of hundred miles further south. I remember a long, hot, uncomfortable journey through the heat of the afternoon, with frequent stops. Once we stopped for everyone to get off to pee by the side of the road. I remember a woman with a baby on her back just lifting the wrapping cloth and holding her baby's bottom out, and away from her back, and directing the its pee away from her clothes with her fingers. Later, at sunset, there was another stop for the Muslims to get off, roll out their prayer mats by the side of the road, turn to the east, and pray. We arrived in Ilorin after dark and found somewhere to stay and something, wrapped in very greasy paper, to eat.

We were just despairing over the filthy state of the room, and the fact that the sheets weren't even clean when, at about nine o'clock, there was a knock on the door and the hotel owner told us that there was a lorry leaving for Lagos very soon. If we hurried down to the lorry park straightaway we might be in time to catch it. We didn't need any second prompting and quickly made our way there. We found the lorry and negotiated second-class tickets with a very hard-nosed Yoruba business woman. Usually, when Europeans did travel by lorry, they went 'first class', in the cab with the driver. 'Second-class', which neither of us had come across before, turned out to be a narrow cabin between the cab and the bed of the lorry. Third class was in the back, on top of the freight.

We climbed in and found two narrow benches, one on either side, just the right height for us to lean our bottoms on. We pushed our bags under the bench wondering what on earth it was going to be like travelling a hundred miles perched like that. As it turned out that wasn't the problem. Over the next two hours sacks of rice, groundnuts and cotton were piled in under our feet, until the bench was the height of a low chair, and Carl's knees were at chest height. In this position the bench seemed very narrow. More and more people piled in, until we were squeezed together, and our knees were interlocked with those opposite. We finally left at about midnight, by which time I was so tired that I soon fell asleep with my head resting on Carl's shoulder.

I don't know what time we arrived in Ibadon, but that was where Carl and I parted. He was going to visit a friend at the university there, and I was carrying on to Lagos, where I had arranged to stay with John Pascal - he who had abandoned me in Sefadu the previous Christmas. John Pascal had been transferred from Freetown to Lagos, but in the meanwhile had been on leave in France. He was due back a few days before I had expected to get to Lagos.

From the Lagos lorry park I got a taxi to the address Jean Pascal had given me, arriving there sometime in the early afternoon. The house stood in a very pleasant street of European style houses, with trees and gardens, quite unlike anything in Freetown. Somewhat daunted, I knocked timidly on the door. It was opened by an African who informed me that he had never heard of John Pascal Pierson, and shut the door. I suddenly felt exhausted and overwhelmed. What should I do now? The Peace Corps hostel had been closed in the weeks since I'd been away, and I didn't know anyone else in Lagos. The taxi had already gone, and I had no idea where I was. I was so

tired after the long, overnight journey that I just wanted to sit down and cry.

I started walking up the street in the direction from which we had come, but it was very hot and my suitcase was very heavy. I soon realised that I wouldn't be able to go very far, and I had no idea where I was going anyway. In the end I decided to go back and knock on the doors of the nearby houses. Maybe I had the number wrong. There was no answer at the first house that I tried, but the door was opened at the next one by a kindly looking middle-aged African who told me that he didn't know any Mr Pierson, but that there were two young European men living next door, at the house that I had tried first. Maybe they would be able to help me. He told me that they usually got home from work at about five o'clock, and invited me in to wait. He showed me into a very cool and comfortable sitting room, and offered me a very welcome cold drink.

Sure enough, at five o'clock we heard one of the men drive up. So I thanked my host and went back to knock on the door again. To my enormous relief the man who opened the door did know about John Pascal. He had been expected the week before but hadn't turned up, and they hadn't heard a word from him. I explained my situation, which he seemed to find highly amusing, and he offered me their spare room for the night.

The next day I made my way into the city, to the airline office, to book my flight back to Freetown, only to be told that they couldn't give me a booking without a current visa. I pleaded with them, telling them that I needed to be back to Freetown for the start of the school term, but it was no use. They explained that there was no point giving me a ticket as I wouldn't be allowed through Emigration

without a valid visa. They advised me instead to go to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to get my visa renewed first and then come back.

Fortunately the ministry was close by, but I was met there by a very black, stony faced official who flatly refused to renew my visa. It was non-renewable. I pleaded with him, but to no avail. I asked him what I should do. If I couldn't stay and couldn't leave - what could I do? He just stared at me blankly, and called forward the next person in the queue.

