

# Volunteer Service in Africa: Another Path to International Diplomacy

By Reed Taylor



Reed Taylor

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For too long, too many of us have considered Africa a “dark continent” in more than one way—unknown to us except as a large land mass below Europe on the map; a land of dark-skinned people having little history of interest to us; even for some an undifferentiated population “in the dark” about the “advanced” civilization of the West. Another dimension of darkness is the extent of moral depravity shown in colonial greed and sectarian violence, leading one to wonder if Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” has more to do with the darkness of the heart. Today, however, thinking people cannot afford to be “in the dark” about Africa, a region whose conflicts and crises dominate today’s headlines and absorb the attention and financial resources of private and public agencies, including the UN and the European Parliament. Economic, political, and personal opportunities of the region have engaged the West ever since European nations’ “scramble for Africa” at the turn of the last century, with its colonial heritage lingering even after the successful independence movements of the 1960s (Pakenham).<sup>1</sup>

This paper will consider the violent conflict in Sierra Leone in the civil war of the 1990s that threatened to undo the promise of independence from British colonial rule in the late 1960s, focusing as much on the culture that faced annihilation as on the process of destruction itself. Much of the basis for this essay is the author’s personal experience in 1969 leading a volunteer group of North American students sent to rural Sierra Leone by Operation Crossroads Africa, a private agency founded in 1958 by the Rev. James

Robinson, the African-American pastor of a Harlem church, to “build bridges of friendship.” Four years later, the private Crossroads Africa program became the template for the Peace Corps. Viewed in the context of the Cold War, volunteer programs such as these can be considered as a valid alternative to political and military paths for major powers to use in developing influence and alignment.<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1969, I joined my group of five black and nine white volunteers from the U. S., Canada, and the Virgin Islands for an orientation session at Rutgers University, along with over a dozen other groups and their leaders destined for work camps in both West and East Africa. Our destination was the tiny village of Mobai, in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, close to its borders with Liberia and Guinea, and about as far away from the capital, Freetown, as the rutted dirt roads could carry us by open truck. At Rutgers, we practiced local customs that made us uncomfortable—getting only a few inches from one another in conversation and holding hands (especially difficult for the males) as we walked and talked. We also began to address the awkwardness of the deliberate racial diversity of each project group in a summer of civil rights frustration. I received advice on buying supplies in the major arrival city to carry upcountry for use over a seven-week period of virtual isolation from urban resources. Then we were on our way to the other side of the world—and a whole new view of it.<sup>3</sup>

On arrival at Sierra Leone’s capital, Freetown, we encountered a daunting

display of newly-minted indigenous bureaucracy, boasting starched uniforms and a flurry of rubber stamps in imitation of the recently-departed British regime. We were met by our host for the summer, Dr. Bockarie M. Kobba, who had founded the Eastern Clinic in Mobai two years earlier to serve the rural Mende tribal area where he had grown up before attending Fourah Bay College in Freetown and medical school in Marburg, Germany. We made our long, bumpy journey to Mobai in an open truck—with frequent stops for the driver to buy gas from roadside vendors (using makeshift oil drums and hand pumps) and even for the driver’s recreation with a lady friend.

Our arrival in Mobai combined a noisy welcome by the few hundred villagers with a growing sense of remoteness as the sunset plunged us into serene darkness. We lived seven weeks without electricity or clean water. The latter we caught by drainpipes from the roof of our home—the guest house of the paramount chief—during occasional rain showers. We boiled this “shingle tea” to offset pollution from bird droppings, and then triple-filtered the water in a 30-gallon ceramic tank I had bought in Freetown, along with a two-month supply of toilet paper, peanut butter, oatmeal in metal cans, and dried soup. We established three of the six bedrooms each for men and women; together with five young men from Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone—our African counterparts—we nineteen “lived close,” sharing the double bed in each room, or more modestly throwing a sleeping bag on the floor.

In those first days we entered enthusiastically into the life of the village, enjoying a local soccer match, joining the whole town in a victory dance afterward, and strolling the small strip of asphalt in front of the paramount chief’s house after

supper—sensing the approach of someone in the pitch dark and calling out “Bobo Gau” as both a friendly greeting and a warning of an impending collision.<sup>4</sup> We established our Sunday morning malaria-pill ritual, to little avail; the parasites had long since found a way around that medicine and gifted eleven us with the disease that bloomed several weeks after our return.

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Soon we settled into our work routine, digging 1,800 feet of trenches to lay the foundation for a 48-bed hospital, and later filling the trenches with rocks and mortar, topped with several stringcourses of cement brick, which we fashioned in rudimentary molds and set out in the sun to harden. Some had other assignments: a medical student from California and a nurse from Calgary went into the jungle in the VW van to carry medicines to outlying villages, conduct well-baby clinics, and provide prenatal advice. A nutrition student from Howard University went along to offer her dietary counsel to young mothers. We rotated who would remain at the house to prepare the evening meal. Once I went to buy cement and food supplies in Kenema, the nearest “city,” about a five-hour lorry ride from Mobai.

