

# LETTERS FROM LIBERIA

J.D.Y. Peel

*Letters from Liberia* was first published by the International African Institute and Centre of African Studies, SOAS University of London, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG.

[www.internationalafricaninstitute.org](http://www.internationalafricaninstitute.org)  
[www.soas.ac.uk/cas](http://www.soas.ac.uk/cas)

Copyright © International African Institute 2016

ISBN 978-0-72860-407-0

Contact: [cas@soas.ac.uk](mailto:cas@soas.ac.uk)

Cover design and lay-out: Anna De Mutiis

Map design: Miles Irving

Cover photo: Pa Coleman, J.D.Y. Peel and S.K. Massale - for more details see '9 March 2012' at page 55.

Photo Credits: All the photos were taken by J.D.Y. Peel or Anne Ogbigbo.

Printed and bound by SOAS Printroom.



IAI

International African Institute



**SOAS**  
University of London  
— 100 Years —

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	5
Map of Liberia.....	6
Introduction.....	7
CHRISTMAS 2010.....	9
JANUARY 2011.....	15
MID - JULY 2011.....	21
AUGUST 2011.....	27
SEPTEMBER 2011.....	35
DECEMBER 2011.....	41
MARCH 2012.....	49
JUNE 2014.....	59



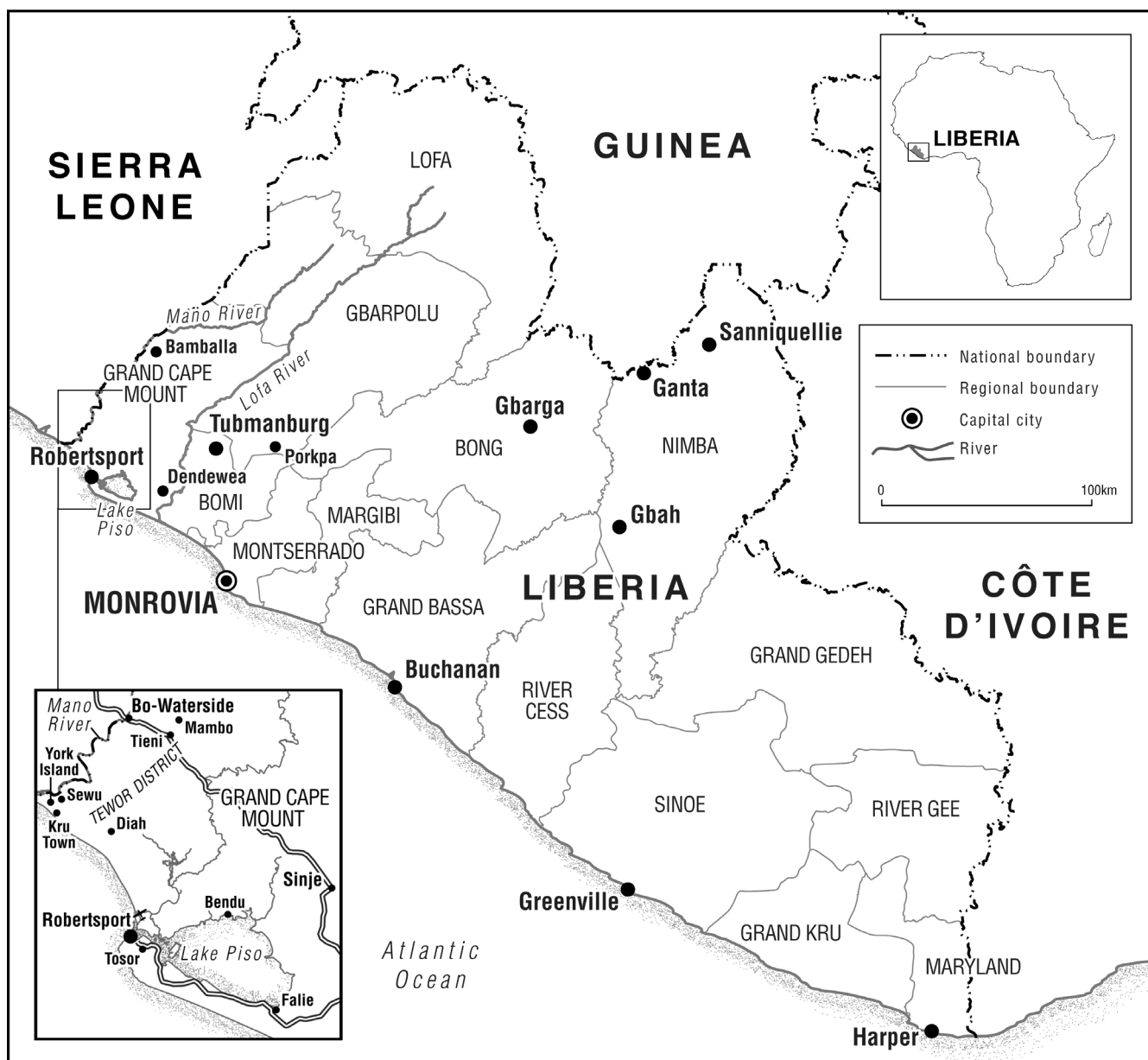


# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the Centre of African Studies (particularly Angelica Baschiera), and the International African Institute (particularly Stephanie Kitchen) for making the publication possible. A small grant from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, SOAS, helped with design, which Anna De Mutiis undertook with imagination and grace.

John's widow, Anne Ogbigbo, gave permission for publication and helped in numerous respects to bring it to fruition. The views expressed by the author, however, should not be taken to reflect those of UNMIL personnel.

Map of Liberia, showing provinces, major cities and the main areas, towns and villages mentioned in the letters



# INTRODUCTION

John (or JDYP, as he often signed himself) wrote regularly to his family and friends during visits to be with his partner, and subsequently wife, Anne Ogbigbo, on her UN posting as Human Rights officer in the Grand Cape Mount region of Liberia.

A communication addressed personally would arrive with a dated attachment headed 'Letter from Liberia'. All eight of these 'Letters', which friends came to anticipate keenly, have been collected to coincide with a meeting to celebrate John's life at SOAS, University of London, on 25 June 2016.

Intended as semi-public documents, blending personal news with current events, the letters are vivid reminders of John's engaged and engaging curiosity, zest for life, and sympathy for human foibles everywhere, and notably in West Africa. These qualities did not leave him as his health deteriorated, though we were deprived of the letters he would have written during trips he could not take. Rereading them is to be seated again around his dining table, strewn with debris of the meals he loved to cook, as John launched into story-telling stride. A good audience brought out his performative side, so we are sure he would have been happy if the 'Letters' he wrote to share his experiences can now be shared more widely and more permanently.

*Richard Fardon, May 2016*



# CHRISTMAS 2010

23 December, and the weather couldn't be more different from the ice and snow you've been having in England. I even feel a twinge of regret that I'll have missed what looks as if it might be the first white Christmas in ages. It's 9am, and already the glare suggests it's going to be a really hot day – and humid with it. The rains have continued late this year, and there's been some almost every day since I arrived: mostly shortish local showers rather than the day-long universal downpours that you get here in June-July. The last was two days ago, so it looks like the dry season has arrived at last. Anne has moved house since January, to a bungalow in its own small compound on the last little hill as you come in to Robertsport, a quarter of a mile from the Nigerian army post, from where we get water and electricity, and about 10 minutes walk to the UN base in the middle of town. Back of us the ground rises steeply to the wooded ridge that overlooks the town, in front of us stretches the farming bush heavily dotted with oil palms, crossed by a red, dusty road with little houses along it, from which rise domestic sounds. Close by the junction, some mango and breadfruit trees show their shiny, brilliant-green new leaves. As you crest the hill, less than 200 yards ahead you see the blue waters of Lake Piso, and in the distance the long sandbar at the mouth of the lake, the white breakers of the ocean, and the continuous wooded bush on the opposite shore. The compound is surrounded by a bamboo stockade topped with razor wire – UN security regulations stipulate this, though it hardly seems necessary in placid Robertsport. Anne has four security staff to guard it, who work in shifts so that there's always two around, two women (Maima and Bendu) who cook, clean, wash clothes, heat water for our baths on a charcoal stove etc. and an old pappey who's a recipient of Anne's charity (all he has to do is open the gate when a car arrives). Add two little dogs and four chickens (mostly given by people to thank Anne for things she's done), and it comes out as quite a little family compound.

This morning it's very busy, as workmen are making a level patio area for sitting out on one side of the house under the shade of a big mango tree. Anne's friend Gérard, the French ambassador, has come to Robertsport for Xmas with some of his family, staying at the little beach lodge, while his Ivorian chef, the genial Monsieur Bamba with his stately Senegalese wife, are staying with us in the spare room. Anne is chatting with them in French,



then switching to what they call ‘Belabo English’ [from a small bitter yellow aubergine which the Vai people like to put in their sauces] to talk to the workmen. It transpires one of them is a Mende, so she asks him their greetings and soon has them off fluently – her facility with languages is very remarkable.

Time has flown so fast since I got here towards the end of November that it’s sad to think I’ll be leaving in just over two weeks time. As before, it’s been such an interesting mix of field-trips about Grand Cape Mount County and time in Robertsport, when Anne has office-work or meetings and I can get on with my own work, either at home or in her air-conditioned office. It seems I get more work done here – writing overdue book reviews, editing a manuscript, writing lectures – yet also feel more relaxed than in London. I’m reaching the end of Volume 4 of Proust.

Yesterday we went to follow up reports of poor conditions and social problems in a couple of the camp-villages that house workers on one of the large rubber plantations found all over Liberia, once American-owned but now taken over by a Malaysian company. We went with an associate of Anne’s, a charming young woman called Victoria who works in child protection with an NGO and knew the plantation well, talked to the school principal, a senior manager and even a Pentecostal pastor who used to be a ‘combatant’ in the recent civil war. The plantation work-force is largely

composed of such ex-fighters who've settled down with their families. I'd never seen rubber-tapping before, or the big lumps of white latex that they collect.

In the two weeks before, Anne had two main projects to follow up in a district called Tewor, about 90 minutes drive away. One was a day workshop on women's rights, with an invited audience of about 30 opinion leaders – clan or town chiefs, chairladies (as women's community leaders are called), some district officials, the odd *kamon* (Muslim cleric) – facilitated by Kagwiria, a feisty Kenyan lawyer with the UN in Monrovia. The best was the discussions with the audience about such things as how polygamous marriages worked or the issue of violence against women. There were quite a few older voices who blamed “human rights” (sic) for their being unable to control their children – which called forth a firm rebuttal from Kagwiria – and the incidence of teenage pregnancies. The show-stopper was the intervention of a courteous old chief who unabashedly explained why it was perfectly right for husbands to beat their wives when they were disobedient. Overall, the audience's main moral concerns could not be better summed up than in Shakespeare's words (I can't remember where from): the prevalence of “wronging the ancients and getting wenches with child”.

Anne's other main current project is about access to education, in particular how to raise the level of school enrolment in the Vai villages that dot the mosaic of food-farms, forested land, and small palm or rubber plantations in the Tewor back-country. More children go to village Koranic schools than to public primary schools, so getting the support of the *kamons* is vital. In the company of a progressive *kamon*, we went to check village facilities (schools, clinics etc.) along an eight-mile stretch of narrow bush-road, which often required four-wheel drive and took nearly an hour to cover. Some very dilapidated and dirty schools with hardly any furniture, yet a decently run little clinic in another place run by an NGO. We buy some country rice that's just been husked with pestle and mortar under one of the little raised granaries made of bamboo you see in every village. In Monrovia last weekend we got two dozen brand-new Korans through an Iraqi colleague of Anne's, to distribute among the *kamons* to get their support to persuade their pupils to attend primary school too.

On these trips, there's a lot to see in the countryside. Far more birds than ever I saw in Nigeria – I wish I had a bird-recognition guide with me –



occasional flocks of guinea-fowl crossing the road; a couple of very striking black-and-white kingfishers, larger than the European kind; white egrets common, and occasionally some handsome plovers; finches, flashing a lot of bright yellow, as they fly over the long grass; hornbills, often in pairs, with that peculiar hesitant, loping flight they have. (It's always struck me as curious that the Yoruba word for hornbill, *ogbigbo*, is also Anne's surname.) Quite often one sees small monkeys in groups of 3 or 4, but last week something really special: just a mile beyond a small town, a chimpanzee ambled across the laterite road about 50 yards in front of us. Bigger than I imagined, with sleek black fur, it just disappeared into the foliage beside the road. Perhaps it had gone to forage on the farms which were around, but so close to a town! In open areas near villages, there seem to be lots of swallows and house-martins, darting and wheeling to catch flies. Strange to think they've recently flown thousands of miles from Europe, and that in three months or so, having built up their energy reserves, they'll be setting off back to Europe to raise their young under the eaves of our barns.