I walked out into the street in despair. What was I supposed to do now? By chance, at that very moment Carl came by. I was so relieved to see him that I did't stop to wonder how he came to be in Lagos so soon after me. Close to tears, I told him my dilemma.

"Come on, let's go back". Although Carl was usually quiet and shy, he was, tall, white, male and American, and he could certainly put on an authoritative voice when he needed to. It worked like magic. I had my visa in no time. No fuss. No fee. No bribe!

I thanked Carl, who was flying out that afternoon, and headed back to the airline office. The first available flight was in three days time. Fortunately my hosts were quite relaxed about me staying for a few more days and, as the next day was a public holiday, they took me sailing in their dinghy, down the Lagos River to the beach where most expatriates went for picnics on their days off. It felt odd to be in the midst of Europeans again, ones who were not volunteers.

## Chapter 9. Back in Freetown

I arrived back in Freetown with a few days to spare before the start of the school term. It was just as well because our house had been broken into whilst we were away and everything movable had been taken. All our chairs, our rug, and all of our linen and towels had gone. All that we were left with was our dining room table, our iron framed bedsteads, wardrobes and dressing tables. Fortunately we had packed all our personal belongings into our suitcases and stored them in the convent store room.

Sandy had arrived back a few days before me and was staying with a friend so I went to stay at the Peace Corps hostel whilst we got our household back together again. The nuns found us a couple of benches to replace our dining room chairs, and a couple of of iron framed, woven plastic chairs for the sitting room. I managed to buy mattresses, bedlinen and mosquito nets from our friends among the Lebanese traders.

Eve had returned to the UK in July as she had finished her contract, and that year we had two new housemates. Meg arrived at the beginning of term to teach maths and science, and Ursula arrived a few weeks later to teach English and History. Meg and Ursula both fitted in well, and with Eve gone it became a much more pleasant household for me to live in.

As the VSO term is usually only one year all my friends, including Marion and Celia, had gone home and I had to get to know a whole new bunch of volunteers. By then I was quite a bit older and had

more experience than them as they were mostly straight out of university or training college. By chance there were two boys among them who had been at the same school as me.

With my holiday pay I bought myself a Honda, a real step up from my puttering mobylette. Now it was much easier to take a passenger and we were able to explore much further afield. I had hardly ever been beyond Lumley Beach on my mobylette, but now I was able to carry on down the peninsula to explore its beautiful beaches and coves, and the tiny fishing villages with unlikely names like York and Kent. A couple of times we carried right on round the peninsula, coming back on the inland road, passing the Chinese market gardens at Hastings, and through the Creole villages of Waterloo and Wellington, with their old wooden houses festooned with purple bougainvillea, and their tall, shady mango trees. Some evenings we would drive up to the Creole hill villages of Leicester and Gloucester where the children played in the wide, dusty street and mammies leaned over their balconies chatting to their neighbours, and greeting us cheerfully as we rode by.

I remember one afternoon after school when Meg and I drove to our favourite, secluded cove, halfway down the peninsula, for a swim. The cove was normally empty but that afternoon there were already people there. Three strangely pale women, with dull lank hair, were cavorting in the water, laughing and splashing like children. When they saw us they waved and called out to us by name. We had no idea who they were until, as we got closer, we realised that they were three of the nuns. We had never seen them out of their habits before. How very different they looked!

*The mountains and beaches of the peninsula*

At school I had much the same classes as the year before, except that my pupils were now a year older. My fourth form geography class were now in the fifth form and preparing for school certificate, something that had never been achieved in the school before. By now the kids knew me well, and classes proceeded relatively peacefully. My field trips continued to be popular, and Sandy I worked with a group of girls after school to prepare them for the interschool sports. It was important that the girls were given something to eat before we moved out into the sports field each afternoon as, except for the boarders, many of them would have had nothing to eat all day. In a letter home I wrote:

Not long after after the start of term a friend asked me if I would like to go with him on a business trip to the iron ore mine at Marampa the following Saturday. Of course I said yes.

