

Introduction/Chapter One

The plane landed and I descended the rickety stairs into the accumulated heat of my 36 year absence.

Would Musa be there to meet me? We had corresponded over the last several weeks by email but had never met. I looked out of the arrival area into the sea of black faces pushing and shoving to get to the screen that separated us. Would I recognize him? Could he find me?

Then one face caught my eye. It was a face with a neatly trimmed dome of silver grey hair. It was a peaceful face. The man behind the face was not pushing. His aura propelled him to the front, people deferred to him.

I gathered up my baggage – much more than I could carry. I grasped what I could and pushing the rest ahead of me with my feet exited into the sea of faces. The man with the silver grey hair said softly “Larry?”

“You must be Musa.” I replied.

“You are welcome,” he said. He directed the taxi driver he had engaged to help me with my baggage and we worked our way through the crowd to the waiting vehicle.

I was in Africa again. Thirty-six years is a long time. I had changed much in that time and I was soon to learn that the Sierra Leone I lived in during the 1960s had changed drastically as well – and mostly not for the better.

I had spent the years 1965-68 in Kabala in northern Sierra Leone as a Peace Corps Volunteer teaching science at Kabala Secondary School which at that time only admitted boys. These were wonderful years. I had some of the brightest and most eager students I have taught anywhere in my twelve years of teaching. Over the years, somewhere between 15 and 25 of these students went abroad for advanced degrees. They became vascular surgeons, PhD mechanical engineers, PhD economists and more. I don’t know the exact number of advanced degrees, but it is impressive.

Sierra Leone was less than five years into independence when I arrived. The infrastructure throughout the country was in reasonable condition. Kabala, typical of many upcountry towns, enjoyed 24 hour electricity. I can recall very few power outages. There was running water in many parts of town. I had a stand pipe in back of the house



plus water to the sink in my kitchen. Annually, toward the end of the dry season, tap water was not available and we relied on the large storage tank that also caught rainwater. But during the dry season there was no water in the reservoir to deliver to the town water system.

Many of the roads up country were bad but were quite passable. Lorries (trucks) of various sizes bounced along the roads with minimal delays. There was limited air service in the country and none to Kabala – there was

no airport. There was a train that ran from Freetown to some of the major up country centers. I know this for a fact. I rode on it once. I have run into former Sierra Leone PCVs from later years who were not aware that trains had ever run in Sierra Leone.

Launches regularly plied the waters of some of the rivers. I rode on the Jong river to Bonthe and back twice during my years there. I also bought passage by launch from Shenge to the Freetown peninsula.

There was no phone service that I was aware of up country – except for perhaps a half dozen phones that were connected locally in Kabala. They were in the Post Office, Police station and hospital, but could not call beyond these few sites.

Sierra Leone produced all of its own food. I ate locally grown upland rice. Kabala was noted for its wonderful peppers and onions. Three cows were slaughtered daily in various markets around town. *Bonga* – dried, smoked fish – was brought regularly from the coast.

Houses were maintained. Some were in disrepair, but most were tidy. They were whitewashed with nicely painted trim. I recall many houses in Kabala with large verandas and concrete pillars supporting the roof painted light blue and pink.



To me, these years were idyllic. They were also my formative years. I arrived in Sierra Leone fresh out of a small college in rural Minnesota. I grew up within 60 miles of this college. I had traveled around the US, often staying in National Parks following an uncle as he transferred within the National Park Service. With the exception of a college summer in Yosemite National Park, all my travel had been on family trips.

After three months of training in Chicago I was deposited in Sierra Leone along with a large group of secondary school teachers destined to scatter to the far reaches of Sierra Leone. I was on my own. But I was also in a structured environment. Kabala Secondary School existed and it was well run. I would slip into a regular job as a teacher. There were books – not necessarily appropriate for the classes I would teach – but something to build class work around.

I was adventurous. There were two breaks in the school year in addition to the longer summer break. I planned a major excursion for all of these breaks. Several times, I would recruit a student or two and plan a hike that would take us for several days through remote parts of the north. We would arrive at tiny bush villages in late afternoon and the students would seek out the village chief and arrange for shelter for the night. I climbed mountains, crossed large rivers on suspension bridges made of vines, traveled by river launch and sometimes dugout canoes to islands off the Atlantic coast. I visited the

families of local teachers in the far corners of the country. I didn't quite go native, but was probably only a step or two removed.

I had a blast.

I also became more politically aware.

My decision to join Peace Corps was not political. It was during my second year in college that I first heard about the program being introduced by the new Kennedy administration. I decided that is what I would do. By Christmas my final year, I had been invited to the Sierra Leone secondary teacher program. It was the only job I applied for. I was seeking adventure.

My first two years coincided with the huge buildup of troops in Viet Nam. Many young men sought to join PC as an alternative to the military. While PC would often provide a reason for a deferment, it did not replace military service.

