

## Christmas Hike, 1966

The school year in Sierra Leone had three terms with a two or three week break between them. I tried to do a major trip of some sort during these breaks and as a result, I was able to travel through much of the country. Often the trip was a several day hike. Since I didn't know the way via bush roads, I usually recruited a student or two who were familiar with the area – and the appropriate languages – to join me as guides.

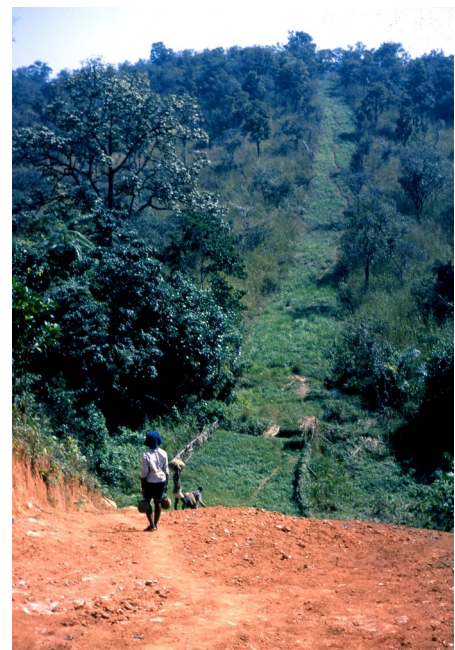
For the Christmas hike in 1966, we found a lorry, the major means of transportation for people and goods in the country. It took us to the end of the drivable road to a village called Koinadugu. Our team included Gracie Scott (not yet my wife), Sorrie and Abu and me.



We spent the first night in Koinadugu in a thatch roof house typical to the region. We were followed to our lodging by many of the kids of the village. One thing I have noticed in Salone is that the smallest measurable time interval is from getting a camera out and having kids pose. The photos here are a mixture of my 35mm and Gracie's Kodak. All were taken as slides which I have scanned since. The slides themselves are badly faded. I have put a lot of time into enhancing the photos with digital tools. They are well over 50 years old.



Many villages in this part of the country appear to have a ring of trees surrounding it. This is a remnant of times of tribal skirmishes. As a defense, villages would build a wall of logs, many freshly cut, around the perimeter. These walls are no longer needed, but many of the logs were able to sprout and become large mature trees which now surround much of the village.





From Koinadugu, we followed the trace of a road that may eventually be made suitable for vehicles, but not yet. This took us to a bridge across a river and the end of that road. I am not a structural engineer, but I am pretty sure that the bridge would not support a vehicle of any type.



Very often as we approached a village, we would be joined on the outskirts by a group of curious children. They would follow us along the road and into the village. When we arrived, Sorrie and Abu would ask for the village chief. He would greet us and find a family that would provide a place to stay for the night.



Sometimes we would be offered beds, other times a place on a floor. The rough beds and grass filled mattresses were quite uncomfortable. We would prepare the beds for the night while people were around, then when gone, we found a straw mat on the floor much more comfortable. Frequently, the stuffing in the mattress had taken the body shape of its owner. If you did not fit that shape, it was even more uncomfortable.



Sorrie brought a shotgun and kept a lookout for game birds as we walked.



We brought rice and some cooking essentials and would often try to purchase a chicken or other additions to enhance the sauce for the rice. We tried to travel light and would use most of our rice each day and plan to purchase some at the next village. But each morning as we packed up, we were presented with more rice to take with us. The people of the villages were so welcoming and generous. Rarely was there an actual store in the village, so anything we bought would be directly from a villager.



In one of the villages, our host posed for his photograph. He brought out a table cloth to stand on for the photo. He also took us to his banana plantation and showed us around. A couple of young boys showed us a basket that was used to store oranges.



Usually, many of the villagers would gather at some point and pose for a collective photo. This was in the days of film and there was usually a wait of several weeks for the processed slides to be returned in the mail. I was never able to show our host villagers their pictures. With today's digital cameras, you can take a shot and turn the camera around and show the result, often to squeals of delight.

At that time, it would be rare for anyone to have seen themselves in a photograph. Cameras were expensive, and even if you had one, film and processing would be unavailable.



The next day's hike took us over a suspension bridge that crossed the Bagbe River. Not quite the structure of the Golden Gate but quite serviceable. My understanding is that the villages close to the bridge are responsible for maintaining the bridge. It appeared to be well maintained, and was an important link between villages. Crossing puts a little bounce in your step.







Along the way, we got a view of Bintu Mani in the distant haze. It is the highest mountain in sub-Saharan West Africa. My hike the previous spring break was a climb to the top. What I remember is that it was a hike to the shoulder then a rock scramble to the top. It was Easter Sunday and, because of the latitude and sun angle, the sun was directly overhead – no shadows. The sun was hot and I got sunburn.

Along the road, we passed a small shelter housing an idol for hunters. They would present gifts here to ensure a successful hunt.



We encountered men along the way cutting firewood. It must have taken a fair bit of chopping to clear a gap through a tree that had fallen across the path entering the village.





When we got settled into our accommodations for the night, we would rustle up some food. Many meals in Africa are prepared in an iron pot perched upon three rocks. It is quite efficient in use of wood. One evening we boiled some plantains to go with the rice. A meal always includes rice. We usually drew an audience when we were preparing our meal.



Another staple food in Sierra Leone is cassava. In other parts of the world it is called manioc or yuca and several other names. The leaf is cooked into a sauce to pour over the rice. The starchy tuberous root is cooked sometimes instead of rice. In the photo, Gracie and I are with some village youths in front of a stand of cassava bushes.



When we got to the village of Sokrella, we met the chief and were taken to our accommodation. As we settled in, Gracie couldn't find her camera. We scrambled to find it with no luck. The last time it was used was at the suspension bridge. We explained our problem to the chief. He found a volunteer to go to the bridge and look. He found it! We were relieved and were able to enjoy a beautiful hazy sunset. This was the season of the harmattan wind, a very dry, dusty easterly or northeasterly wind on the West African coast, occurring from December to February, the dry season.







The next day was the last day on the trail. We continued seeing the Loma Mountains in the distance and Sorrie kept an eye out for game. He was lucky. We walked the last few miles into Kurabonla and found a place in the Government Rest House.



It was a great trip. Gracie and I had a good time and I am sure that Sorrie and Abu were happy to be along. We appreciated their ability to navigate the unmapped bush roads and their ability to ask directions and seek out the chief as we entered each village. Thank you Sorrie and Abu, wherever you are.