*I'm relaxing after spending one and half hours on the sports field, helping the girls with hurdles. I've got about 50 million books to mark - well three sets of 36, and a literacy class to teach in ten minutes. Then I have to set an English test for tomorrow, and prepare a fifth form geography lesson. I can't put anything off until tomorrow because tomorrow I have a tennis practice straight after school, and a Geography Society meeting later in the evening. On Thursday - athletics, a game of tennis, and literacy class. So the whole week has already virtually gone, even though it's only Tuesday. Each week flies by in this way, and I never seem to be able to catch up.*

The Marampa mine had been opened sometime in the 1930s, and in 1966 accounted for 20% of Sierra Leone's exports (diamonds counted for 64%). The mine was opencast and produced haematite for the West European market. The ore was washed at the plant, bringing it up to 64% iron content, before being exported along a specially built, fifty two mile long railway line, and through a company owned port at Pepel, someway upstream from Freetown on the Sierra Leone River.

After travelling around West Africa in native transport, on mostly unsealed and pot holed roads, and visiting so many traditional African towns and villages, arriving at the Marampa mine was like landing on the moon. Not only was it a lunar landscape, with the vast pit and bare, red scraped earth, but all the machinery was huge and ultramodern. When we first peered into the pit the trucks winding their way down the road on the far side looked like dinky toys, but close up they were immense, larger than anything I had ever seen before. The wheel of a dump truck was taller than me, and the

truck itself was dwarfed by the huge digger. The contrast between what I saw that day and the African world I was familiar with was stark.

*Me standing by a dumper truck*

A few weeks later, at half term, Liz, the new Irish contract teacher who had replaced Eve, was planning a trip to Magburaka to visit some friends. She invited Meg and me to go with her.

Magburaka is a hundred and twenty miles from Freetown, and some thirty miles beyond the end of the tar seal. By then the rainy season was over and all the roads were dried out and open again, so the journey was not too uncomfortable in her little Volkswagen. The town stands on the banks of the Rokel River, and Liz's friends lived in the "hill station" overlooking the town, where the few expatriates Europeans and wealthier Africans lived.

When we arrived Liz's friends were pleased to see us, but they told us that there was a problem - there was no water in the hill station. Normally water was pumped up from the river by two small pumps, but the day we arrived the second pump had failed - the first one had failed several months earlier but hadn't been repaired as the second one was still working. We learned that the pumps could only be repaired in Germany, a process that would take at least six months, and that there were no spare pumps available anywhere in the country. Without water there was no electricity either, as the generator required cooling water. No electricity meant no lights and no refrigeration. And no water meant no washing sticky hands or dirty dishes, and no flushing toilets. In the tropical heat it posed a serious risk of diarrhoea and worse.

We would have left straight away except that we needed petrol, and the local petrol station had run out, and the tanker wasn't due until after the long weekend. So we stayed and, as our hosts said, we could help them eat the contents of their fridge, as everything not eaten in the next day or two would have to be thrown away. Water had to be carted up from the river in buckets, and dishes had to be washed in a bowl with as little water as possible. I still remember the feeling of sticky hands, and the smell of the hurriedly dug hole in a hidden corner of the garden.

In my diary I wrote:

> *Existence occurs on two levels. Downstairs subsistence; upstairs our modern way of living. In new countries like this the floor is very thin, and already becoming rotten. One hole and the whole floor may tumble. We tread warily around of this new hole gazing down for the first time on the reality of subsistence life. People must devote all their energies to existence. Water must be fetched and carried. Food must be bought or gathered fresh each day, and prepared every day for eating. No factories here or supermarkets. No convenience foods. No comforts bought by electricity. And the continual malaise of disease: fever, gut rot, who knows. And the heat - the sticky innovating heat. It is a full-time job just to exist from day-to-day, no time or energy for anything else. There is no purpose in life except merely to exist.*

Suddenly I had glimpsed the harsh reality of every day life for so many African women.

On Sunday our host took us down to a pool in the river, where the few Europeans in the town used to go to swim, to wash and cool ourselves off. It was some way upstream of the town and its effluent, and above of the place where the women did their laundry. I went into the water with mixed feelings: on the one hand, huge relief at the opportunity to cool off and wash myself; but on the other, anxiety that there could be bilharzia in the river. Bilharzia, also called schistosomiasis, is caused by a parasitic worm that is passed on by a certain type of snail that is found in slow moving fresh water

in the tropics. Fortunately the water was fairly fast flowing, and there were rapids upstream, and no one experienced any ill affects.