Last weekend we went to Monrovia for a change of scene, over two hours drive away: a chaotic, messy, not-very-charming, in fact rather typical West African city, with bad traffic jams. It still wears the scars of the civil war in the form of the blackened concrete shells of sacked buildings. It's really the only city in Liberia – about a quarter of the country's population lives there – and is altogether too dominant. Over 90% of Liberia's doctors are to be found there, while the five districts of Grand Cape Mount County have just one, in Robertsport. We called in to see the staff at the UN Human Rights Section headquarters, and stayed in great comfort at the house of Isabelle, a good friend of Anne's who's the head of UNICEF in Liberia. Apart from the chance to have a couple of meals out in decent restaurants, the interesting thing was to be close to the UN/NGO centre of things just as a major international crisis was developing, namely that in the Ivory Coast, Liberia's eastern neighbour. All the talk and lots of meetings were about the problem posed by refugees flooding into Liberia: the estimate of numbers rose from under 4,000 to over 10,000 during the weekend. After I leave, it's possible Anne may be asked to go to Nimba County in the east – a remote area with very poor roads – as she speaks French. This week, back in Robertsport, she's heard from contacts that considerable numbers of Liberian ex-combatants – happy to escape high levels of unemployment – are being recruited by



the Ivorian leader Gbagbo. It's all starting to look very messy and ominous.

It's now nearly 5pm, and the day is less hot. This evening Gérard and his family are coming around and we'll all have supper on trestle tables under the mango tree by Anne's new patio. I'll finish now, so I can send this as an e-mail attachment – provided the UN internet connection is working, which isn't guaranteed – tomorrow. I hope you all have a lovely white Christmas, and look forward to seeing you in the New Year.





# JANUARY 2011

Wednesday 5 January, and tomorrow we leave Robertsport for Monrovia, from where I'll fly back on Friday evening. The last rain was a week ago: a heavy downpour in the evening and then starting again about 5.30am and going on as a drizzle till after 8.00, leaving things grey and overcast till the afternoon, when the clouds cleared and it became really hot and humid. It felt like we'd gone back to the rainy season, but it proved a final flourish. Walking down from the old church last Sunday morning – it's secluded on a hill behind the town, and has magnificent views both towards the ocean and inland up Lake Piso, as far as some wooded hills perhaps 5-6 miles away rising out of what looks like continuous forest – I noticed how hazy it was. This has continued, with cooler nights and dewy mornings, and I realized the harmattan had come – the haze being a very fine dust borne from the distant desert, though far less pronounced than I've known in Nigeria. The sun is a fuzzy pale yellow in the early morning, and goes a rich, vivid orange as it sets. As if to go with this, a lot of people seem to have eye-infections at the moment, conjunctivitis I suppose, but locally known as Apollo, because it is associated with the time the Americans landed on the moon. Interestingly, Anne says it has the just the same name far away in Afrique Centrale.

I must mention St John's, the Episcopal church where I go to the 10.30 service most Sundays. It's the oldest, and you might say the elite, church of Robertsport, attended by such notables as Mr Massaley the former mayor – “S.K.” to me, I'm “Prof” to him – the Sheriff and the Court Clerk, all of whom I'm on friendly terms with. Congregations are not vast, but sing vigorously led by the surpliced choir, composed of women and girls. Musical assistance is given by Mrs Robertson, a slender American lady in her 80s, her thin white hair pulled back in a little bun, the widow of a long-time missionary, who decided to come back from the US to end her days here. For connoisseurs of Anglican churchmanship, Episcopalians in Liberia (like Anglicans in Ghana) are “high”, whereas the former CMS territories of Nigeria and Sierra Leone are “low”. That means that you address the minister as “Father”, not as “Pastor”, and the liturgy is very much “bells and smells”. The



main Sunday service is accompanied by great clouds of incense (which I rather like), and when the priest processes out in his alb and chasuble, he tops them off with a black biretta (much too Romish for me). It's true that quite a lot of the glory has departed from St John's. Though the church itself was not destroyed by any of the combatant factions in the civil war, its secondary boarding schools for boys and girls were sacked, and their ruins still stand in the spacious mission grounds, a melancholy reminder of all that pointless destruction.

The week after Xmas was rather quiet in terms of field-visits, since Anne was struck down by a tummy-upset for a couple of days, and had to give some time to completing an essay assignment for the Master's course she's doing by distance learning. One village, Dendwea, which Anne first visited in connection with problems to do with its school, has a particular attraction. It's beautifully situated amid lush vegetation just where a smaller stream joins the Lofa River, one of the major rivers that traverse Liberia, and now after the rains full-flowing between continuously wooded banks, almost as wide as the Thames at Wapping. It's where you can get a special seasonal delicacy, called "crayfish" locally but actually what Anne

calls *crevettes d'eau douce*, big fresh-water prawns, some 3-4 inches long. The season for them is just coming to an end. They catch them in tapering, cylindrical fish-traps, and then keep them fresh till they have enough for sale, either for particular customers or to sell on the main road, putting them in large plastic water cans punctured with holes that they suspend in the river. Anne rings the chief on his mobile to find out if they've got enough – say a bucketful – and we go to collect them, still very much alive. You pour boiling water on them, drain and then stir-cook them unpeeled for a few minutes in a big deep pan with a little hot olive oil, adding a glass of white wine and chopped garlic. Delicious with chopped potato-greens and something starchy, like fufu, sweet potatoes or *asaro*. The latter is a Nigerian yam-pottage which I taught Bendu how to cook. Yams aren't a big thing in this part of West Africa – rice is – but you can find them occasionally. To my delight we got quite a big one, but its flesh when boiled turned out not to be fine and white, like the best Nigerian yams, but a rather disagreeable brownish-grey, so pounded yam, the king of Ijesha foods, was out of the question. You make *asaro* by coarsely mashing the boiled yam pieces and mixing them into some sliced onions which you've fried with tomatoes and a bit of pepper in a generous amount of palm-oil, whose rich taste and strong yellow colour flavour the dish. I won't say it came up to the best standards of *cuisine bourgeoise Yoruba*, but it was passable.

Yesterday we visited a large village called Diah, a couple of hours drive away, at the invitation of a friend of Anne's called Haja Fahnbulleh who lives there. Haja is a tall woman in her late 40s, dark-complexioned, with a sweet face but quite a piercing gaze, very *puissant*. Originally trained as a nurse, she used to work as a field officer for the Ministry of Gender & Development – which was how Anne got to know her – and recently was appointed District Commissioner of Tewor. To belong to Fahnbulleh clan in Tewor is like being a MacDonald in Skye or a MacRae in Wester Ross. Haja, like most Vai, is from a Muslim family but became a Pentecostalist after being healed at a church in Monrovia; her husband (also a Fahnbulleh and once a Muslim) is a pastor. Her elderly male predecessor as DC was a Fahnbulleh too.

We meet Haja – who is still known to everyone by her Muslim



name - at the public hall in Tieni, the District headquarters, chairing a meeting to plan a big fund-raising event for local projects. About 15 chiefs and a few senior ladies sit on the dais behind her, while some 30-40 “youth” and others, nearly all men, are in the body of the hall. Haja is absolutely in command of her audience, whom she addresses interactively, varying her tone from quiet and soft to forceful or indignant, switching between Vai (mostly for the chiefs) and Liberian English (more for the youth), sometimes jokey and anecdotal, sometimes sternly admonitory: altogether a bravura performance, strongly reminiscent of some Pentecostal sermons I’ve heard. Though the issues are not gender-specific at all, she uses her own gender very astutely. To emphasize that she’s Commissioner for all the people, ready to take up to anyone’s problems, she declaims “I am your sister, your mother, your auntie” - a sequence of female roles of ascending levels of authority - and says she’s not like the kind of chief they have in Sierra Leone, giving a humorous low bow, which amuses people. In two ways Liberia is different from other West African countries I know: many more women hold political office, and chiefship is very modest in style. Liberia is shortly going to introduce elections, instead of appointment, for this kind of local administrative office, and it rather seems to me that Haja is positioning herself for the new political age. I think she’ll go far.

We set off again with her for the last 10 miles to Diah, turning off from the tarred main road down a straight, rather sandy bush road, that undulates up and down across a landscape crossed by little streams or boggy depressions which the car has to ford. But the surface is mostly good, and soon we come to a lively weekly market at a settlement called Camp 3, where we get out. Haja does a bit of glad-handing - people just address her without ceremony as “Haja”- and Anne’s warmly greeted too by some women she’s met before. The road goes on like a dusty orange-brown slash between the varying lush greens of the farmland, and after a few more miles we come to Diah. This is rather a large village (or “town” in Liberian parlance) and one of the most clean and attractive I’ve seen, with trimmed grass verges and even clipped bushes in front of some houses. Haja’s church, Trinity Healing Temple, trim in

white and blue, greets you as enter it, next to a small school. She and her husband plan a whole complex of facilities around it. The sandy areas around houses in the centre are swept clean, and the mosque has an attractive minaret in the local style. We adjourn to her neat one-story house and have lunch under a mango-tree: fufu and chicken stew, with okro and local benniseed (sesame), which is ground into a powder and sprinkled into the soup. We talk mostly about religious topics: the response of local Muslims to Haja and her husband's conversion and the introduction of a Pentecostal church to the community – first hostile and then accepting – and then about the forms that witchcraft can take. Haja tells us about a man with awful sensations in his head, who came to her and said he'd killed so many people by witchcraft. She told him he had to go and confess to the families of the victims. He did so, but the sensations continued, and he said he'd rather die than confess the remaining enormities he'd committed. Haja says he still hangs around the mosque but that he's become quite "useless", a sort of incompetent isolate.

Witchcraft, this time closer to home, came into the conversation that evening. Haja had come back with us to Robertsport, where her family has a house, and came round in the evening for supper. The subject came up of Anne's dogs, one of which had died mysteriously on Xmas day, leaving just little Jato, the last of its litter. But this was the fifth dog that had died in her compound since she moved here in March. It's true that there's a high mortality among puppies, especially when they're allowed to forage on garbage dumps, and that Anne's dogs didn't all die the same way. But one case was exactly the same: the dog suddenly sickened and died after about 36 hours, moaning in distress all night as if (in my inexpert view) it had been poisoned. For Anne it was not just distressing, but disquieting. How could such a run of deaths just be a coincidence? Everyone around thought it was "not normal", as Haja pronounced with authority. It was hard not to conclude: "some enemy hath done this thing". When it happened, Monsieur Bamba was still here, and he made a charm to put in the house: he took an ordinary small hand broom, and inserted into the middle of it 7 small limes, 7 pieces of charcoal and 7 cloves of garlic, then bound it all up securely and left it on the

floor of the parlour where it could be seen. The disquieting thing was that it seemed that the dog's death, if due to human agency, had to be ascribed to someone inside the compound, as the dogs were not allowed to go outside. I was reminded of a Yoruba proverb to the effect that the enemies outside your house are nothing to the enemies inside it. Haja said that witches did not like dogs as they could sometimes smell them out, and that was why the dogs might have died. I asked her straight what she would do, and she said that if the compound was "anointed" – with oil empowered by prayer – anyone responsible for the dog's death would be driven away. Anne had already decided to tell "Tombey people" about it. Tombey is the clan that embraces the villages closest to Robertsport, including Tosor, where Anne is very well liked and where the clan chief, Momo Sewa, lives. They are said to be very powerful in occult matters and (at the very least) any perpetrator would be worried if he heard that Tombey elders had been brought in. Momo Sewa said he would look into the cause of the matter ... and there it stands. Meanwhile, the surviving dog, Jato, gets fed a good diet and looks very lively. So perhaps M. Bamba's charm has worked, and no anointing will be needed.