I made a decision to extend my PC service for a third year. My local draft board didn't approve and refused to extend my deferment. I spent much of my third year appealing my draft status, eventually losing a presidential appeal. But the fact that my local draft board corresponded by surface mail allowed me to complete my third year and return to the US and take up another teaching position. But that is another story.

Politics in Sierra Leone took a turn for the worse. My impression during my first year – although my view was from a remote, inaccessible perspective – was of stability. The government functioned. There were things to complain about, but that was to be expected.

There were news reports of military coups in Ghana. There was trouble in Nigeria. People of the Ibo tribe in the east were threatening to secede and form Biafra.

But Sierra Leone was stable. In fact, there would be an election coming up during my second year. Sierra Leone would show the rest of Africa that there actually could be free and fair elections. The Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), led by Albert Margai, was in power. The SLPP power base was among the Mende people in the south. There were reports of corruption, but we were isolated in our little part of the country.

Siaka Stevens was the leader of the All People's Congress (APC). His base was largely in



the middle of the country and the north – among the Temne and Limba tribes. He had strong support in Kabala. As the election approached, there were rallies in Kabala and Siaka Stevens made an appearance. I heard him speak. I saw large crowds of red-shirted supporters marching

through the streets of Kabala singing, chanting and carrying signs proclaiming APC superiority.

The elections took place and, in spite of arrests of some of its candidates, the APC won. This was historic. It was the first case of an opposition party defeating a sitting government at the ballot box in sub-Saharan Africa. But the victory was short lived. Immediately after Siaka Stevens was sworn in as Prime Minister, he was arrested by Brigadier Lansana, commander of the Sierra Leone army. Lansana was in the process of reinstalling the defeated Prime Minister, Albert Margai, when a group of senior army officers took control and installed themselves as the government of Sierra Leone. Two coups within a week!

Kabala remained relatively calm. We tuned into radio Sierra Leone and heard the military music that was played to accompany the coups. Little changed for us in the North. The military government remained in charge during most of my third year. I continued to travel extensively during each school break. Nothing much had changed from my perspective.

My time in Sierra Leone was coming to an end. It was the turbulent year of 1968. The Tet offensive rocked Viet Nam. A telegram informed me I had lost a presidential appeal of my draft status the same day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered. Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for president. Robert Kennedy was murdered.

Then in Sierra Leone, a disgruntled group of privates and a few sergeants rounded up the military government and seized the radio station. They weren't quite sure what to do next. For lack of any better ideas, they restored Siaka Stevens to his position as Prime Minister.

Things were rocky through much of the country from then on. Our Peace Corps termination conference was shortened after being surrounded by army and then police. We were sent back to our posts to finish out the year and prepare to return to the US. As I traveled from Kabala to Freetown for the last time, I had to pass through three check points manned by the army. Persons and baggage were searched but I don't recall anyone being detained.

My roommate was about a half day behind me and passed through the same three checkpoints. But there was an additional check point as he approached Freetown. This time a search of his baggage turned up a diary in which he recorded events that took place during the coups as reported on the radio. They also found letters from his fiancé. These were deemed to be subversive and he was hauled off to CID for questioning. After several hours of questioning, he convinced his captives that he had to eat – and that western stomachs couldn't handle local food. He needed to eat at the Brookfields Hotel where he knew I would be staying. When he arrived he got a few steps ahead of his escorts and ran to the reception desk, hurriedly looked up my room number and burst into my room followed a few seconds later by two CID escorts. He quickly explained his plight and was hauled off to be fed.

I was unable to locate the PC director and ended up contacting the US Ambassador who intervened and a few hours later, my roommate was freed.

It was then, July 1968, that Sierra Leone and I parted company.

I traveled through Europe on the way back to the US with my fiancé, Gracie Scott. She was also a PCV and had been teaching in a primary school in Kabala for the last two years. We got married in Washington D.C. in August then we both took teaching jobs in a poverty area on Long Island. This earned me a draft deferment until my age made me no longer eligible for the draft.

We taught in New York for two years, then got jobs teaching on a remote island in Micronesia named Satawan. This was very similar to our PC experience – except that we made more money. There were PCVs teaching in adjacent classrooms.

We traveled in New Zealand and made contacts at several schools. I was hired to teach at Gisborne Boys High school on the east coast of the North Island. Gracie found a job teaching at Kaiti Primary School in the same town. We spent five years there and our two children were born there.

We returned to the US in late 1977. I changed careers and spent 20 years as a software engineer. Gracie taught for a couple of years then ran a day care center in our home. She died suddenly in 1992.

I retired as a software engineer in 2000. I had lost virtually all contact with Sierra Leone. I tracked down one or two former students that were living in the US and had a few telephone conversations. I heard the horror stories in the news about the civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone for much of the 1990s. But I knew very little about how Sierra Leone had changed in the more than thirty years since I had left.