I seem to have lost interest in traveling after the Magburka trip because, according to my diary, I was happy to spend the Christmas holidays at home "*reading, writing, and sewing*." My letters home tells a slightly different story:

> *Never have I had such a merry Christmas. I'm utterly exhausted now, and we've still got the New Year to celebrate.*

Although I don't remember any of it, the letter tells me that there were lots of parties, tennis and beach picnics.

Ramadan was very early that year, and the new moon was spotted on a Thursday evening in the middle of January, setting in train the Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations and the much anticipated Lantern Parade. Although it was generally said that Europeans should avoid the centre of town on that night for fear of drunken mobs, an African friend, Ken, took Meg and me into town to watch the parade and join in the celebrations. We set off at about 10 pm to walk the two miles into town. We walked with the gathering crowd, and admired the floats that past us on their way to the parade assembly point. Everyone was happy and friendly, and people were already beginning to dance.

Ken took us to a Creole friend's house where we were taken up to their balcony that overlooked the square where the floats were being judged. We had a wonderful view of the celebrating crowd from up there. People were carrying huge paper lanterns, and other lights twinkled on the beautifully crafted floats. When the judging had

*The Kru Bay slums. Internet photo*

finished the parade began to move away for its circuit of the town, and the crowd joined in behind each float, dancing to spontaneous singing and drumming. We went down to join the crowd and watch the floats passing by. There was wonderful, friendly, carnival atmosphere, and the whole scene was kept in order by an huge policeman, called "Lofty", who waved an enormous truncheon threateningly at us if we surged too far forward.

Once the tail end of the parade had left the square we walked down Krutown Road, towards home, and Ken took us down to his uncle's nightclub, deep in the slums of Kru Bay, "*an area of mud roads, tin shacks and high smells*". I remember a large, open sided, tin shack, lit by hurricane lamps, with a bar on one side, selling beer and soft

drinks, and a friendly, happy crowd. There we drank Fanta and danced the hi-life until four in the morning.

To my mother I wrote:
Despite the late night everyone seemed to be up early the next morning, dressed in their best robes and *lappas*, to make their way to the prayer ground at the stadium. "*The finery was magnificent*".

I didn't have long to watch the people streaming by as a group of us had planned to make the most of the long weekend and go to Banana Island, a tiny banana shaped island off the south western tip of the peninsula. We drove our Hondas and mobylettes in convoy down the coast road to Kent, a tiny Sherbro fishing village. We found some boys to look after our bikes for a "*dash*" and hired a bullom boat to take us out to the island. Bullom boats are large, heavily built canoes, this one had a tatty triangular lug sail and a dear, friendly old skipper.

Banana Island had a population of about two hundred Creole farmers and fishermen who lived in a neat little village, called Dublin. As in the older parts of Freetown, the streets crossed each other at right angles. Each section was neatly hedged, with beautifully kept cassava gardens and flowering bushes. The streets were grassy and, we were told, no machine, or even a bicycle, had ever been on the island. Standing in the centre of the village one could see, at the most, only three houses at a time.

We camped on a golden, palm fringed beach, and swam in the clear water, snorkelling among the rocks and looking at the colourful tropical fish. One of our group had a spear gun, so that evening we supped on fish that we had cooked over a campfire. We sang folk

songs to a guitar that someone had thought to bring along, and slept under the stars.

We watched...

> *... the sun set over a rocky peninsula, with the glowing sky silhouetting a tall palm tree. Next morning we watched it rise again from the mists over the sea to the east.*

We awoke the next morning to the sound of cocks crowing, soon followed by the noises of the village awakening and the smell of newly kindled cooking fires. I went to the well in the middle of the village to fetch some water, and there joined a group of children already gathering. The older ones balanced buckets and gallon tins on their heads, and the younger ones a variety of bottles and containers. I particularly remember one tiny naked tot with a baked bean can on his head. An old paint tin was lowered down the well on a long string, and then pulled up by hand, and the water was tipped into the waiting containers. I took a turn at pulling up a few buckets.

When it was time for us to go home we hired some canoes to take us back to the mainland. The canoes were various shaped dugouts that took two or three people each. The one I went in was paddled by a scrawny little man with elephantiasis, his huge football sized scrotum barely covered by his grubby loincloth.

There was another party that evening after we got back from Banana Island. I was enjoying myself with my friends when an older acquaintance, Ken, came in, bringing with him a man who had newly arrived in Freetown. I was introduced to Bryan, an engineer. I was not interested in meeting another engineer as, at a previous party, my

*Children collecting water on Banana Island*

time had been monopolised by a very persistent, and very boring, mining engineer. In my mind engineers were all boring so I wasn't impressed when Bryan asked me to dance. I made my escape at the first possible opportunity and returned to my friends.