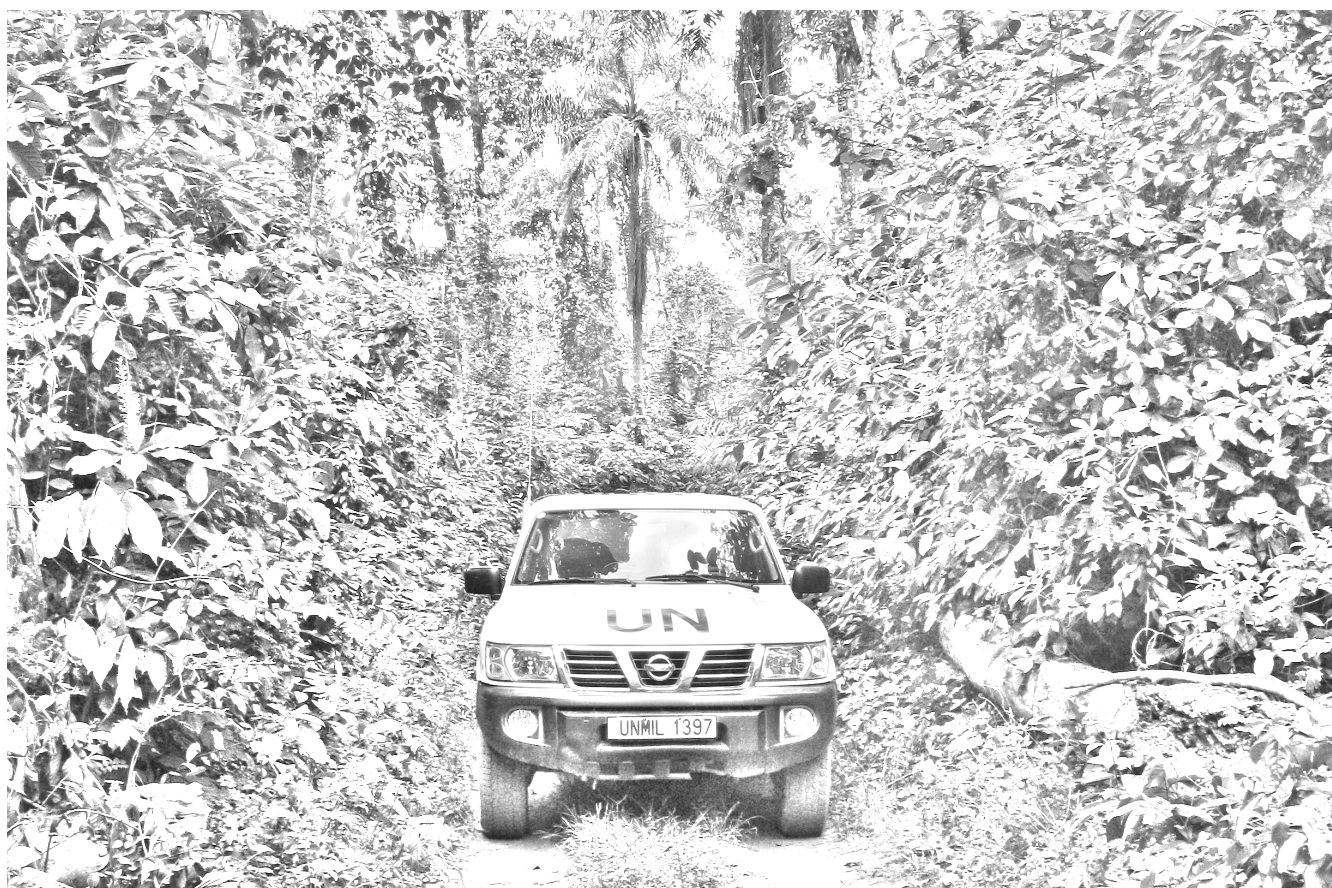


## JULY 2011

8-11 July. Several days up-country in areas I've not visited before. Anne had a two-day workshop on Human Rights in Development, attended by County Development Officers, at Gbarnga, Liberia's second largest (pop. 67,000) and most central town, in Bong County. It's on the only tarred route that leads inland from Monrovia into the real interior. The undulating road climbs gently through a hilly, wooded countryside – most of it now farms or secondary forest, interspersed with oil-palms and some smallish rubber plantations, but with quite a few splendid trees still around. In places, patches of bush have been burnt clear to plant rice, whose brilliant green is shooting up between the blackened tree stumps. Elsewhere, in the frequent swampy depressions or stream valleys, rice grows in small paddies. Like most Liberian up-country towns, Gbarnga is sprawling and loosely-settled with a messy main street full of little shops and young men on motor bikes, but the Catholic Pastoral Center where we stayed on the edge of town was spacious and nicely built around a cloistered court in yellow brick made from local clay.

Afterwards we drove further inland to Sanniquellie (pop. 12,000), the capital of Nimba County (where Anne was seconded for three months earlier in the year to work with Ivorian refugees). The last 20 miles were on a potholed laterite road, in pouring rain, and we didn't arrive till well after dark – but we found a comfortable room at the Red Cross base in the town, and the County Superintendent, a friend of Anne's, had prepared fufu and chicken stew for us. We'd brought some red wine with us, and after supper – the rain having stopped – we sat outside to share a bottle with a group of Red Cross or UN staff: a Sri Lankan now a Canadian citizen, a Somali ditto Australian, an Italian who's just arrived to be the HR officer for Nimba, a quietly-spoken northern Nigerian and Anne's former no.2 when she worked there, an energetic young Liberian called Jayjay Roosevelt.

Next morning Anne showed me round Sanniquellie, a much livelier place than Robertsport. Anne says she admires the get-up-and-go attitudes of the local people, mostly Gio and Mano, compared with the Vai of Grand Cape Mount! They are far keener on education, and



are more assiduous farmers, so that food is cheaper. Sanniquellie sits in a valley between wooded hills, on Liberia's only working railway line, built to carry iron ore from the Mount Nimba mines to the coast. At its centre there's a brightly painted monument to commemorate the Sanniquellie Declaration of 1958, when the presidents of the then three independent states of West Africa (Ghana, Guinea and Liberia) met to plan the Organization of African Unity. Nearby is the central mosque with a small minaret, no doubt established by the Mandingo traders who founded the town along a route that comes down from Guinea, 25 miles further on. In West Africa, Islam goes with the beef trade, so we go to get some good *filet de boeuf* from the main butcher, who's also the imam. His pale-brown complexion and thin aquiline nose show him to be a Moor from distant Mauretania, who keeps his accounts in Arabic. The locals are in large majority Christian: big Methodist and Catholic compounds, containing high schools, sit at either end of the town, and all sorts of other churches are spread about in the new grid of residential roads being carved out of the bush on the outskirts. It being Sunday, we keep hearing snatches of Evangelical hymns in the damp morning air, so saturated with moisture that it keeps bursting into a light drizzle, as we go

about visiting two or three of Anne's friends. They are mostly women in their 40s or so, who've worked with her on human rights issues, and are really attractive and impressive people: they have often had complicated marital careers, had to bring up children on their own, had to work and save to support their families, and struggled to forward their own education. Once again, I'm very positively struck by how many women there are in public positions in Liberia, compared with other West African countries.

One place we go to visit is the local prison, which as such places go (and particularly compared with the over-crowded hovel at Robertsport), is clean, well-organized and spacious. One prisoner is cleaning out the hutches where they keep rabbits to enhance their diet. On a chalk-board inside the main block there's a list of all the inmates: 79 men convicted of a variety of offences and 4 women, all in for murder. As we leave, Anne calls over a young woman who's cooking in the compound and asks me to walk ahead with the deputy-governor. Later she tells me her appalling story. She was about 14 when her parents separated, and she went to live with her father. He forced her to have sex with him and she became pregnant. He told her that if she told anyone, he'd kill her and then himself. After the baby was born, her father would not allow her to leave the house or see her friends, and they, putting two and two together, taunted her for having his child. When the baby was getting to 2 years old, it was agreed she'd go and live with her mother, who had moved to another place. On the way there, overcome with shame and desperation, she drowned the child by holding him down in the water while crossing a stream. She was convicted and sentenced to 5 years, while the case against her father for rape and incest failed for lack of evidence. No DNA testing in Liberia. At first her mother came to visit her in prison, but some months ago she stopped. That's why Anne wanted to talk to her.

After lunch at the County Supe's, we leave about 2pm. An hour later we've got to Ganta where Ya Belleh, the County Gender Coordinator, a beautiful and rather serious woman, insists we stop and eat something of what she's cooked for us. With her new boyfriend, they make a warm and welcoming couple. About 4pm we're on our



way again, on the awful stretch of road back to Gbarnga, a once-tarred road that has been allowed to deteriorate, beyond redemption in many places. We stop two or three times to buy country produce by the side of the road: some snails, black forest mushrooms, and pineapples. About 6pm it starts to drizzle again, and by the time we get to the outskirts of Monrovia approaching 9pm, the rain has become heavy and persistent. After a horrible slow crawl through the congested traffic of Redlight and Paynesville we reach the French ambassador's house, and want nothing more than to go straight to bed. It's been 170 miles from Sanniquellie - almost the depth of the country - but it seems longer.

15 July. We go to Monrovia for the 14 July reception at the Residence de France. Drinks and snacks, about 200 guests - mostly diplomats and NGO people, very heterogeneous, with the Head of the UN Mission (a big blond Danish woman in her 50s) and the American ambassador (a tall older black lady), the two queen bees of the gathering, whom people buzz around. Lots of francophone Africans, the women in gorgeous dresses - Anne in a blue and yellow outfit - the men stocky in baggy dark suits except for the head of Human Rights, who's a Burundian grey-haired and wearing a snazzy blue African shirt, the tallest man in the room.

We went with Raphael Abiem, Anne's immediate superior, who's a genial South-Sudanese still euphoric about his country's new independence. He did a Master's in theology at Harvard and knows the Arabic text of the Koran well, so we have lots to talk about. His older brother Mark was a PhD student in history at SOAS when he was killed by a band of government militia (headed by an Arab who was one of his teachers at primary school) while doing fieldwork in Sudan, over 20 years ago. Raphael has such stories to tell, and his life intersects so closely with the South-Sudanese liberation struggle, that I urged him to write his autobiography.

Next day, we leave Monrovia at 5.45 to avoid the traffic so are able to zip through Vai Town and Duala Market where during the day the vehicles are always nose-to-tail. Quite suddenly, soon after 6 am, people are to be seen along the roadside, hurrying to work or

perhaps to prayer. It slowly dawns on a cool cloudy day: no sun is to be seen, but the silvery moon briefly shows itself, before disappearing behind a bank of low cloud. Veils of mist rise from the sodden bush, but already it's starting to dry out and warm up by the time we get back home at 8am.





## AUGUST 2011<sup>1</sup>

Over the past fortnight, Anne's work has been dominated by matters to do with Sande, the women's secret society which prevails all over western and central Liberia, so I'll devote this letter almost exclusively to that. Nearly all adult women belong to Sande, and its leaders (known as *zoes*) are greatly respected in the local community. "Traditionally" (which in Liberia tends to mean before the civil war of 1990-2003), girls were mostly initiated during their adolescence. It took place in the *bondo* or "bush-school", where they were secluded with their *zoe* instructors – nowadays for 3-4 weeks, though it used to be much longer – and taught the knowledge and skills to fit them to be adult women and wives. The details of what transpired in the *bondo* were kept in the utmost secrecy, but a key feature was that the girls underwent what is now known as "female genital mutilation" (FGM). Right now, a lot of *bondo* are being held in villages or small "towns" all around the County, which Anne has been monitoring for reasons I'll come to.

30 July. This is one of those days when rain never seems far away, even in the broiling sunny interludes which sometimes come between the downpours; other times, the rain doesn't even stop completely, but gives way to the finest light drizzle, or occasional spotting, before it comes again. A *bondo* has been held at Falie, a village on the shore of Lake Piso about 25 minutes drive away, for the past month, and today there's to be the coming-out ceremony for the new initiates. This being a mainly Muslim area, all this has to be over and done by the time Ramadan starts in two days time. Anne knows the presiding *zoe*, Ma Miatta Njombo, very well: she's a big woman in her 50s, who's often to be found in the small covered market in Robertsport, where she specializes in a kind of sweet deep-fried doughnut called *kala*. Falie is bigger than it looks from the road, the mud-built, zinc-roofed houses disposed in no regular order, with alleys and open spaces between them. Many trees stand among the houses, and close by are a couple of vast cotton trees, where spirits are said to cluster. Towering over the surrounding palm-bush or secondary forest, such mighty trees mark out the site of many Vai villages: we can

---

<sup>1</sup> John dated the letters when these were sent rather than in relation to the events in them.



pick out Bendu (which we visited two days ago) five miles across the lake.

