

A Trip to Bonthe

I returned to Sierra Leone in 2004 - first time in 36 years. I first went to Sierra Leone fresh out of college in 1965 where I taught science at Kabala Secondary School in northern part of the country. I have always considered these years in Sierra Leone as my formative years, the experience setting the pattern for the rest of my life.

One of the highlights of the trip was a return to Bonthe, an island off the southern coast that I had visited a couple of times all those years ago. My host and I were taking a hand cranked grinder to Bonthe to help make a food to treat malnourished children.



The journey started in Freetown with a trip via pickup truck to Matru Jong on the banks of the Jong river where river boats travel regularly back and forth. We arrived and spent the night, giving us a chance to explore the town in the afternoon and evening. I love to poke around market stalls and see what is being offered for sale. In the morning, we found a boat ready to head down to Bonthe. We loaded our gear onto the boat and awaited departure. My last visit to Matru was about 1967.



Although not overly packed, there were still many people making the trip. The boat called in to several riverside villages along the way. Some got off, others got on.



Goods were delivered and village women swarmed out to sell food and fish. Someone brought what would probably not be high on our list of edibles.



We arrived at Bonthe, got settled in and went exploring the town. There are many interesting old buildings, residential and, at one time, commercial, dating back to colonial times. Many were abandoned. This was only a couple of years after the terrible 10 year civil war ended. There were signs that the government and international NGOs were helping to rebuild and reestablish infrastructure. There was a library and schools. There was a Norwegian Refugee Council that worked on a housing/resettlement project for amputees and war wounded.





You may remember a movie that came out in 1997 called **Amistad**. It was based upon an actual event in 1839 in which a group of Sierra Leoneans, Mende by tribe, had been taken captive and were being brought to the US as slaves. On the leg from Cuba to the US, the captives overpowered the ship's crew and took over the ship. They made it to Connecticut, where they were imprisoned. After many legal maneuvers, they were eventually released and were able to return to Africa. Several arrived on Bonthe. I was shown some old graves, but whether they were the Amistad people is not known. There is a school there named the **Amistad Memorial UMC School**.

I explored some rusting hulks along the shore near an old jetty and the abandoned Patterson, Zochonis & Co, Ltd building. It would have had an imposing presence during colonial times.



We did get the grinder set up and ground some soybeans to make soy milk.



The return trip was interesting. We left Bonthe in the morning, heading back to Matru and the pickup. The boat had many passengers and we, again, stopped at villages. There was one stop where the boat got close enough to the shore that I was brushed by a tree limb and leaves. It was infested with ants and, shortly, so was I. And did they bite! Guess they were just as unhappy as I was.



A little later, at another stop, a villager came out with fresh fish. My host bought them to bring to a relative in Freetown. We were still hours from Matru and the fish were laid out on the deck. We got to Matru and loaded our gear and the fish into the pickup, then had a meeting for a couple of hours before starting the several hour trip back to Freetown. After winding through the city we arrived at the relative's place and the "fresh" fish were delivered. They had been out in the heat of the day for well over 12 hours. Might have been safer to have brought the dried fish that were also presented by vendors.