Before the party was over I had arranged to play a game of squash with Ken the following day. I was surprised when Bryan turned up

at the squash court as well. As he didn't play I wondered if he had nothing better to do. Later, as we were having a beer at the bar, Bryan asked Ken if he would like to go sailing with him that Wednesday evening. There was a race and he needed a crew as his partner, Ted, was away in Nigeria. My ears pricked up as I'd done a bit of sailing and really enjoyed it. So when Ken said he couldn't I offered to go instead. The opportunity to get out onto the harbour sounded too good to miss.

That Wednesday, after school, Bryan picked me up in his gleaming white Rover 2000 and took me down to the Freetown Aqua Sports Club. I helped him rig up the little GP14 and he seemed impressed that I knew my way round a boat. As we were about to launch and set off for the start line Victor, a local trader and the club secretary, informed us that Wednesday evening races were for novices. As Bryan had previously owned a yacht he was not eligible to be skipper. Bryan turned to me and asked if I thought I could manage. I had done enough sailing to be reasonably confident that I could and, as it turned out, I won the race - at least we crossed the finishing line first. I was about to tack and steer the boat around the outer mark before returning to the ramp and the Club House, when Bryan told me to gybe and recross the line. We argued about it and he prevailed. When we got back to the Club House we were informed that, although we had indeed crossed the finish line first and got the gun, we had been disqualified for recrossing the line.

Before leaving the Club that evening Bryan invited me to dinner the following Saturday, and I accepted, only remembering later that I had already agreed to go out with Raymond, one of the Armenian twins who were always pestering Meg and me for dates at that time. Bryan accepted my embarrassed apology with equanimity. That Saturday

*Bryan and me. I'm holding a cup we won sailing*

evening I was dressed up and waiting for Raymond when Bryan turned up at the door and, to my embarrassment, Raymond didn't. Bryan seemed to find the situation amusing and in the end I went out with him after all. He explained later that he'd figured if I wasn't available one of the others in the house was sure to be.

We saw a lot each other over the next few weeks. We continued to sail the Wednesday night races together, and sometimes I would crew

with him on a Saturday afternoon if Ted was away. Sometimes on the Sunday we would drive down the peninsula to Bureh Town beach, a gleaming white, palm fringed beach that was swept clean every week by the local villagers, for a picnic with some of Bryan's married friends. He took me snorkelling among the rocks, to places and depth I would never have dared to go on my own.

He took me out to dinner on Saturday nights, sometimes to one of the nightclubs, at others to a dinner party with some of his married friends. This was the first time in my life I had mixed socially in adult company. Our volunteer community was more like an extension of student life. Occasionally we would go back to Bryan's house and I would cook, using the cookery book that he bought for me. After one such occasion he told his houseboy, Kamara, that I was a better cook than him. Unperturbed, Kamara pulled himself up to his full four foot eight, puffed out his chest, and said indignantly "*Missis sabi book*!"[36].

Much later Bryan told me Kamara had said to him "*Dis na fine woman. You go marry im*?"

By the end of March we were engaged.

In March, 1967, Sierra Leone held its first general election since gaining independence in 1960. There were two main parties contesting the election: the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) which had held power since independence, and which was the party supported by the Mende tribe; and the opposition, the All People's Congress (APC), led by Siaka Stevens, the party supported by the

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[36] "She can read". i.e.: "If I could read I'd be quite as good as her"

other main tribe, the Temne. The Creoles of Freetown, who were the educated elite, and who as civil servants, lawyers and other professionals, had run the country even under the British colonial administration, were a minority group with very little political power or influence.

For some time the African teachers at school had been debating the merits of a one party state, as advocated by Sir Albert Margai, the incumbent prime minister. As these discussions were usually carried on in Krio we Europeans weren't generally able to join in. If we did try the discussion would immediately stop, and the subject would be changed, and they would often revert to one of the other native languages. Mrs Scott, who was the Creole teacher I got to know best, explained to us that most of the staff believed that multi-party democracy was a western form of government and not suitable for Africa.