The Sande coming-out ceremony has already started when we arrive about 4pm. Its primary aim is to show the girls' parents they have emerged safely from the experience of the *bondo*. The 32 new initiates sit in a long row on mats, an open space in front of them, with spectators crowded around. They're all dressed in white cotton dresses and head-veils – in fact looking very much like confirmation candidates – but their faces are also rubbed with white chalk, and each girl wears a tassled white woollen necklace, which protects her from harm. In age they range from children of 4-5 right up to young women in their early 20s. At first they sing choruses together, accompanied by vigorous clapping, under the motherly attention of Ma Miatta and the sterner direction of Pa Kende, the senior *dazoe* or Poro elder, who walks up and down in front of them with a little switch. (Poro is the men's equivalent of Sande, and controls overall affairs in the town.) We visitors are each respectfully greeted by name in a chanted chorus, and given front-row seats. Then the initiates take it in turn, in ones or twos, to come out and perform a little dance,



accompanied by choruses from the rest. These are like party pieces, and must have been planned and rehearsed while in the *bondo*: a tiny girl skips comically around with puffed-out cheeks; many do short dance-numbers with particular movements; two girls crawl round on hands and knees, rhythmically wagging their bottoms up and down; four girls do a dance which involves waving white sheets between them; an older girl sashays up and down, swaying her hips seductively as she talks to her boy-friend on a mobile phone (the accompanying chorus has the refrain “mobile!”). Appreciative laughter and applause greet the performances, and people throw money in small bills at the performers, which Ma Miatta collects in a plastic bag. Things have not gone far when the heavens open, and for twenty minutes it just pours. Up go the umbrellas (at least for the spectators), and the show goes on. Soon the girls are soaking, shivering with the sudden cold and having to wring out their dresses when they get up to perform. Finally the rain slackens off and, the performances over, the girls set off in an exuberant troupe, still singing, round the village. (I’d been reading Proust, and was put in mind of the gang of high-spirited girls who so enchant the narrator in *Within a Budding Grove*). Everyone else follows, stepping over the rivulets still streaming across the sandy ground under the mango trees. Later it feels very like after a university graduation ceremony, when the graduates, proud and pleased, stand around with their family and friends, wearing a peculiar costume which marks a transition which they’ll never need to go through again. Anne goes to talk to some of the *zoës* outside a house adjacent to the *bondo* entrance, which is set in a screen of densely-woven palm-fronds at one edge of the village, to keep out all men and non-initiates from the forbidden area, while Pa Kende takes me on a tour of the village. Tonight there’ll be more dance performances, but attended by ancestral masquerades to honour the occasion, including the famous Zoba or “black devil”.

Sunday 31 July is hot and sunny, and Falie seems a different place when we get there at 11.30 to see the last event of the Sande graduation. Under the shade of the big mango trees, a brightly-clad crowd of people, nearly all women and children, are thronging around a line of white plastic chairs, where the new initiates are sitting. They are quite transformed from yesterday: still all in white, but now it is newly-made costumes in

perforated damask, in individual styles, from a 7-year-old's smart little trouser-suit to what might be the dress for a fashionable bride. They are just beautifully decked out by their proud mothers, with nice hair-dos (and a few wigs), eye-shadow and lipstick, earrings and necklaces. Whereas yesterday they performed with gusto for others, today it is prescribed that they sit demurely and impassively in their finery, while others celebrate their achievement. In terms of the qualities which Sande sets itself to inculcate in women, it seems that yesterday's display of deference is complemented by today's self-control. The songs are now sung by mature Sande women, accompanied by two women shaking calabashes strung with beads (called *sasa*), which give a harsh, insistent rhythm. Then they are joined by the drummers, men as always, to complete a 5-person ensemble. The leading drum is a hollow wooden cylinder with long slits in it, held horizontally and struck at the front with two sticks to produce a high, sharp sound of varying tone, in rapid complex rhythms. The others are a European-style side-drum, and a sonorous bass drum beaten with one heavy stick and the left hand. An irregular space has opened up between the girls sitting on one side and the players on the other, with spectators all around, and now it is the senior women (including some *zoes*) who mainly dance, close to the players. Anne joins them for a few turns herself. Mostly they come forward individually to do a turn for a minute or so, but sometimes a little group will dance together. A virtuoso performance is put on by a lithe and energetic woman in her 30s, who sometimes carries the Zoba mask. The young initiates, for whom it is all done, watch quietly from their chairs. After an hour, we say goodbye and slip away.

All this is what is most positive and attractive about Sande: the community's celebration of its young women, the girls' sense of achievement, the dignity of the older women, everyone's sheer enjoyment of the performance of their familiar and distinctive culture. (As I write this, I can hear Maima singing Sande choruses to herself as she washes our clothes in the backyard.) Yet there is also a downside to Sande, which is what brings it to the attention of a UN Human Rights Officer like Anne.

There are three problem areas. Firstly, it seems that Sande has negative effects on girls' enrolment and completion rates in school. Many parents regard Sande initiation fees as a higher priority than school fees. If the *bondo* is held during the school year, many girls are pulled out of class

to attend it, and often don't return afterwards. So efforts are being made to establish the rule that Sande bush-schools are only to be held outside the school year – but against some resistance and with variable success. Secondly, there is the issue of FGM. Liberia is officially committed to eliminating it, and the Ministries of Health (MoH) and of Gender & Development (MoGD) take measures to this end; but the powerful Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) actually licenses the *zoes* to hold the *bondo*. Moreover, Sande commands such support at local levels that no politician dares campaign against its practices: to do so would lose them nearly all the rural women's vote. Thirdly, there are recurrent cases of Sande intimidation of non-members and coerced initiation. A flagrant example has cropped up in the past few weeks.

28 July. We set off for Sinie, a village over an hour's drive away, which we visited briefly last week on the report of a case of intimidation. With us are Fatu, a Child Protection Officer with the MoGD, who works a lot with Anne, and Mr Pinney, the County Inspector. His job is to serve as the chief liaison officer between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the traditional authorities (chiefs and *zoes*) though as far as I can tell its remit is rather loose and roving: he seems to have his finger in a lot of pies and is a Poro *dazoe* himself. I'd earlier brought him a bottle of J&B whisky, which he calls "Jebbeh and Boakai" and unloosens his propensity to gossip. (There is also a locally made spirit, whose name I first heard as *kenju* – demotic pronunciation of "cane juice" – otherwise known as CJ or "Caroline Johnson".) Fatu is a jolly broad-beamed woman with a very loud voice, while Mr Pinney is a little thin man with a quiet cackling laugh. Mr Pinney is known to fancy big ladies – he and Fatu have a running joke about this, though she doesn't fancy him – and they have a ribald conversation in the back of the car about the affairs of various acquaintances.

To get to Sinie, we have to strike off the main road for five miles across a devastated landscape. The bush has been cleared by bulldozers to create a gigantic palm-oil plantation run by a Malaysian multinational, leaving its rolling terrain of ridges and swampy depressions naked and exposed. The debris of uprooted vegetation has been pushed into rows about 10 yards apart, in the middle of which the new palm-trees are being planted, in strict geometrical lines. Here and there across the vast expanse

smoke rises from makeshift kilns, since for the time being the charcoal-burners have plenty of raw material. Finally, we enter the familiar bush again, cross a stream where women are washing clothes, and a few hundred yards later are in Sinie.

At the centre of the case is Mary, a young Kpelle woman who moved to Sinie a few months ago to join her husband, a young man who's an unqualified teacher at the village school, by whom she has a baby. The Sande women say she broke one of their "laws" by going on a forbidden path and so catching sight of the initiates when they went to bathe in the bush at the back of the *bondo*. Mary says this was done inadvertently, since as a stranger she didn't know. They insist that she must either accept initiation herself or pay a fine of L\$5,500 (about US\$78). She just doesn't have the money, and when she manages to save it she wants to use it to complete high school. So she feels she has no option but reluctantly to join Sande.

Our proceedings start in the schoolroom next to the mosque, where some speeches are made and Mr Pinney is formally presented with a white rooster, a plate of white rice and some kola. It's then proposed that we continue the hearing outside the entrance to the *bondo*, which is only two minutes walk away – we passed its dense fence of palm branches as we drove into the village. Mr Pinney starts by asking to see the licence to hold the *bondo*, and a piece of paper is produced, which we examine. It proves to be invalid, since it was not issued by the MoIA but by the Garwula District Head *Zoe*, her thumbprint attested by the District Commissioner; and it is time-expired. Mr Pinney ticks the Sande people off for this but makes no move to penalize them or to declare that it invalidates the fine they've imposed on Mary. He then takes a document out of his briefcase, which sets out his own rules for the conduct of *bondo*, which he has the teacher in his blue Chelsea shirt read out and translate into Vai (though he speaks Vai fluently himself). It seems more like a ritual to underscore Mr Pinney's authority than anything else.

Finally we get to the matter itself. I now realize how much, despite the presence of Anne and Fatu, the tribunal has been set up to endorse, not to reconsider, the Sande ruling against Mary. Mr Pinney sits at a table with four elderly *zoes* on a bench behind him (all wearing their usual white head-ties which match his white baseball cap). At either end of the table

sit Anne and Fatu, and further out to one side are myself and the *sanja-manja* or “town chief”, both of us entirely marginal to the proceedings. At the other side, in front of the *bondo* entrance, are close to a dozen Sande women, who from time to time break into a short chorus, two of them playing *sasa*, to express their support of something that has been said. The first person to speak is the spokesperson or messenger of the *zoës*, a forceful and voluble woman in her 50s, who puts the case against Mary, to the noisy approval of the Sande women behind her. Mary’s mother-in-law (a local woman) says she should join Sande, while her own mother (who has come specially from the next county), looking glum and out-of-place, says nothing. Nor does her husband. Mary herself has not been present up to this point, but Anne insists she should be sent for, so that we can hear what she has to say. With an air of “nothing I say will make any difference”, she admits she saw the initiates, but did not do so on purpose and did not flaunt the fact afterwards. No verdict is delivered by Mr Pinney, and the discussion just drifts to whether Mary will pay or join. The Sande women are obdurate as to the amount of Mary’s fine, even though what her husband gets for teaching their children is only L\$500 a month. That means they are going to take the equivalent of eleven months of her husband’s yearly earnings! When it seems inevitable that she should join, Anne intervenes to say she will help her to pay the fine, for which we’ll come back next week.

3 August. Day by day, the rain has been getting more frequent and the wasteland looks utterly desolate when we cross it in a light but steady downpour. Our sturdy Nissan Patrol really needs its four-wheel drive now. This time the meeting in the schoolroom is brief. Anne counts the money out on a table and the *zoës*’ spokesperson re-counts it, while I take a photo to record that the business is done. The *zoës* all appear very satisfied and crowd round to shake our hands. The husband and teacher, still in his Chelsea shirt, looks angry and upset. Mary, expressionless as ever, just says “thank-you, auntie” to Anne as we leave. We exchange a few last words with the town chief, and ask him about the impact of the town’s loss of most of its farmland because of the concession granted by the government to the Malaysian multinational. He says that though they received compensation for destroyed crops – we saw the remains

of someone's old cassava farm by the side of the way – it's not certain if the town will remain viable. At least Sande is something of its own the community can hold on to.





# SEPTEMBER 2011

It's a very muggy afternoon, with just over a week to go before I have to return to London. There's just been a little flurry of excitement in Anne's yard, as one of her security guards, Ziko, caught a small green mamba in a bush near the front door. Carefully lifting it with the split end of a pole, he killed it by dropping it for a few seconds onto the charcoal fire and then tossed it over the bamboo stockade into the bush. The last two weeks, the rain has seemed to be coming less often – a long sustained soaking every 4 days perhaps – though it's usually overcast and very, very humid at all times. It often comes on in the second half of the night, announcing itself first by a heavy pit-patter of drops on the zinc awnings over our bedroom windows, then by the gurgle of a growing stream of water off the main roof into the big, blue plastic barrel outside the back door, and finally by a delicious, thunderous downpour whose sound on the roof obliterates everything else and that can go on at full intensity for an hour or more before settling into a longer spell of gentler rain. I just love these downpours, but they can be quite localized, so it's always frustrating when the clouds decide to dump their load elsewhere.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a heart-warming experience while attending St John's Church, up on its wooded hill behind the town, as I do most Sundays. That morning there was a visiting preacher, the Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Monrovia, an impressive and obviously very well-educated man. In a short informal address at the end of the service, he suddenly said how pleased he was to meet me again, distinguished professor from the School of Oriental and African Studies etc. etc. The penny dropped: at least ten years ago, when he had been doing a doctorate in theology at King's, he had come to see me at SOAS to ask for bibliographical advice, and we'd talked about his research. That's nice, when all-but-forgotten threads in your career are knitted together again so unexpectedly.

In my last letter, I mentioned the vast palm-oil plantation being created by Sime Darby, the Malaysian multinational. Ten days ago, there were reports of a disturbance on a long-established rubber-plantation, recently acquired by SD from its former American owners, so Anne and two county officials of the Ministry of Labor went to investigate. From what the manager told us, it had happened at a remote village on the plantation, which was now judged

too dangerous for us (or SD staff) to visit. The problem arose from the fact that during the civil war that ended in 2003, most rubber plantations were effectively run by one or another of the armed factions. After peace came, many ex-combatants stuck around and were employed, but often proved an unruly and unreliable work force. Many took to illegal rubber tapping, especially after the Nigerian peacekeeping force was withdrawn a few years later, selling the raw latex on the black market in Monrovia. Quite recently, SD security staff had noticed a Ministry of Agriculture vehicle (whose number-plate they took down) going regularly at night to collect rubber from the village which was controlled by the illegal tappers. A fight ensued when the SD staff went to the scene, and their motorbikes were burnt. The local police are too afraid of the ex-combatants to do anything, and the latter have threatened SD vehicles, once with Molotov cocktails, even on the main road. The evidence for some kind of criminal syndicate with links in the Ministry of Agriculture is rather compelling, but so far no effective action has been taken. Gibril Turay, the experienced Sierra Leonean in charge of the small UN Field Office here, worries that the security situation is slipping out of control. He would like to see the Nigerians back, as they didn't wear kid gloves to do the job.