We took a few excursions. One day we walked three miles to Potolu, a tiny village with traditional thatched-roof houses. We were treated to some

traditional dances and a hot meal of rice and cassava leaves, with plenty of hot sauce, which we ate in the traditional manner with our fingers—hot to the touch as well as to the tongue! Another day we drove thirty miles to the noisy and colorful market town of Koindu, at the intersection of Sierra Leone with Guinea and Liberia. Yet another time six of us drove almost sixty miles north to Pejewa, home village of our chief brickmaker, to witness a ritual dance that featured “devils” of the secret Poro Society—a privilege reserved for visiting dignitaries like the president or prime minister. I was told they had never before had white people see this ceremony, or even visit the village.<sup>5</sup>

Now, forty-five years later, I treasure these memories of Sierra Leone’s traditional culture, not only in the sentimental haze of an octogenarian, but also in view of the tragic civil war that abruptly ended the peaceful life of Mobai twenty-two years after our group came to lend a hand to the village’s clinic project, already well under way. In the summer of 1991 Dr. Kobba wrote a letter to the members of the group that included this chilling eyewitness account:

On the 25th of March 1991, foreign rebels from the neighboring country of Liberia, invaded our country. Mobai was captured on the 12th of April 1991. Before the invasion, we used to treat patients from Liberia as we are only 15 miles away and the people on the Liberian border in our area are of the same tribe, Mendi [sic]. [On April 12, as I finished an ectopic operation] at about 4:30pm, I was informed that the rebels were on their way [...]. I rushed to pack a few of our belongings and we left Mobai at 6:00pm. I was informed the next day that the rebels attacked Mobai at 8:00pm. All the citizens were rounded up in the mosque and the court barrio that night.

They killed many people including two of my brothers[,] John Kobba and Allie Kobba[.] [T]he paramount Chief Bunduka and speaker were also killed. Many people ran into the bush and nearby villages [...]. The list of the people killed is very long [...].

It is hard to believe the stories of how the rebels [killed] our people...by cutting their throats and in some cases, drank their blood from the neck veins and arteries [...]. The barbaric way in which our people have been killed remains unforgettable [...]. In some cases one could equate the killings to that of gasing [sic] the Jews in the second world war [...].<sup>6</sup>

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Upon his return to Freetown that December after a brief exile in Germany, Dr. Kobba relayed to us the testimony of many who had remained in Mobai through the summer. They reported that the hospital and nearby houses had escaped being burned because the rebels “are living on our houses and on our products [...]. Two weeks ago, the rebels managed to attack another village where my immediate relatives had escaped from the war to stay [...] and 52 poor civilians were brutally killed.”<sup>7</sup>

Such horrific news swept away the good feeling I had enjoyed as I looked back on our work in the summer of 1969; in its place was a grinding emptiness as I came to realize the depths of evil to which human beings can descend. This was truly “the darkness of the heart.” I was no African scholar, only a high school English teacher who had had a seven-week experience inserted into his graduate studies in the late 1960s. By the turn of the new century, however, I had relocated my 8mm movie of the Mobai project and was looking into some literature about Sierra Leone’s civil war of 1991-2001. I found an excerpt from the 1991 manifesto of Sierra Leone rebel leader Foday Sankoh, characterized by journalist Daniel Bergner as a former army corporal, one-time “prisoner for plotting a coup, itinerant photographer in the provinces, a guerilla-trainee under Muammar Qaddafi.” His manifesto waxed eloquent on the high ideals of the rebels, who he said were

fighting for democracy, and by democracy we mean equal opportunity and access to power to create wealth through free trade, commerce, agriculture, industry, science and technology. Wealth cannot be created without power. Power cannot be achieved without struggle. And by struggle, we mean the determination, the humanistic urge to remove the shame of poverty, hunger, disease, squalor, illiteracy, loafing and hopelessness from this African land of Sierra Leone. (qtd. in Bergner 38)<sup>8</sup>

The hollowness of Sankoh’s lofty rhetoric was exposed when he negotiated a treaty with the government forces a few months later that put him in charge of Sierra Leone’s diamond mines.

After a decade of disruption, the war ended in 2001. Personal accounts by survivors of the war like Mariatu Kamara and Ishmael Beah began to

appear, describing the savage behavior of the rebels, who used machetes to cut off people’s hands to keep them from voting (Bergner 36). Individuals and groups from Europe and America, as well as the United Nations, responded to the human catastrophe by providing medical services and subsistence in rehabilitation camps, largely in the vicinity of Freetown, but also abroad.<sup>9</sup>

With the end of the war, Sierra Leone entered a decade of government stability and slow but steady economic recovery. Today the nation enjoys a resurgent tourist industry and free reporting in the press and on radio. Dr. Kobba has reportedly returned to Mobai to rebuild his ruined hospital and revive the palm oil plantation the village counts on for financial support of its clinic and other services.<sup>10</sup>

My brief insertion into the traditional culture of upcountry Sierra Leone in 1969 left me with a vivid image of life there before the civil war. This paper has endeavored to put that image into an “after” context that takes into account not only the political and military record of the war, but also the outrageous violations of human rights on the part of the rebel soldiers (and some of their governmental counterparts), many of them children. After proceedings that raised the world’s awareness of the crimes against humanity committed in that region during the bloody decade of the 1990s, the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague eventually convicted Liberia’s Charles Taylor, instigator of the rebel invasion in the spring of 1991.