The day nominations closed, three weeks before the election, the town was awash with rumours. It was said that the electoral committee were refusing to accept APC nominations and that Margai would be returned unopposed. It was also rumoured that troops had been posted to form roadblocks to prevent the APC candidates from reaching the nomination centres. Another story circulating was that one SLPP candidate had been returned unopposed because his APC rival had received a letter saying he was under age and therefore disqualified, even though he had a birth certificate showing that he was twenty six.

The local paper reported that there had been fighting in Kono, the diamond mining district, and that many people had been killed. One of our pupils, whose father was an SLPP man, and whose uncle was

standing for the party, had been there at half term. She told us that a mob had come to their house threatening to kill her father. She said she had been very frightened, but as her story was very incoherent and she didn't show any signs of anxiety or concern we didn't know what to believe.

There were rumours that black magic was being used upcountry to swing the election and that in some cases this involved human sacrifices. Human hearts were considered to be particularly important for *juju*. We heard that teachers up-country had stopped keeping pupils back at the end of the school day, whether for sports or for detention, after one child had gone missing after being sent home late. It was suspected that he had been captured and sacrificed for black magic.

There were reported to have been several scuffles in Freetown, although we didn't see anything of them. One story circulating was that a British warship had been spotted standing off Freetown, at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River, and that a crowd had rushed down to the waterfront to welcome it. It turned out to be a merchant vessel waiting to dock. Later that same day the African teachers were discussing the incident in the Staff Room, and Mrs Sawyer was heard to loudly proclaim: "*Black man no good fo gumint*", but when I enquired if they had been better off under British colonial rule there was immediate indignant denial.

Four days after nomination day it was announced that martial law had been imposed on the western area of the country, which included Freetown. Police could now arrest anyone who looked as though they were going to cause trouble, and it was said that they broke up an APC meeting, causing even more unrest. When we did go into

town in the days before the election we saw trucks full of armed troops in battle dress driving around.

By then the nuns were becoming quite nervous, and I had caught their anxiety. Mother Theresa had seen the Independence riots in 1956 and they had scared her. All the evidence indicated that the mob would be even more irresponsible this time, so any rioting could quickly descend into civil disorder with gangs of marauding youths taking advantage of the situation to loot and cause mayhem. Mother Theresa advised us to have enough food in the house to last us for at least two weeks as, if there was any disorder in town, it would be unwise to go shopping. She also suggested that we get a good stock of candles in case the electricity was cut off. A few days before the election we filled the bath, and every available receptacle, in case the water was cut off, and stocked the fridge up with bottles of boiled and filtered water, enough drinking water for several days.

The election took place on a Friday, and the results began to trickle in over the weekend. For a couple of days everything seemed uncannily quiet, and we carried on as normal. The official position was that the SLPP had won 31 seats, and the APC 28, with two independents and five results still undeclared. The rumour was that the APC had won four of those seats and an independent, one.

On Monday the APC claimed victory because, they said, two of the independents had swung their way, but the SLPP refused to concede defeat, and Margai refused to resign. The Governor General seemed unable to do anything. The rumour was circulating that if the SLPP were defeated Margai would call in the army, and possibly the Guinea army as well, to carry out a coup d'état.

Many people from upcountry were observed to have come into town that morning. Later, in the middle of the school morning, the children suddenly all stood up and started shouting. Somehow they had heard that there was fighting in town. Some were frightened and burst into tears. We were instructed to do our best to carry on teaching as normal, but parents started coming to school to collect their children and by 11 o'clock only half of the school was left. By lunchtime we had to let the children out into the compound, and then there was nothing we could do to stop them going home. We learned later that four people had been killed that morning in the fighting.

Later that afternoon, as things seemed to have calmed down, Bryan drove me into town. Everything was quiet, except for bands of youths, dressed in red, the APC colours, marching around town singing anti-Margai songs. The few taxis driving around were carrying red streamers. The Lebanese and Fula shops in the main street were closed, but the supermarkets and banks, which had been closed earlier, were open again.

What happened next becomes rather confusing. My diary is silent, and Bryan and I remember things that don't fit well with what I can glean from Wikipedia and pages of the local paper that I have kept. The official story is that Siaka Stephens was sworn in as prime minister, only to be ousted within a few hours by a military coup led by Brigadier Lansana, a Mende and a friend of Albert Margai,. Lansana claimed that it had been unconstitutional to swear Stephens in because the election of the paramount chiefs had not been completed. To maintain order he imposed martial law over the whole country, and a dusk to dawn curfew. The very next day a group of senior military officers led by Brigadier Andrew Juxon

Smith overthrew Lansana, arresting him and suspending the constitution.