For several weeks now, Liberia has been increasingly preoccupied with the elections which are due in October, and the dozen or so local UN personnel have had pre-election monitoring added to their more routine tasks. The big question is not just whether the incumbent President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, will get re-elected (very likely), but whether her Unity Party will keep its majority among the Senators and Representatives due to be chosen by the Counties and Districts. The combination of very local interests in each of the 15 counties and the ambitions of the political class, whose members are obsessed with what's going on in Monrovia, means there are a lot of parties and quite a few Independents running locally. The three big ones – Unity Party, Liberty Party and CDC (whose top two are a son of former President Tubman, now in his 70s, and the ex-footballer George Weah) – are all represented here in Grand Cape Mount, where UP has hitherto been strong. So there was a scramble for the UP nominations and some were disappointed, including Dr Kromah, the richest man in Robertsport and a big local patron (hence known as “Bucket”). It is said that he and Ellen's friend, the County Superintendent, have long been at





loggerheads; and that the UP caucus, distrusting Kromah's ambition, gave its nomination for Senator to Edward Dagoseh, a long-serving party stalwart. So Kromah has decided to run as an Independent. His generosity is applauded and the County Supe is unpopular, so UP may have screwed up in GCM. For while party allegiances, grounded in personal loyalties and going back decades, matter to the elite in Monrovia, they mean nothing to local people. The only politician who seems to have a genuinely transcending appeal, especially among women, is Ellen; but that won't necessarily do much for the UP. Anyway, the politicians are starting to show their faces. Brightly coloured banners and billboards have appeared around the town. Two more hopefuls – Dr Eugene Shannon, UP candidate for Representative, and Joanna Hill, another Independent would-be Senator – appeared at church last week to support its fund-raising rally. Joanna's "national headquarters" is just up the road from Anne's house, and all afternoon people turned up to listen to her music, eat her rice and say they'd vote for her, as they will do for any other wannabe politician!

23 August. Today was the most important event before the election, and served as a sort of rehearsal for it: a Referendum to put four questions (to

postpone the election for a month, to change from an absolute to a simple majority, and a couple of others about qualification for office). The task of monitoring the Referendum in GCM was divided up among all the UN staff: Anne and Sheriff, a Liberian colleague, were allocated a remote area towards the Sierra Leone border. We set out at 7.15 and reached our area just after 9am, branching off northwards from the main tarred road along a laterite secondary road, through small towns with euphonious names like Mambo, Dambala, Bendaja and Bambala. As we drove north, we passed from Vai into Mende country, where they are much better farmers, as the large upland rice and cassava farms showed, inter-planted with pepper, okro and bitterball, as well as wet rice in some wide swampy depressions. It had begun dry, but a drizzle came on in mid-morning and when we got to our furthest limit, 35 miles in from the main road, around noon, a persistent rain had set in, filling the crater-like potholes in the road with great pools of orange-brown water which our Nissan Patrol plunged through like an amphibious craft. At Bambala the weekly market was in full swing, with a wide range of vegetables, much cheaper than at Robertsport, so Anne stocked up with stuff. We were offered a small, still-living pangolin, held up by its tail, covered in strange, pale greeny-brown scales. On the way back in the afternoon, we visited another three small towns lying deep in the farmland along narrow side-roads, overhung by great bamboos and pressed in by lush wet vegetation.

Our job was simply to check that polling was going ahead smoothly, with no disturbances or hitches; and this was the case, though not many people were voting. We came across a couple of candidates in their home towns: would-be Senator Dagoseh, and my friend S.K. Massaley from church, running as Independent for Representative in his District, who embraced us warmly. From time to time we stopped country people along the road, to ask if they had voted and what they understood by the questions. Few people had a clue what the Referendum was about. One woman going to her farm with her children, asked if she had voted, said she would vote tomorrow; “But you have to vote today”; “I will do my own tomorrow!” Another, on her way to the poll, said she did not know what she was voting for, but would find out when she got there. Three or four people pronounced with confidence that they were just voting “for their rights”. In one remote village, we stopped to see the *kamon*, whom Anne knew, to ask

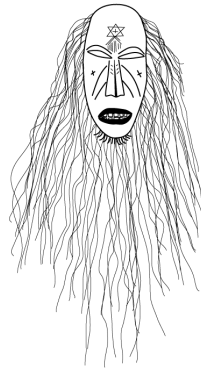
how voting had gone there. He must have been sleeping – old people get tired fasting through the Ramadan afternoons – as he was still pulling on his robe when he came out to see us, and I don't think he was properly awake. His first response was to ask the children standing around if they had voted. Another woman said she would only vote if the paper had Ellen's picture on it.

30 August. Today is Id al-Fitr, the feast of the end of Ramadan. Aisatu, a beautiful dark-complexioned Fula woman who buys fish for Anne, wearing a most elegant costume in black and turquoise blue, embroidered with big red and yellow flowers, came to greet her at the office, where she was struggling to meet the deadline for her latest MA assignment. So did Bobo, the old pappey who keeps the gate in Anne's compound. We were annoyed with him last week, as he complained of a painful ear-ache but would not take the prescribed medicine at the requisite intervals throughout the day because of the fast. It was impossible to convince him that Islam allows sick people, pregnant women etc. to break the fast for health reasons. Anyway, he also popped in on his way to the Id prayers, to show off his new cap and striped cotton gown that Anne had bought him for 26th July, the Liberian national day.

Another extraordinary coincidence happened to me later in the day. Two official UN auditors – a smart Haitian woman and Ekundayo, a tall, quiet Nigerian – came yesterday to monitor the work of the Civil Affairs unit, and Anne asked them round for lunch before they returned to Monrovia. In the course of the usual small-talk, it soon emerged that Ekundayo was the son of one of my oldest Nigerian women friends, Bolanle Awe, a historian and an Ijesha, whom I've known for nearly 40 years. He at once rang her on his mobile and we talked. What a connected-up world this is!

1 September. Yesterday Maima and her husband Ray, who are Anne's main support, killed one of our little flock of chickens for my last evening here, and served it up in a nice peppery stew of tomatoes, onions and chickpeas, washed down with a bottle of white wine, which we shared with Pro, a lovely South African colleague of Anne's. Her Zulu name means "she who must be obeyed", like Rumpole's formidable wife in the old TV series, but it doesn't at all fit her. Sometime after midnight thunder began to rumble,

and about 4am a prodigious storm burst. It went on at full tilt for nearly two hours, accompanied by almost simultaneous thunder and lightning, whose flashes kept throwing the wooded Cape Mount massif that rises to about 1,000 ft behind us into momentary silhouettes. Still raining at dawn – Robertsport felt melancholy and completely washed-out. This afternoon we leave for Monrovia, where we’ll stay overnight with friends before I fly home tomorrow.





# DECEMBER 2011

13th November. I had meant to reach Liberia on the evening of the 11th, but fog at Heathrow caused a delay of nearly 3 hours, so I missed my connection at Paris Charles de Gaulle. Air France booked me into one of those dull chain hotels near the airport, and next afternoon I was flown to Casablanca, from where after a 6-hour wait I took an onwards flight with Royal Air Maroc. So I entered my 70s high over the western Sahara, and arrived at Monrovia at 4.30am. To my relief, immigration was quick, my baggage came at once and there was a smiling Anne to welcome me, along with a car and driver supplied by our friend Gérard, the French ambassador. Less than an hour later, to bed at the Residence de France ...

Next day, a picnic-lunch at the beach turned out to be a birthday party, held at a small two-storey chalet set in a plot of soft grass amid palm trees on a sandy bank right next to the beach. Anne planned it with a group of our friends in Monrovia: Gérard and his wife Annick, Masilo the South African ambassador and his Swedish-American wife Karla, Isabelle the Portuguese head of UNICEF, David the British *chargé d'affaires* and his wife, Anne's South African colleague Pro, and a few more. Gérard started by serving a splendid cocktail of his own devising (champagne, tropical fruit juice and Cointreau), and we ended with a large birthday cake. In mid-afternoon a gentle breeze began to blow from the vast expanse of shining ocean. It was after 6pm, with the sun in its last blaze dipping towards Brazil, when we packed up. We spent the evening very agreeably with Karla and Masilo, and early next morning set off back to Robertsport.

15th November. Signs of the advancing year: the fresh new leaves on the mango trees, local oranges for sale (dirty yellow-green in colour, but really sweet and delicious), the water-level of the Lofa River fallen by 2-3 feet since I left 10 weeks ago, swallows (newly arrived from Europe) darting and swooping over the open land at Grassfield. The weather is very hot and humid, with short violent showers every few days, coming mostly at night.

Last week the run-off election for the presidency of Liberia took place, with a resounding victory for the incumbent, Ma Ellen or Madam Johnson-Sirleaf, who got around 90% of the vote, since the CDC, the main opposition party, decided to boycott the poll. But CDC, apart from a certain regional

basis of support, also found a constituency among youth across the country. Still, there is no doubt the election was “free and fair” – it was certainly very closely monitored, by the UN and others. The worst incident was when an angry CDC march the day before the election was shot at by the police, killing some people. Ma Ellen has set up a commission of enquiry, but its findings are not likely to do much to embarrass the government or assuage CDC feelings. No doubt its leaders will, in the way of Liberian politics, get some sweeteners, but the discontents of the young men who lined up behind them, won’t be so easily addressed. It is said that out of fear some have left Monrovia to go up-country. This sounds ominous – especially granted the local potential for trouble among the ex-combatants to be found in the gold-mining camps and rubber plantations – but it’s hard to imagine Liberians wanting to relive the nightmare of ten years ago.

People’s edgy, pervasive sense of insecurity has other, more perennial sources. On our way back from Monrovia, we encountered a large throng of young men and parked motor-bikes close to the main entrance to the Sime Darby plantation, near the busy little town of Gbah. An older man, the deputy-leader of the Motor Cyclists Union, who was coordinating things at the scene, said the corpse of a young man had been found on a bush-path next to the road. It was already beginning to spoil. The police had not come, so Anne rang UN security at Tubmanburg to send someone. Two days later we had to go to Gbah again, to see a contact of Anne’s, a security officer at the SD plantation, an ex-combatant who is now a Pentecostal pastor. I gave him the Bible Concordance he had asked me to bring him from London, and asked about the incident of the other day: had the young man – a 12th grade student at the SD High School, who took passengers on his motor-bike to earn money – been waylaid by robbers? The pastor was emphatic that the killing was “ritualistic”. He was last known to be alive at 8.15pm, when he had been called on his mobile to take a passenger. Later he was stabbed, or “juked” as they say here, in the neck, for his blood to be drawn off for some nefarious purpose. No one is surprised that events of this kind happen from time to time – the tenor of daily life is continuously informed by stories of them. (Two weeks later, we again saw the pastor, who updated us: the police enquiry seemed to be going nowhere, so the victim’s family had decided to try “African science”, contacting a specialist far away in Guinea to deploy magical means to find the killers.)



22th November. A field trip to Tewor District with its energetic and capable DC, Anne's friend Haja. We go to collect her at Tieni, the District headquarters, to find a noisy dispute going on outside her office. A rough-looking youngish man, wearing a Mandingo-style short smock, Rasta dreadlocks and a cutlass in his hand, who works as an unskilled labourer around the town, had had a dispute with a man who engaged him to "brush" his farm; and, taken before the town-chief, treated him with grave disrespect. The Vai are a peaceable and ceremonious people, and the man was not a local. His landlord said he did not want to give lodging to a troublemaker, so it seemed the man might be drummed out of town. Hovering on the edge on the crowd, looking concerned and unhappy but not saying anything, was a lanky teenager wearing a school uniform of white shirt and dark green trousers. He proved to be the man's son, 15 years old and in 7th Grade. Since the father was only 34, Anne thought it very likely that he had begotten him while fighting in one of the armed factions during the war. That would put him in that lost generation of young men, who missed out on their education and have since found it hard to find work and settle down to the routine demands of life. The usual generational traits seemed to have been reversed in the contrast between the rolling stone of a father (who did in fact claim to be a "musician") and his serious, sober son; but it was touching to see the bond between them. Anne spoke sternly to the man, who meekly replied "Yes, mum!" and went back to brushing the long grass at the back of the DC's office with his cutlass. I don't think they'll throw him out.