In retirement, my interests took me to Norway on a 31 foot sail boat. My daughter became a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador. My new wife and I traveled there to visit her. It was a thrill to travel around the country as a PCV again.

I traveled to Nicaragua and became involved with an organization called Project Minnesota Leon. It is a sister state organization linking Minnesota with Leon Nicaragua.

Then in late 2003 a friend forwarded an email to me. An organization called Quantum Connections (QC) was seeking to establish person to person global partnerships between people in the US and people in developing countries. QC had established contact with a man in Sierra Leone named Rev. Musa Jambawai. He was currently a Methodist minister but was also trained as an agricultural engineer. He had taught agricultural subjects at Njala University in Sierra Leone. QC was looking for someone that would be willing to travel – on his own nickel – to Sierra Leone and establish a partnership with Musa.

QC had sent some equipment to Musa, including a very robust food grinder which never arrived. They were trying to get a laptop computer to him but were not sure how to best ship it to ensure its safe arrival.

I expressed interest in returning to Sierra Leone. I made contact with Musa by email and we exchanged a few emails. Summer was sailing season in Minnesota and rainy season in Sierra Leone. I didn't want to travel there during the rains. I decided to plan my trip for November of 2004. I wanted my trip to be long enough that I could get everywhere I wanted to visit and to have plenty of time to travel with Musa. I didn't want to have to not take a trip because of lack of time. I decided on a trip of six weeks.

As I was planning my trip, I sought out my roommate from Kabala, Gary Walker. I discovered that he was living and working in Freetown. He was on contract with the Sierra Leone government working directly as an advisor to the government commissioner that is responsible for rebuilding Sierra Leone after the decade of Civil War. He offered me a place to stay in Freetown and much advice on what had changed in the intervening years.

I departed for Sierra Leone in early November of 2004.

Meanwhile, Sierra Leone entered three decades of decline.

Siaka Stevens returned to power with a vengeance. Political enemies were arrested. Government money and foreign aid was channeled to his accounts. Ministers loyal to Stevens but objected to the corruption were removed. Stevens sent red-shirted thugs on rampages against perceived enemies.

A very popular and honest minister, Mohammed Forna, protested some of the blatant abuses. When there was no response from Stevens, he resigned and formed an opposition party the United Democratic Party (UDP). Thousands rushed to join this break away party. Stevens unleashed his red shirts against the UDP.

When the police refused to arrest Forna, the army was dispatched. Forna was arrested and locked up in the Pademba Road Prison.

Over the years of APC corruption and neglect, the infrastructure crumbled. Electric plants all over the country slowly ground to a halt. Water supplies dried up as pipes broke and no money was provided for repairs. Road maintenance stopped and the rains wreaked havoc in roads all over the country.

Food production declined. Schools decayed as teachers were not paid and fewer teachers were trained. Foreign teachers left the country. Books were not replaced; facilities and classrooms deteriorated and crumbled.

This decline accelerated through the 1980s.

As the 1990s arrived, there was civil war in neighboring Liberia. Charles Taylor in Liberia wanted more money and had his eye on the diamonds in eastern Sierra Leone. He encouraged the formation of a rebel group to dig diamonds and sell them through Liberia. The rebels used the money from diamonds to purchase weapons, many of which were supplied through Liberia. The terrorist organization, al Qaeda, got involved. With large sums of money to launder they purchased vast quantities of diamonds harvested by the rebels and smuggled through Liberia to al Qaeda agents. Diamonds were easier to move around the world than cash.

The rebels formed the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). They moved from the east kidnapping children, burning and destroying villages and farms, raping, killing and mutilating victims that happened to be in their path. Kidnapped boys were often forced to kill their parents, then had no place to go but with the rebels. Large groups of child soldiers were made high on drugs and sent on rampages, killing and maiming anyone they could shoot or catch. Some of the worst atrocities on the continent were committed

in Sierra Leone during the decade of the 1990s. Very little of the country was spared the violence. Many of the survivors will live out their lives as multiple amputees.

An end to the violence was enforced with the help of the largest UN peace keeping force in the world. They have been there since around 2000. The rebels have been largely disarmed and an elected government is in place.

The climate of physical disease and decay and manmade forces of neglect, war and corruption have relegated Sierra Leone to its place of dead last – 177th out of 177 – among nations in the 2004 UN Human Development Index. The HDI ranks all nations based upon life expectancy at birth (34.3 years in Sierra Leone), adult literacy (36%), gross school enrollment and per capita GDP. For Sierra Leone per capita GDP is US\$520, the lowest among all nations and one third that of Haiti.

After spending much of thirty years in northern Sierra Leone a missionary summed it up thus: “There are no soft edges in Sierra Leone.”

Sierra Leone is slowly trying to recover.

This is the Sierra Leone I returned to after my 36 year absence and Musa was there to help me find my way around this strange land.

