

A Privileged Weekend

# In A Home Away From Home

Helen Fallon

Photo: M Smith

**I**t is now some years ago but I still remember that I was delighted when Anthony, one of my Sierra Leonean students, invited me to spend a weekend with his family in the north of Sierra Leone. While I had visited some of my students in their homes, this was the first time I was invited to stay.

It was Anthony's first trip home in four years. A hundred miles, in Sierra Leone where transport was expensive, was considered a vast distance. Students didn't return home for Christmas or summer holidays, yet alone half-term.

A few weeks before our visit, Anthony sent a letter announcing our impending arrival with someone travelling to the village. His brother Brimar, the village schoolteacher, read the letter to their mother. Returning home as a university student to a community where most people could not read or write, and bringing with him his lecturer – a woman from far away – was news indeed.

## A WARM WELCOME

We set out in the early morning in a ramshackle van called a *Poda Poda*. It rumbled along the pot-holed road, finally disgorging cramped passengers a few miles from the village. After waiting about two hours a creaking taxi with a canary yellow number plate appeared on the horizon and brought us – dusty, hungry and tired – the final miles along a red ribbon of laterite road.

At his home Anthony's family had assembled to greet us. His father had died some years ago and, in keeping with the tradition of his ethnic group, his uncle was now the head of the house. So his uncle was called his father, as was his elder brother. Anthony introduced me to his birth mother, and to his elder sister who he also called mother.

A considerable amount of time was spent exchanging greetings and enquiring about my family. Anthony's uncle, the one he called father, expressed concern that my father was dead.



"Who," he asked, "is head of your family?"

"I have four brothers and an uncle," I explained, feeling it was just too difficult to explain how different things were in Ireland. But he was reassured: my mother and the female members of the family were being looked after.

A bowl of groundnut stew – made from peanuts, chilli peppers and fish – was passed my way. I ate from the big spoon that accompanied it and then passed the bowl and spoon to Anthony's uncle, the one he called father.

#### WHERE EVERYONE MATTERS

My bedroom was attached to the village school, where Anthony's brother Brimar was a teacher. It had a tiny window with a wooden frame. Instead of glass a piece of grey mosquito gauze kept out the creatures of the night. In the morning I woke to the sound of laughter. Light struggled through the tiny window and illuminated the faces of children pressed against the mosquito gauze.

Breakfast – a cup of coffee and an egg – took some time; water was boiled on an open fire, set between three large stones. After breakfast I was taken once again to greet Anthony's many relatives.

Then we went on a trip to a gold mine where whole families spent long days knee-deep in water panning for gold. If they found anything it went to the wealthy controllers of the mines, before making the long journey to jewellery shops in cities whose streets these villagers would never walk. The local people, who found the gold, were lucky if they got a tiny bonus in addition to their meagre wages.

In the evening the villagers gathered in the open air. A child was sent to a nearby village to get a small container of palm wine. Like milk in appearance, it had a sharp tangy taste. I sat sipping, watching stars spread thick across the sky. The villagers talked in the local language. But I did not feel left out, despite not understanding the dialect.

There was a real stillness and peace; no sounds of cars

in the distance, no television. Instead, crickets, frogs and other night creatures provided a gentle backing orchestra.

The next day the rituals surrounding meals were repeated, with Anthony's mother and his aunts arriving early to light the three-stone fire. During the day I visited the school, a workshop where pots and pans were repaired, and some land the family had on the outskirts of the village. Everyone seemed to be related to Anthony.

Our departure was given as much attention as our arrival. Eventually a *Poda Poda* creaked into view. After haggling with the driver for a few moments we agreed a price. The long journey back to the city began.

#### FAITH AND FAMILY

A few months later, my two-year contract completed, I left Sierra Leone. For about ten years Anthony kept in contact with me; I still have all the thin blue aerograms.

The early ones expressed optimism; the hope that multi-party elections would bring stability and prosperity to Sierra Leone. Later he wrote that the ruling government had been overthrown in a military coup.

Time passed and later he wrote of a much changed and dangerous situation; of villagers displaced, of time spent in a refugee camp in Guinea. Finally there was, a few years ago, a letter from Ghana where Anthony had

begun a degree programme in one of the universities.

I think Anthony's faith and his strong sense of family helped him through those difficult years. He concluded one of his last letters to me:

*Please accept my warmest greetings for you and for your family whom I do not know. I hope God is caring for them. Although you are now without father and mother, God will take care of you. My mother is still alive; therefore I thank God for that. I hope He will continue caring for her and for me.*

*Greetings to you.*

*Anthony*

I'm sure God is taking care of them. ■



**Anthony boards a canoe to cross the local river where many people spend a long day panning for gold.**

(Photo: H Fallon)

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.