We set off to visit the little "towns" along a newly-laid laterite road going southwest from Tieni, as far as York Island, which is the most westerly settlement of Liberia, on the bank of the Mano River. The town got its name from a small island in the river, which a long-dead British official demarcated as the boundary of Sierra Leone. The road just comes to an end at the river bank. There used to be a ferry here, but now all we see are two boys trimming a new canoe paddle and a moored boat which carries people the few miles upstream to Bo-Waterside, where the road-bridge and frontier post are. The forest looked thick on the other side, shimmering under the cloudless sky, and downstream we could see the blue Atlantic, less than half-a-mile away. We turned back to the town to talk to the elders: the real figure of authority was not the town-chief but Alhaji Aliu, a genial and sprightly old man, dark-skinned with a wispy white goatee beard. It's

a beautiful place, well-swept, with useful trees interspersed among the neat houses, many of them still thatched. We sit around in a small circle of chairs, while Anne and Haja ask about local access to schools and clinics (all several miles back up the road). While we're talking, Alhaji peels a couple of grapefruit for us to suck, and before we leave he sends a boy to pick another two dozen more for us to take away. They are the biggest grapefruit I've ever seen, with pinkish flesh, and absolutely delicious.

1st December. It's the annual "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" (GBV), and Anne's been busy with organizing events and doing a bit of sensitization herself. She decides that we'll visit some more of the villages on the road to York Island. After a short call to give the Alhaji some soap, sugar and salt, to thank him for last week's grapefruit, we first visit Sewu. Anne has got some copies of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, not just translated into Vai language but rendered in the singular Vai script, which was invented (or rather revealed in a dream) to a notable man in the nineteenth century. Only a few people know the script but there was one man at Sewu, though he was very rusty at it. He told us that the only sound originally left out was "kpe", and for that they settled on a symbol suggested by the containers they used to carry palm-wine in. We talked about this till a crowd had gathered, more men than women, and sat round in a large circle under the shade of some mango trees. Anne opened the session by asking them what gave rise to disputes between men and women, and what we got first were examples of wifely disobedience to what the men regarded as their rightful claims. Soon the focus shifted to problems arising from polygamous marriage, and the tensions it creates between men and women. Haja gave a quite bravura performance, standing in the middle of the circle and drawing a diagram of the polygamous household on the ground with a stick as she talked. Her pointed and humorous depiction of life-situations familiar to everyone present was in the best traditions of stand-up comedy, but it segued into something more like a Pentecostal sermon to promote monogamy and marital trust. Anne concluded on a more practical note, warning against behaviour which leads to HIV/AIDS.

We then moved on to a very different settlement a few miles away, Kru Town, one of several such along the coast, founded by Kru fishermen whose homeland lies over 200 miles to the southeast. The narrow sandy road



through the bush effectively came to an end at a stream with an unsound-looking bridge of palm trunks, so we decided to leave the car and walk the remaining few hundred yards. With the sound of the ocean breakers already in the background, we crossed a football pitch of near-white sand, past a little church entirely made of palm branches, through a small plantation where a couple of boys had shinned up to cut down coconuts, which were falling with a thud, and into the village. It's home to about 1,200 people, now not only Kru, but drawn from every Liberian tribe, so the town-chief said. The houses are set much closer together than in the typical Vai village. Even the grandest are only wattle-and-daub with grass-thatched roofs, and most are little more than windowless shacks, their walls and roofs made from palm-fronds. Canoes are drawn up on a steep, narrow beach, such that the sea seems to press hard against the town. The only modern building is the "town-hall", a small, open-sided meeting-house with a concrete floor and a zinc roof, where our session is held.

People are summoned by beating an old gas-cylinder with a stick, and soon there's an audience of about 60, again more men than women. The format of the meeting is the same, but when we ask how disputes arise between men and women, an entirely different focus emerges: here it is to

do with their economic relations around the sale of fish. The basic pattern is that a fisherman gives his catch to his wife to sell, and she then brings the money which they share. But the women complain that sometimes the men put some of the fish “overboard” (i.e. give it to their girlfriends to sell), while the men claim that the women often keep back some of the money for their own purposes. There’s said to be much more fighting and wife-beating in fishing than in farming villages, and Kru women are notorious for being self-assertive and loud-mouthed (suggesting that the notion of “fishwife” is cross-cultural?). People laughed and nodded when Anne mentioned the practice known as “fish-for-fish” at Kru Town in Robertsport: that is, when the supply of fish is short, and fisherman will only sell to the women traders preferentially, in return for sexual favours. What this implies for the spread of HIV is all too plain, as Anne points out. A lively meeting comes to an end at 5pm.

We trudge back to the car, only to find that it has a flat tire and the spanner needed to take off the spare wheel is missing from the tool-kit. But the young men who’ve accompanied us are brilliant: someone runs back to the town to get another spanner and they change the wheel for us. While we’re waiting, we learn that GBV need not be not entirely one-way: a sturdy and bold-eyed young woman tells a hilarious story, with suitable gestures, about how she dealt with her lover when, in her presence, he insulted his wife on account of another affair of his, by chewing some chilli peppers and spitting in his eyes, before rubbing the rest down his trousers. (Peppering is almost an institution here: a fortnight ago, there was a jail-break in Bomi County, in which the prisoners overcame their guards by spitting pepper in their eyes.) It’s not until 8.30 that we get home, quite exhausted by the last hour’s drive in the dark on the bone-shaking, pot-holed road from Madina junction to Robertsport. Too late for any cooking, so we make do with toast and a tin of *paté de fois gras* I brought from Paris, washed down with a bottle of champagne left over from my birthday party. This is the rugged life!

8th December. I return home tomorrow, and Anne will follow about 10 days later. It will be good for her to get away for a while, since the last few weeks have not just been very hot and tiring, but very dispiriting for her. There’s been a run of really dismal cases: some vile rapes, incidents





of the corruption endemic among many of the Liberian officials (police especially) whom she has to deal with, neglect and brutality at the prison leading to an inmate's death, a crisis at the high school arising from teacher absenteeism etc. What has capped it all is a case of sexual abuse that surfaced last weekend: of a 12-year-old girl by a man in his 50s, which has proved to be worse than it seemed at first. It came out when Anne interviewed the girl that she first "knew life" – to use the euphemism used by Anne's friend Fatu, the local child-protection officer – at the age of nine, when the woman whom her mother sent her to live with in Monrovia first used her to make money by selling sexual services to adult men. The girl later came to live here with the teacher whom her mother married later – but the mother has been away again, trading at the Guinea border in distant Nimba County. The stepfather seems to have been neglectful, to say the least, in allowing the girl to go and cook for the man who abused her – in fact Fatu suspects he may have actively condoned it. The readiness of Liberians to park their children with relatives or "friends" who are not very well known to them, or able to look after them properly, is in accord with a long-established

practice of fostering in West Africa, but it is wide open to exploitation. It was a key factor in an appalling case involving the rape of a 7-year-old, that Anne had to deal with at Lofa Bridge few months ago. She will be very glad to take a break from all this.





## MARCH 2012

8 February. I arrived last week, after the usual tedious journey, from a bitterly cold start in London at 4am to a happy reunion with Anne in the sultry heat of the early evening at Roberts International Airport. After an agreeable late dinner preceded by several cocktails chez our friend Gérard at the Residence de France, which pretty well knocked us out, we went to bed exhausted, and only set off for home the following morning. The dry season is well evident: the Lofa River, a great surge at its height in late August, has fallen so low that stretches of its rocky bed are now above water; all along the road, patches of bush have been cleared or burnt in readiness for next season's planting, while here and there clouds of blue smoke rise above crackling flames, and white egrets scour the blackened grass for insects; the road from Madina junction to Robertsport – potholes as bad as ever – throws up clouds of dust which coat the vegetation a rusty brown for yards back on either side; tiny mangoes and breadfruit are appearing on the trees across the road from the house. On the way back from the UN base at Tubmanburg on Monday, where Anne had to go to pick up her Nissan Patrol from the mechanics, we notice a hot wind has blown up, creating dust-devils on the road, and by the evening it's clear the harmattan has returned. A heavy haze of very fine dust envelops everything, making both town and bush look pallid and dried-out, and depositing a dusty film on all surfaces even inside the house. By reducing visibility, it has the effect of closing us in: we can no longer see across Lake Piso – usually the big cottonwood trees stand out clearly on the other side – and cuts off the further wooded ridges on the Cape Mount massif behind the house. The sun rises as a clear silvery disk, with grey wisps of cloud drifting across its face, while the full moon of a couple of nights ago appeared in the same place yellowy and no less large. The harmattan makes the nights much cooler, so that you need to sleep under a blanket. In the mornings local people go around in sweaters, complaining of the “cold”, and can hardly credit the news from wintry Europe that some people are actually dying of it.

20 February. In the two months since I left, several changes have appeared in Robertsport. A positive icon of modernity in the form of an immaculate new Total petrol station, with a little shop attached, is under construction

at the junction 200 yards over the little hill from Anne's house. A big road-clearing programme has been started in the town, which is hardly top-priority, apart from the truly awful road up to St Timothy's Hospital. But everyone says that the County Superintendent and the Assistant Supe for Development got a backhander of \$25,000 (including something for the members of the County's UP caucus, to stop their mouths) for the road contract. The Asst. Supe has invested his in a business to supply drinking water around the town, drawn from a spring on the mountain; his mini-van painted "Waakor Pure Spring" and a truck with a large drum on the back is parked at night for safety right outside the Supe's residence. Things are settling down after the election late last year which gave Ma Ellen a second term. Ma Ellen is taking a long time to announce appointments at county level, so we don't yet know if she'll replace her old friend Catherine Watson Khasu, who is the long-serving and self-serving, Superintendent of Grand Cape Mount County. Before the election, people thought she would, but it looks less and less likely.

But the most interesting change is to do with Sande and Poro. I've written before about Anne's work with the women's secret society called Sande, whose activities – especially the *bondo* or bush-schools it holds to initiate girls – take place under the overall authority of the Poro, its male counterpart. From an ideology of gender complementarity, it is the rule that the two societies don't operate at the same time, but take turns to "control the bush", alternating every 3-4 years or so. This pattern was completely disrupted by the civil war of 1990-2003. When it broke out, Sande happened to control the bush, but all initiation was suspended while the conflict lasted, and afterwards more pressing issues supervened to prevent the formalities by which the bush should be returned to the men (which in Liberia involves the authorization of the state, through the Ministry of Internal Affairs). So Sande initiation resumed, and many *bondo* for girls were held around the County last year. But pressure had been building up for the bush to be turned back to Poro, and last August our friend Mr Eric Pinney the County Inspector (who's a Poro *dazoe*) showed us a letter he'd written to the MIA, asking for this to be authorized. But the word from the MIA was to wait till after the election. I guess they were worried about potential public disorder among young men, after twenty years in which no one had been initiated to Poro. By the end of January initiation had begun again in places, and some

new Poro initiates started throwing their weight about, perhaps continuing the disaffection of young men that was evident during the election. There was an incident at the border town of Bo-Waterside when traders, bystanders and even some immigration officials were molested, and a week later there was a panic in Robertsport one evening, triggered by a rumour that the Poro masked “devil” (which non-members of Poro are not allowed to see) was going to come out. In turning the bush over to the men, all the five districts of the county are meant to move together, but such was the pressure that remote Porkpa District broke ranks and acted on its own. On a field visit there ten days ago, accompanied by Mr Pinney, we met some senior Poro *zoës*, who said a big ceremony for the whole county would take place soon to signalize the turnover, to which we’d be invited. “Madam Anne” was annoyed to be handed a letter asking her to contribute the preposterous sum of US\$500; but we did give them a sack of rice.