Bryan and I both remember that at some point there was a rumour of a revolt by junior officers at the Wilberforce Barracks, and that someone was recalled from London to form a new government. Halfway through the flight home the pilot received a message from Freetown to say that there had been another coup, and that the man was no longer the Prime Minister designate. Instead his companion, who happened to be on the same flight, was. We remember very clearly that Sierra Leone had five governments in seven days - an all African record - whereas the official version only accounts for four.

Martial law remained in place for some weeks after that, although the curfew was lifted from dusk to 10 pm quite quickly. We became used to being stopped at checkpoints on our way into town or the beach by soldiers with guns. One time a gun was poked right into the car and into my face when we were coming home from the beach a bit late. We always made a point of being very polite to the soldiers, and calling them "Sir".

Paradoxically, at that time of unrest, in some ways I felt safer. With the curfew we didn't have to worry about "*tief-men*" at night, and there was something almost reassuring about seeing soldiers, armed with machine guns, trotting down the road past our house. As Europeans we never felt threatened through that whole period of unrest.

Some time after the election, and after martial law and the curfew had been relaxed, Bryan had to make the trip up country, to Kenema and Yengema, to assess the state of the electricity distribution system

for the Sierra Leone Electricity Corporation (SLEC). As it was school holidays I went with him. The Electricity Corporation provided us with a Land Rover, which was just as well because once we got off the tar seal, at Mile 91, the roads were in an appalling state. It was the very end of the dry season and, although the first rains had already fallen, the roads were dusty and very badly corrugated. I remember that if we drove at normal speed the vehicle juddered, rattling our teeth, and deafening us with the noise. The alternatives were to drive either very slowly, or to drive very fast over the tops of the corrugations, which Bryan said was like driving over ball bearings.

As the first rains had fallen it was the burn off-season. For many miles through the oil palm plantations and through areas of native cultivation the undergrowth was smouldering. Everywhere was covered with the pall of smoke that blotted out the blue sky. The land was being prepared for planting as soon as the rains had got properly under way.

What I had once seen as neglected scrub I now recognised as organised native agriculture. The traditional African method of cultivation is 'slash and burn'. Each year, at the end of the dry season, and after the first rains have fallen and dampened things a bit, the land is cleared and burned off. It is then tilled to break up the clods and to incorporate the fertile ash, and heaped into mounds. Cassava is planted in the centre of each mound, and other crops - tomatoes, peppers, onions, okra and gourds, are planted around it. The mound provides good drainage in the rainy season, and by the time the tomatoes and other crops are harvested the gourds have covered the surrounding ground and the cassava has grown up into a tall straggly bush. By then the poor soil is exhausted, and the farmer

*Burning off*

moves on to slash and burn the next patch of land, leaving the gourds and cassava - the 'hungry crop' - in the ground to be harvested as needed. Second growth jungle quickly reestablishes itself, and the land is left to rest for several years until it is ready for whole the cycle to begin again.

Yengema, a few miles to the west of Sefadu, is the town at the centre of the Sierra Leone Selection Trust's (SLST) diamond mining lease, and where the few Europeans who worked for the company on site, lived, Neat bungalows were set in a park like setting, along tidy streets lined with a colourful riot of flame trees, hibiscus and bougainvillea. It was such a contrast to the crowded, dirty, chaotic

native town of Sefadu that I had visited a year earlier. It was like another world.

Sierra Leone diamonds are alluvial and are found in the river gravel of the Sewa River system that drains the Loma Highlands, the highest, and geologically the oldest part of West Africa. The gravels are dredged from the river flats and then trucked to one of the several SLST washing plants. It was not unusual to see several men following these trucks, heads bent as if in prayer. But they were not praying, they were searching the ground for any gravel that had fallen off the trucks, and any diamonds that might be in it.

We stayed with the mine's engineer and his wife, and that evening were entertained with stories of life in the diamond mining community. Although in general labour was hard to come by in the area, there was never any problem getting men to a dig hole. One of the engineers had needed a hole dug for some foundations. It needed to be about six feet wide and four feet deep, but when he arrived at the site the following morning he found the men he had hired had all but vanished down the hole, which by then was about ten feet deep, and they were still digging!

