

Kabala, Sierra Leone

I graduated from college in the spring of 1965. My summer, that year, was spent in Chicago for Peace Corps training. I and my PC cohort would be sent to Sierra Leone for teaching in secondary schools in various parts of the country. As training progressed, I was able to talk to Sierra Leoneans who were part of our training. This helped me look for an appropriate school. I found that Kabala Secondary School was quite remote and looked interesting. I requested placement there. It was accepted and I would be assigned to KSS.

Kabala is in the far north of the country, not far from the border with Guinea. It is the district center for the largest district area-wise and the smallest district by population. And it is a long trip from Freetown, the capital of Salone.

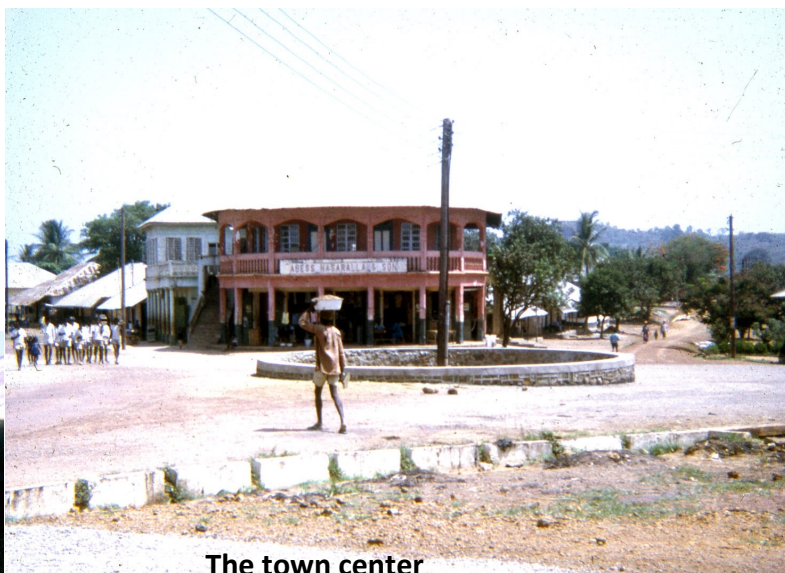
Kabala is a picturesque small city with a pair of rocky peaks to the north. I climbed these peaks several times while living there. From the peaks, the entire town is visible, spread out along a relatively flat area surrounded by small farm fields. It had two primary schools, the District Council and the Roman Catholic schools. Then there was KSS, a boarding school with a fairly large campus to the south of town. The photo below was taken from one of the peaks, looking south over the town. The KSS compound can be seen just beyond the town with classrooms in front and playing fields behind. Stretching to the left of the main part of town is the area called Yogomia where Gracie lived.



In the photo, you can see an open space which is the “center” of town. The main markets are there, several stores surround it and the lorries park there to load and unload freight and wait for enough passengers to start the trip south. Arriving lorries drop off their passengers there.



The market with many stalls



The town center



Lorries loading and unloading

I lived near the town center and across from the District Council school. To get to my teaching job at KSS, I would walk to the town center then along the road in the photo to the right. It was a very friendly town. All along the way, I was greeted with “Kushe” or “Kushe-o” which is the universal greeting in Krio, the common language throughout the country. You were expected to respond with “Kushe”, which I almost always did. There may have been a few occasions when I was not paying attention and didn’t answer. This usually resulted in “Eh, bo, Kushe no de?” (Hey, friend, no greeting today?) with a big smile and a chuckle.



Kabala is, I was told, 199 miles from Freetown. I have no idea from what point in Freetown this measurement was made. But I don't recall anyone ever saying it was 200 miles. None of the Peace Corps teachers in Kabala had a vehicle. So, any travel from Kabala had to be on public transport, and that is the back of a lorry. It was usually at least a 12 hour trip to Freetown.



Kabala is the administrative center for Koinadugu District. There are district administrative offices, a police station and a post office.

In addition to buying stamps and mailing letters, I would go to the post office to arrange a hair cut. One of the postal workers was a traveling barber and would come to my house and give me the haircut. Here, my roommate is getting a haircut.



Lorries primarily haul freight with passengers packed in after the freight is loaded, whether or not there is room. It can get very crowded and uncomfortable. And depending on the freight, it can be miserable. I have ridden with a load of freshly picked hot peppers. My eyes burned and watered the entire trip. I have ridden with a load of dried fish. The smell gets to you eventually. I have ridden with bags of cement; animals and fowl that are being transported. Then, during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, it is a race to get to the destination before sundown. If not, the trip will stop at sundown and hopefully resume the next day. Fortunately, this only happened to me once that I recall.

I remember one trip to Makeni normally a 3 hour trip. Ten or more of us were crammed in and the gate closed from the outside. At a town less than half way, we stopped, not unexpected. We were not let out. We sat there, crammed in and very uncomfortable. Eventually, I squeezed myself out of the opening near the top and climbed down. When I got around to the front, the radiator was out and disassembled on the ground! We would not make it to Makeni as planned.



Although Kabala is quite remote, in many ways it is a typical up country town. In the mid 60s when I lived there, we had electricity 24 hrs. There was a water system with stand pipes in many places around town. I was fortunate to have a stand pipe in the back yard as well as water into a sink in the kitchen and shower. We also had a large metal tank to catch rain water. During the dry season, there could be several days or even weeks with no water. The rain tank was our source then. We boiled and filtered our drinking water, whether it came from pipes or from rainwater. But we never ran completely dry. My house had a metal roof and was built of locally made bricks with a whitewashed cement coating.



We were across the street from the District Council (DC) primary school. Out the front door and to the left a couple hundred yards was the town center.



Some of the streets had been paved at some point, others were dirt roads. Most of the houses had metal roofs, and a veranda across the front was typical. Almost no indoor toilets. So there would be an outhouse behind nearly every house.



Scenes around the streets of Kabala. My house is at the top and the DC School upper right.



Kabala is nestled close to mountains to the north with two rocky peaks. When we had visitors, I would often take them on a hike up the mountain and give them a view from one or both peaks. On one occasion, I took a group of boys from the high school for a camping trip. We pitched camp in the area between the peaks then got up before sunrise, climbed to the peak and watched the sun come up. Spectacular!



There was a tree on the compound of the DC School across the road from our house that would burst into spectacular bloom each year.

Another part of town had a small coconut plantation with a group of evenly spaced coconut trees. One part of town, Gbauria, was noted for its palm wine which is fermented coconut water. That part of town also was noted for making music and dancing well into the night. I remember fondly drifting off the sleep listening to the happy music drifting from that part of town.

Kabala was a wonderful place to spend my first three years out of college teaching high school science. KSS was a good, well-run school with very eager students. I will write more about that in a future story.