22 February. We were just about to leave the office at 2pm in the baking midday heat – for the harmattan has well gone now – when word came that a big fire had broken out in Fante Town, at the far end of Robertsport, close to the Lake Piso shore. We could see a great cloud of black smoke billowing into the air above the palm trees. Along with the Kru, the Fante (hailing from Ghana, 500 miles to the east), are the great fishermen of these parts. Indeed, here they are more important, since they have bigger boats and land much more fish. Fante Town is where work is shortly to start on a major fish processing facility, funded by the World Bank. It’s a messy place, the houses interspersed with fish processing sheds made of loosely woven sticks to let the air through, smoking kilns (about 4ft high and up to 6ft across) with the fish placed on racks on top, basins of brine and stacks of firewood. Pigs scavenge along sandy alleyways and across patches of uncut grass between the houses. The most imposing buildings are several churches disposed on the edge of town. More money must be made in Fante Town than anywhere else in Robertsport, but purely Liberian folk like the Vai and Gola complain that the Fante (though many are Liberian-born for generations back) still take their money to build houses back in Ghana. The fire began in a building on the strand, used to store boat fuel, like several others close by with “No Smoking” painted on their walls in large letters. It is unclear exactly how it started, though it’s rumoured that a fish-smoking



oven was too close. Amazingly no one was seriously injured, and there was really not much to be done but to let the fire burn itself out. When the heat and smoke slacken off sufficiently, men throw sand and water to douse what's left of the blaze. The owner lost all his assets and ran off in despair. Apparently, he was the burly shirtless man whom we saw being led back, people holding his arms on each side so he didn't do himself harm. Next to the smouldering building, there's a little dirty beach, where 3 or 4 long dug-out canoes are drawn up, painted red with "Manchester United" or "Jesus Is Coming" in big white letters on the side. Further along, several of the larger motor-powered, ocean-going boats are beached. They are handsome craft, with finely shaped prows, painted light blue with such emblems as the Ghanaian black-star flag or the red, yellow and blue badge of FC Barcelona, and large coloured flags of various designs flying bravely from a small mast set towards the bow. As elegant as Fante Town is ugly, they remind me of some of the boats you see in a Canaletto painting of a Venetian regatta.

26 February. In Monrovia for the weekend, to attend a couple of events to mark the departure of Anne's boss Eugene, the Burundian head of the UN Human Rights section. On Saturday, we had lunch with Edith Gongloe, a smart, well-educated woman whom Anne got to know last year when she



spent three months in Nimba, where Edith was a dynamic Superintendent. While in the US, she had headed an organization of “Liberians for Ellen”, but when she decided to run for a Senatorial seat as an Independent she lost Ellen’s favour. She came close to winning, but had to give up her job and is now wondering what to do next. We were eating grilled fish in a cheap eatery down an unpaved side-street next to the City Hall, when an extraordinary incident occurred. At first it sounded like a women’s quarrel outside in the street, but there was just one woman walking up and down, declaiming fast and furiously in strong Liberian English. I asked Anne if she could make out what she was saying, and she replied she thought she was crazy. But Edith said she was saying some sensible things, and certainly the people on the verandah at the front were listening intently to her. She had had a spiritual revelation about the state of the country: men with blood on their hands were still exercising influence, no mention of Ma Ellen by name but dismissive references to “that woman”, the people were suffering in their poverty, a severe drought and famine was soon coming unless people repented, gay rights was Sodom and Gomorrah ... What somehow added to the effect was that the woman looked so very respectable. She was in her 40s, slim and not bad-looking, dressed as if on her way to church: an “up-and-down” outfit in cotton with a black and green print, a gauzy head-tie in light green, black shoes with heels, a black handbag over her shoulder. Her delivery was extremely vehement, with dramatic gestures using both hands and a cascading eloquence that reminded me of an evangelical sermon. Sometimes she dropped her voice to address one of the onlookers, and they would murmur their agreement. She continued for at least 20 minutes in the broiling midday sun – she was still there when we left – till her skin dripped with perspiration. Edith had heard of her doing this about the town, but did not know her name or think she had any followers. A voice crying in the urban wilderness?

The next day, before returning to Robertsport, we went with Anna’s Kenyan friend Kagwiria to have lunch at a hotel that serves a very decent buffet. We were on the point of leaving, when a slim, tall man whom I didn’t at first see touched me on the shoulder and greeted me: it was Niyi, the son of my old Nigerian friends, Jacob and Christie Ajayi. Niyi’s a paediatric surgeon in London, and was in Liberia for the week on a medical mission. Such an extraordinary coincidence always feels like a kind of blessing.

7 March. The last week has been a rather low one, as Anne went down with what seemed to be malaria for several days, and is still feeling rather weak and washed out. She went for treatment to St Timothy's Hospital – whose problems have often figured in her reports – so now we saw something of how things appear from the other side. The staff treated her very solicitously, but the hospital had run out of its stock of the ampoules needed for the injection prescribed by Dr Keita, the nice Guinean deputy to the Liberian senior physician (absent in Monrovia, as more often than not). So Daniel (Anne's HR partner) and I drove down to Grassfield, to the bustling, slummy little street that's what you might call the *quartier commercial* of Robertsport, to see if we could get the medicine from either of its two small drug-stores – without success. Since hospitals always give me intimations of mortality, it moved me to get a reminder of life's renewal in a Fula naming-ceremony we passed on the way back: the mother sitting proudly with her week-old baby in front of her house, surrounded by family and neighbours, while a white-bearded *kamon* said Arabic prayers, before women danced, sang and threw money. Back at the hospital, it transpired that one of the nursing assistants had some of the ampoules for sale at his house – no prizes for guessing how he must have acquired them – and Daniel drove off again to get them. After several hours on a glucose drip, Anne was discharged in the early afternoon. She was much better by Saturday, but slid on Sunday, so we decided to go to the UN clinic in Monrovia. Again, she felt a bit better, but was still tired and below par. Another test at St Timothy's this morning showed she had typhoid (which they say is often not diagnosed, since its symptoms are easily masked by malaria) – for which she's now on a 10-days course of medication. Happily, she's due for her "R&R", and will soon be able to come back with me to London for a fortnight's recuperation in a cool English spring. Yesterday afternoon reached such an intensity of mugginess that I was not surprised to see thunder clouds build up by the evening, and about 3am we were rewarded by a rain-storm that lasted over two hours. Dawn came fresh and cool, with mist low on the mountain and the oil-palms absolutely still after the violence of the storm. Maima told us that she'd seen a small troupe of baboons, who live on the mountain – we often hear their calls in the evening – come right down to the houses. But by noon the sun was hot as ever, rapidly drying out the earth: the regular rains before planting will not start for at least another 6-8 weeks.





9 March. As I write this at 7.40pm, a very West African melange of sound meets my ears: the Allahu akbar! of the evening call to prayer at a nearby neighbourhood mosque is backed by vigorous drumming from the Friday watch-night service at the “Church of Jerusalem International” beyond it. But the event of the day was the lunch I gave for my three best friends among the ancients of Robertsport. These are Pa Moses Coleman, a Congo man turned 80 last year, a retired engineer and a stalwart of St John’s; S.K. Massaley likewise, early 70s, mayor of Robertsport before the war and greatly respected by everyone for his local knowledge; and Mr Pinney, late 60s, the County Inspector. As they were in a merry mood and had known one another for years, the atmosphere was a bit like ‘Last of the Summer Wine’. We ate the favourite Vai dish of *tujagbondo* (peppery fish stew with okra and bitterball in palm-oil) and rice, washed down with G&T and white wine. When Anne got back from the office in mid-afternoon after writing her weekly report, SK gave a complimentary speech to us both and presented me with a local-style suit in green lace.

16 March. I had hoped to conclude this Letter with the outcome of the Superintendency issue, but the crafty old boss-woman, alias the O' [Old] Ma, in Monrovia is still making her mind up. In Robertsport, rumours abound and change every week. Before last year's election, there were already mutterings against the Supe and some women from two of the Districts got up a petition against her to Ma Ellen. The Supe must have been getting worried, since one day Anne met in the market a renowned *zoe*-herbalist from up-country, who said he'd been summoned to see her. A few weeks after the election there was a celebratory party for UP notables at a little lakeside lodge a few miles outside Robertsport, to which Ma Ellen came, and the story that she had cold-shouldered the Supe added to the feeling that she would soon be replaced. But the weeks went by with no further action, and Anne thought the Supe seemed more confident – she was certainly showing her face in town more. Our great source of gossip is Fatu, the Child Welfare Officer, who lives just across the way from the Supe and knows her driver. Four weeks ago, she heard from him that Supe was terribly agitated after she got a summons from Ma Ellen to attend a meeting in Monrovia. Expectations of her removal arose but soon subsided when nothing seemed to follow, and again it seemed her confidence revived. But last week came several more signs. Some university students from GCM County were emboldened to criticise her on a local radio programme and to collect signatures for a petition to the UP caucus against her. It is rumoured that Supe has fallen out with her Deputy (whom she was in cahoots with over the roads contract), since it came to her ears that he'd been lobbying in Monrovia to replace her. Supe went round her house and threw out all the juju medicine she'd got – some said to be bought from powerful sources in Sierra Leone – saying they'd done her no good. Three days ago Anne actually got a text-message from her, also sent to various others, mocking the students' petition for its spelling mistakes and asserting that “God takes care of his own.”

This afternoon we called on Supe, as Anne wanted to raise the state of affairs at the hospital with her. It did not take long or need any prompting for her to get onto the matter of her re-appointment, and she was amazingly candid. Senator Dagoseh, the chairman of the UP caucus and till lately her political ally, had now turned against her. She even read out to us the defiant



text-message she'd sent to him, full of Christian sententiousness and (this being a case of gross betrayal in her eyes) references to Caesar and Brutus. So it does look as if Supe is on the way out, but who knows till the final blow falls? If she does go, it will be as much because she has alienated so many of her former allies as because of her administrative failings. What I find most enigmatic in all this is the attitude of the O' Ma herself. Is she just reluctant to axe an old friend who has become a political liability, like Tony Blair; is she carefully delaying execution and concealing her intentions by mixed messages, to create uncertainty and alarm among the notables, like the Emperor Tiberius; or is she just taking time to settle the elaborate pyramid of conflicting personal interests which is the political nation of Liberia, like the late President Tubman?

21 March. Yet another overcast day of stupendous humidity. This morning Pa Kende came round to the house to complete the fierce-looking Poro mask called Kokpo that he has carved for us, by attaching a long raffia fringe like a lion's mane round its face. Maima's sweet little three-year old daughter, whom everyone calls Small-Small, is absolutely terrified of it. We leave early tomorrow for Monrovia, where we're attending a meeting on FGM convened by Isabel, the head of UNICEF in Liberia. Afterwards it will be great to spend our last evening with Masilo and Karla, our South African friends.

P.S. 3 April. Since returning to England, we've learned that the axe has finally fallen: both the Supe and the Asst. Supe have been replaced. It seems that the news broke in Robertsport during a regular "civil society" meeting mostly attended by young people, to discuss affairs in the town. The Supe's son Dwalu was present, and so was the pained and shamed witness of the great jubilation which ensued.





## JUNE 2014

25 May. It seems amazing that it's more than two years since I was last here. The new direct BA flight from London is a boon, but it arrives 8.30pm, so it was great that Gérard, the French Ambassador had arranged for a police officer acquaintance to meet me and speed me through immigration like a VIP. Then the tedious hour's drive into Monrovia, to a pleasant supper with Nejuwa, an Ethiopian colleague and friend of Anne's. Next morning we pick up Michael, a Kenyan legal anthropologist based in Utrecht, whom Anne is helping to set up a link with Liberian partners for a project on traditional justice. At a hotel on Tubman Boulevard where we've stopped for breakfast, we meet the Hon. Mohammed Paasewe, the young and dynamic Superintendent (the "Supe") of Grand Cape Mount County, such a contrast to his predecessor. Anne has been concerned with a perennial problem in the County, the all-too-frequent absence of its key officials in Monrovia, when the routine administration of local affairs always slides badly. The Deputy Supe is nowhere to be seen. The reason why he's been away a lot of late, the Supe explains, is that a Japanese grant for building a vital bridge in the County has been stuck in Monrovia for months, essentially so that various officials might get their cut from the grant before sending it forward. But the Japanese accounting procedures are strict, and the Supe has to do a lot of political legwork in Monrovia to get the procurement through unscathed. That's the Liberian way.

It's mid-afternoon by the time we get to Robertstown. The rainy season has come, and there are several heavy showers on the way. The jolting, untarred road from the junction is in a poor condition, with tall lush grass pressing in on it and many water-filled potholes which will get worse as the season advances. At Tosor, the last little "town" before Robertstown (about 5 minutes further on), we turn into Anne's new house, which she had built on a prime strip of land made available (through lease) by the Tosor people, about 150 yards deep, between the road and the shore of Lake Piso, which can be glimpsed through palm-trees at the end of the plot. It's a spacious bungalow with three bedrooms, a large central lounge-dining-kitchen area, two bathrooms, a storeroom and a broad verandah facing the lake. It's very comfortably furnished, with tiled or terrazzo floors throughout. It's a pity that UN security regulations require it to be surrounded by a wire-mesh

fence topped by razor-wire.

We go into Robertsport to say hello to old friends, and I get many hugs, handshakes and enquiries after my health (“How de body?”, “De body dey fine!”). My old friends, Pa Moses Coleman and S.K. Massaley – early 80s and mid-70s respectively – both look frailer and each has eyesight problems. On the other hand, Ma Miatta Njombo, the senior Sande *zoe* in town and Anne’s special friend, looks very glossy and well – she’s in her mid-50s and has just got a new husband. Her only daughter had a baby about the time I was last here, in 2012, who was named John after me (though like most Vai people they are Muslims), now a lively active 2-year old.