Sierra Leone’s recent history illustrates the whole range of human nature. Preparing to write this paper has required me to face the worst side of human greed, violence, and brutality, but it has also provided recent signs of hope, as well as priceless memories of a corps of volunteers almost a half-century ago committed to building “bridges of friendship” between North



Americans and West Africans, between blacks and whites, between haves and have-nots.

Pastor Robinson's legacy of fostering the best in human nature promotes what James Joseph calls a "transnational civic culture" in which acts of generosity, rather than self-referring charity, count much more than economic or political coercion. Such "soft power" results from projects of "assisted self-reliance" in partnerships that honor the leadership and resources of the indigenous community. In addition to the *vertical* transfer of resources from rich to poor, our common view of philanthropy, Robinson promoted a *horizontal* relationship among and between the poor. The Crossroads Africa model of participatory development shines a light of hope that pierces the gloom of the deepest human evil (Joseph 15-23). May we lift our sights above the defining evil of today to embrace a vision of hope rooted in personal diplomacy.

## Notes

1. On December 4, 2013, the European Parliament received a report on the plight of Eritreans fleeing their repressive regime, Mirjam van Reisen, Meron Estefanos, and Conny Rijken, *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond [Draft]* (Oisterwijk, Netherlands: Wolf Legal Publishers, 2013), cited at <http://socialwatch.org/node/16313> [accessed January 18, 2014]. See also Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).
2. James A. Joseph, the former U.S. Ambassador to South Africa recently wrote of his Crossroads Africa experience as a group leader in Ghana in 1966, noting that OCA's founder, the Rev. James Robinson, had fostered a program bringing African nations into America's orbit through what Joseph Nye has called "soft power."
3. A documentary film of original footage and sound from the 1969 project in Mobai can be accessed at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaV\\_talRM\\_w&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaV_talRM_w&feature=youtu.be).
4. Seventeen years later a young girl in a village closer to Freetown recorded an insider's view of the rural life in Sierra Leone we observed in 1969:  
Starting from the time I was about seven, and strong enough to carry plastic
5. The five African-American students took an unscheduled trip to Kenema, hailing a lorry early one morning and returning after dark. They needed some space and privacy to process the unaccustomed interracial intimacy that was part of the Crossroads philosophy—a tough challenge for black and white Americans alike in this year of burning cities and civil rights activism. The next day Dr. Kobba reminded the group that in Africa we were all Americans, though the locals referred to us as "white" and "Negro" (not "African-American," thus disappointing those hoping to re-connect with their African roots). By the end of the summer such racial awkwardness had been lessened by our frequent talks during group sessions, but all were keenly aware that we were returning to an unchanged racial polarity at home. At a 2013 reunion we revisited as adult friends those early frictions. See news of the reunion at <http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130407/CITYANDREGION/130409354>.
6. Letter from Dr. B.M. Kobba, January 15, 1992, Sierra Leone.
7. Letter from Dr. B.M. Kobba, September 16, 1991, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Journalist Daniel Bergner records a similar attack in 1994 on a village elsewhere in the country, as reported by a missionary family (Bergner 78-84).
8. For a gripping account of the brutal rebel attacks by one of their boy soldiers in that "lost decade" of the 1990s see Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*.
9. International outrage over these amputations resulted in efforts to bring victims from Sierra Leone rehabilitation camps to Britain, Canada, and the U.S. for advanced surgery and prosthetics, as well as psychological healing and a fresh start. For a description of the rehabilitation program set up by Rotarians from Staten Island and Brooklyn for young amputees from Sierra Leone, see Sylvia Moreno, "Peace Girl," *The Rotarian* 191, no. 8 (February 2013): 38-49.
10. The UN agency overseeing postwar recovery returned the Eastern Clinic's palm oil plantation on October 7, 2004, in a ceremony featuring remarks by Dr. Kobba. See <http://ecm-sierraleone.com/portfolio.html> and a press release issued the next day, [www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unamsil/pr185.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unamsil/pr185.pdf). A local newspaper mentioned Dr. and Mrs. Kobba in the obituary of a close Mobai relative in

2012, at <http://news.sl/drwebsite/exec/view.cgi?archive=8&num=19535&printer=1>. Six weeks earlier, the *AARP Bulletin* profiled a former Peace Corps volunteer in Mobai in 1966 who was preparing to return there at the end of 2011 to help Dr. Kobba rebuild the ruined hospital. Walter Villa, "Hospital Draws Man Back to Africa; Miami Professor Bill Todd to Return to Sierra Leone to Help Rebuild Village Clinic," *AARP Bulletin*, November 14, 2011.

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