We made a second trip to Yengema a couple of months later. By then the rains had really set in and the roads had become impassable, so we were flown up in the little SLST plane. From Kenema we flew up the Sewa Valley, and could see how the whole valley was pitted with diamond workings. These were licensed native mining operations, part of the Alluvial Diamond Mining Scheme, which allowed the locals to dig outside of the SLST Lease area. The diamonds they found were supposed to be sold through the National

*The SLST compound where the Europeans lived*

Diamond Mining Corporation, but most probably found their way across the border in to Liberia.

I remember very clearly that, on the way back to Freetown, we had to fly very low to keep below the cloud base. We were so close to the tops of palm trees that it felt like we could reach out and touch them.

One evening, at about that time, Bryan came round to our house in a state of great excitement. A large ocean going catamaran had just sailed into the Sierra Leone River and anchored off the town. It was David Lewis, the renowned ocean sailor, navigator and writer, with his wife and young children, and a family friend. We dashed down to the yacht club and Victor took us out in his little motor boat. They were delighted to see us and invited as on board. They showed us

around the boat and told us stories of their adventures they had had since leaving the UK more than two years earlier. They had first sailed south down the Atlantic, and through the Magellan Straits, into the Pacific, where they had lost contact with the rest of the world, and were thought to be lost at sea, until they turned up in New Zealand several weeks later. They had left Cape Town six weeks before arriving in Freetown and were now heading north on their way back to England. They had stopped in to make some much needed repairs before reaching the rough seas of the Bay of Biscay and the English Channel.

When we left them that evening we took with us a huge bag of dirty laundry, and the promise to pick up the children the next afternoon after school, so that David and his wife could get on with repairs, and cleaning the boat, undisturbed.

We took the two girls, aged five and four, and their family friend down to Lumley Beach. The girls, who had spent most of their short lives at sea, had never been on a beach before, and had never bathed in the sea. It was a delight to watch them, at first cautiously, and then with growing confidence, step into the gentle surf and begin to frolic and play.

The next day Bryan and Victor decided to put on a barbecue for them at the club house. According to my letter home:

> *At four the next afternoon Victor bought me fourteen pounds of steak, and stacks of fresh vegetables, and told me to have dinner ready for thirty, by 7pm.*

Everyone helped and we had a wonderful evening that the Lewis's really appreciated, particularly as it was the first fresh meat and vegetables they had had since they had left Cape Town six weeks earlier.

Having decided to get married both Bryan and I had to revise our future plans. Bryan had been heading back to New Zealand after seven years overseas, and I had been planning to return home, to Durham University, to do a postgraduate teaching diploma in English as a second language (as it was called then), and then head overseas again to another developing country.

In the end we both had to compromise. As it was very important to me to get to get married in England, at home, that's what we agreed to do. Bryan would first go home to New Zealand for a quick visit as his father, who was in his eighties, had had a minor stroke. Then after we were married, we would go to Birmingham, me to do a postgraduate teaching certificate in Geography at my old university, and Bryan to go to the University of Aston to do a masters degree in power systems engineering. We agreed that, in the longer term, we would settle in New Zealand.

My mother was already busy planning the wedding, and my last few letters home are full of wedding plans. By then I was more than ready to go home. The rains had begun and the weather was hot and humid. On 27 May I wrote:
The last few weeks of the term passed uneventfully. My fifth form geography class sat their school certificate exams, and two of them passed - a first for school.

*I'm beginning to count the days till I come home, and I'm getting impatient. Then I look around me and see the sunshine and the sea, and think of the sailing and swimming, and wonder why on earth I want to go back to dreary old England. But I still go on counting the days and cursing VSO for not laying on a charter flight sooner.*

School finally finished on 18th July, and a week later, on the 27th, I embarked on the flight home. VSO and Peace Corps had together chartered a plane to take all the volunteers from Sierra Leone and Ghana back to London. Everyone was excited about going home, and not long into the flight someone bought out a guitar and we sang and joked our way across the Sahara. It was just like a student outing again.

When we landed at Gatwick and taxied into the terminal a shout went up: "Look! They're all white!" After two years in Africa it was odd to see Europeans doing manual work. And when we disembarked and went into the terminal something else seemed odd - then I realised what it was - I could understand the conversations going on around me. Everyone was speaking English!

My parents were there to greet me and soon we were on the last leg home. My African adventures were over, and I was finally ready to put my extended student days behind me and face adult life.