28 May. News has come that a witch-cleansing is taking place in Banalor, a small town deep in the bush on the other side of Lake Piso, about 20 mins off the main road by a rocky, rutted track, barely wide enough to take a car and only a four-wheel drive at that. These are public performances, staged by any town when it feels its well-being and development is being frustrated by the activity of witches. But they have to be authorized by the Liberian state, whose representative is the County Inspector, Mr Eric V. Pinney; and they are not to involve any forced confessions or punishments against the law. The UN Human Rights interest is to monitor that this is so, but without intervening in local “cultural” enactments.

We arrive at 1pm, and already things are under way. In a tree-shaded open space before the houses is a crowd of over 100 people, with chairs at the front for elders and notables. In front of them, behind a rope, the confessed witches sit on mats – some eight elderly women and two boys about 10 years old – looking impassive, perhaps a bit bored or bemused. Next to them are displayed on another mat some of their materials: half-a dozen small bottles, some little medicine horns, something nasty in a black plastic bag and other indeterminate small objects. To one side a small ensemble of drums and rattle-gourds plays to accompany intermittent songs or choruses, led by the witch-finder’s assistants.

Proceedings are directed by two principals: Gine, a man in his 50s, a senior Poro *dazoe*, and a younger man in his late 20s, Lamie, who is the real star of the show, since it is he who actually does the witch detection. Both are wearing a pyjama-like uniform of white, with a St-Andrew’s cross pattern



on the shirt and stripes down the sides of the trousers, red for Gine and navy blue for Lamie. The other prominent figure – corpulent as no elderly Vai villager is – introduces himself as Mr Alfred B. Freeman, locally-born but resident in Monrovia, clearly a man who’s done well in business.

Accompanied by Mr Pinney, we are given prime seats at the front and formally welcomed, first by an elder in Vai, to whose formulas the people reply “Amin!”, as if to a prayer; and then by Mr Freeman, who gives a short explanation of what it’s all about: “We are come to perform a certain thing in this our town; we need to protect our children, there are some people who use leaves to do an ugly thing, so we have to clear the ‘witchcrafts’ out of our town.” Mr Pinney arises to greet everyone in the name of the County Superintendent and then to reprimand the townspeople for having started the witch-cleansing without having received the proper authorization. Anne intervenes to prevent a public wrangle about this, while Mr Freeman presents a letter signed by all the town’s notables to prove their collective support for the cleansing: “We the Town people had agreed for Mr Lamie (the witch doctor) to dig up any bad medicine other people as plant [sic] in the town (Banalor) to destroy [it]. If any bad person having to challenge him, Mr Lamie... should bring that person to light ...” Anne then speaks, after being welcomed with a short song and dance. People applaud when she joins in with a few steps. She tells them that she’s been following these witch-cleansings in other towns, and there must be no force or violence, as in former times when people were beaten or forced to drink something – alluding to the much-feared sasswood ordeal.

The alleged witches are then required in turn to stand up and recount their misdeeds to the assembled crowd. It’s evident that not all are happy at this humiliation, and when things get under way, there is some prompting by one or other of the senior men in the front row. First up is a small woman in her late 50s, herself a *zoe*, who tells a coherent story – trembling slightly as she talks – about how she joined the witches. She produces a few leaves which she places on the small table right in front of us, which enabled her to fly, faster than a jet plane, with her feet in the air and her head towards the ground. Her claim that she no longer “ate” people is not believed. Her grand-daughter, a buxom young woman in her late teens, who was “caught” in a witch-cleansing last month at the nearby town of Bendu, testifies that she had received witch powers from her. This evokes no show of emotion

of any kind.

Then come two sisters, in their 70s, known as White Daba and Black Daba, who both produce leaves which enabled them to fly. One confesses to having killed her own daughter, and the other (who was able to take the form of a pigeon) speaks of using a leaf to turn a baby into meat which she then ate. Interrogated as to why she had previously denied having leaves, she replies with a laugh that she's brought them now. They are followed by an angel-faced 10-year old boy, who (after much prompting) haltingly says he was inducted as a witch by White Daba.

Next is a plumpish woman in her 60s who confidently opens with "God bless you all!" She speaks of having had violent dreams, in one of which people came and put a cap on her head, and gave her some meat soup which made her very sick. She is clearly resistant, claiming that, though she can fly at night and protect herself, "she's not part of any witchcraft". Gine, the older witch-finder, says it is better to confess since then you can be free of it. There follows a little old woman in her 70s known as Musu Tombey, who puts five kinds of leaves on the table. She answers questions in such a low voice that her answers have to be relayed to the audience by Mr Freeman through a bullhorn, and there's great hubbub when it's announced that one of these leaves allows her to change into Zoba, the feared "Black Devil", a masked spirit which comes out at Sande ceremonies.

Finally Lamie introduces another old lady in her 70s, Ma Titi, who's been standing at the side in a group of women suspected but not yet proved. With a slight smile, she warily eyes Lamie's "power mirror", a rectangular piece of glass backed and framed with wood decorated with a few cowry shells, about the size of a tablet computer, which he uses to detect the presence of witchcraft. "She's not a witch but somehow a witch", Mr Freeman mutters to me enigmatically. It's said she can see many things and visit distant places in her dreams. She says very little, but after inspecting his mirror Lamie offhandedly declares her clear, they shake hands and she goes off to the applause of the onlookers, still with her bemused expression.

After all the confessions have been gone through, attention shifts to the two witch-finders, who line up before the concourse with their team: four young women, wearing white head-ties and with white marks on their faces and arms, and some young men of the town with workmen's long shovels and a pick-axe. Lamie has been walking up and down in front of the

crowd with his power mirror, scrutinizing it and tapping it with his finger, as if it was a piece of electrical equipment with a faulty connection. Gine's piece of mystic technology is what looks like a revolver carved from wood, decorated with a few cowries and two small strips of white cloth, a Muslim rosary and a small circular mirror like what you'd find in any woman's handbag, which he points disconcertingly at people. Now they are going to find and dig up some more medicines (*kpangba* in Vai) buried around the town, starting with one which allegedly was buried in the bush by a man under suspicion. Lamie washes the mirror and then his face from a bucket of soapy water. Then the two witch-finders do a curious double act, in which they face one another about 10 paces apart, rush towards each other and then back several times, mock-fighting as if over possession of the mirror. Lamie finally gets it and suddenly darts off towards the bush, followed by the rest of the team and a crowd of excited young people. After some 20 minutes they are back, headed by Lamie, who runs in an oddly stooped way, holding out the mirror in front of him as if it's guiding him. They add the *kpangba* they have found (which looks like a small lump of laterite rock) to the other tools of malefaction on the mat, and several people photograph it with their mobile phones. The search party then suddenly wheels round and, still following Lamie, rushes off again, this time out by the road that leads into the village. They return after 15 minutes or so, to announce that they've located a *kpangba* so dangerous that it cannot be dug up until a ram has been sacrificed. Lamie, who seems to be in a state of trance, collapses on the ground exhausted and dripping with sweat, while two of his female acolytes wash and wipe his face. It's not long before a couple of young men drag a small ram into the arena and lay it close by Lamie's feet. People crowd around to touch the ram and then their chests, pronouncing the Basmala ("In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate") in Arabic as they do so. The ram is taken away, and there's a lull. It's after 4pm and we have to have to start back. On the way out we pass a crowd, mostly of women and children, thronging around where the dangerous *kpangba* has been found, at the edge of the village.

6 June. The past week we've mainly stayed in Robertsport, as Anne has been overwhelmed with her bureaucratic duties as Head of Field Office. With a German colleague away on leave and her long-term Human

Rights co-worker Daniel, a Ghanaian, preparing to leave at the end of his contract, things are really stretched. She had several deadlines to meet for reports, and is constantly interrupted by people coming to her office with all sorts of problems. A funny thing happened a couple of days ago. I was at home one afternoon, when Boima, the young town-chief of Tosor (where Anne's bungalow is) came round. He's smart and politically savvy, though not highly educated. I asked him in and made him some tea. After some desultory remarks, he asked if he could say something about my wife. I wondered what on earth was going to come next. He asked if she could take Liberian citizenship so they could elect her as one of the County's three Representatives! A politically instructive request, but that would be some poisoned chalice.

It's been a sad week too. A six-year old boy from Kru Town has died of a disfiguring facial cancer, Burkitt's lymphoma, which mainly affects African children. Anne had spent a lot of time trying to persuade his parents that he needed medical attention – they were convinced it was due to witchcraft and needed “African science” to cure it – and had raised money for him to be taken to a hospital in Monrovia, but it was far too late. Mr Pinney's son got badly smashed up in a motor-bike accident 10 days ago, and may well not survive; while Mr Pinney himself collapsed with pneumonia, though is now recovering in the local hospital. A lot of people have gone down with the great endemic of these parts, malaria: not surprisingly, since there's a lot of standing water about and few environmental measures are taken to control it. Somehow a seal was set on the week by the Muslim funeral we attended on Sunday afternoon, of the aged mother of the County Education Officer, Dwight Harvey, an excellent man who spent 25 years as a teacher in Georgia USA, and decided to return to his native county to do something for its development. He's finding it an uphill struggle – there were times when he did not receive his salary for months on end – and feels that the stifling of local initiative by Monrovia is a big part of the problem.

The one time we went out was to a workshop Anne organized for community leaders on “Maintaining the Peace in Liberia” in Sinje, capital of the next district. UNMIL has been here for 10 years and is due to leave in 2016, so “What then?” is something that is being widely asked. She posed a series of questions for general discussion, of which the one that elicited by far the most detailed and engaged responses was about people's experiences





during the civil war. Stories of murder, rape, summary executions, mass killings, brutal torture before relatives, young men being induced to commit atrocities in their communities, girls being led away as sexual slaves, terrible marches through the forest, hiding in caves to escape the killers, miraculous escapes ... all came tumbling out. But Anne remarked afterwards that the young man who served as her organizing assistant for the workshop, the representative of a community organization and now studying sociology at university, was notably silent. He had been a “rebel” – as the members of all the armed factions are now termed – a follower of Charles Taylor, and had been sent for training to Libya.

There was a half-hearted Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the war, but so many participants in the violence are still active today at all levels of Liberian life that any large-scale exposures would be enormously disruptive, and there’s absolutely no political will to go there. Yet the memories are just below the surface everywhere. A local example ... The lakeside land on the edge of Tosor where Anne has built her bungalow was once occupied by a settlement of Fante fishermen, migrants from Ghana.



When war came, the native Vai were able to escape into the thickly-forested massif of Wakolor, which rises to 1,000ft behind Tosor, whose secrets they knew. The Fante knew nothing of this hinterland, stayed by the lakeshore and were massacred in their dozens by the “rebels”. Anne poured a libation of gin to their spirits before she started building her house.

12 June. A hot sunny day such as you often get between heavy spells of rain, like the one we’ve just had lasting on-and-off for 36 hours. I keep thinking back to the witch-cleansing at Banalor. Apparently by the end of the week, a total of 22 people had confessed: 9 women, 8 children and 5 men. From what Anne has said about three other cleansings, it’s usually more women and fewer children than that. The people always haggle with the witch-finders over their fee: Banalor paid US\$200 (plus their meals for the week), while recently the larger town of Bendu was asked for \$600 and beat them down to \$400. Falie, on the road to the junction, has apparently negotiated a fee of \$250 for a cleansing next week. These are big sums for poor communities to raise, yet they judge it worthwhile to remove what they consider an obstacle to “development”; and assuredly they yield a very tidy income for the witch-finders. It drives away most of my anthropological relativism and makes me feel like a missionary: “Oh may the Lord open their eyes ...” What is more depressing: the humiliation of these wretched souls by their neighbours and kinsfolk for their absurd supposed misdeeds, or the spectacle of poor people in a poor community blaming themselves for their poverty, with the connivance of a state that preaches development at them?

13 June. There was a buzzing crowd round the police station when we went to collect two officers to whom we were giving a lift, on our way to Monrovia. The previous evening, they told us, local people had apprehended a man climbing a tree at 10pm. His explanation that he had been looking for a bird was very odd, and also unwise, since it suggested that some kind of witchcraft was involved. In the morning they found a juju in the tree, and dragged the man to the police station. No one believed his claim that it was a benign juju, but reasoned instead that if he knew that, he must have put it there. The feeling in the crowd was such that the police felt they had to do something, so they charged the man with criminal trespass. The case

will surely be thrown out of court, but not before the man has been put to considerable trouble and expense. A sort of justice, I suppose. This is a strange country.

JDYP

