

MOUNTAIN

OF THE

LION

T h e   G r e a t

R e v i v a l   i n

S i e r r a   L e o n e ,

W e s t   A f r i c a

Donald Hugh O'Keefe

# Mountain of the Lion

## The Great Revival in Sierra Leone, West Africa

by Donald Hugh O'Keefe

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# ONE

I HAD EXPECTED West Africa to be primitive and undeveloped, and yet, looking down at Liberia from the commercial jet, I was stunned by the jungle with its rough dirt roads connecting distant villages. The villages were a scattering of brown mud huts with grassy roofs in compounds barren of any vegetation.

As a boy I had seen pictures just like the scene below me, but this was real. It wasn't some far-off exotic land to dream about. It was here and now. Suddenly, the romance of Africa was replaced with the sobering thought that my family and I were going to live here. This wasn't a camping trip where we would briefly rough it in the great outdoors, nor was it a two-week vacation where we would see the highlights prepared for tourists and then run back to our comfortable California home. We were going to live here.

When the plane touched down at Robert's Field we were excited, but dog tired from the all-night flight. When we walked into the sunshine we met another reality of West Africa: the humid equatorial climate that surrounded us was like a sauna. We were soon sweating through our clothes and wishing we had worn lighter garments.

Over by the airport buildings we saw our welcoming party waving and yelling greetings to us. We were really glad to see them.

Of course, we had to go through customs and immigration procedures. Going through customs in West Africa is an unforgettable experience. Books could be written about the things that happen to people going through customs. No inexperienced person should attempt it on his own. One time a missionary's wife had a customs agent take her undergarments out of her suitcase and hold them up for public display while he and other agents laughed and made silly comments about them. She was red faced, but bravely ignored their game. There was no malice in this act—it was just the way West African customs operates.

Some things that happen in customs are not so harmless. If you do not know the ropes, or if nobody meeting you knows the ropes, you can go through some very unpleasant harassment and efforts to relieve you of your money or your goods. Thankfully, we were met by the Liberian missionaries, and with their assistance we survived customs.

The trip from the airport to the missionary's home was forty to fifty miles. Along the way it became evident that this land not only looked different from the air, it was different.

Women walked down the road topless, and men took baths in public completely naked. Teenage girls with their bodies painted white walked single file down the road as they participated in the initiation rites of the Bundo Society, a women's society based upon devil worship.

In some areas the road was lined with kiosks selling a wide variety of goods: used clothing, rice, palm oil, used motor oil, devil charms, and artifacts. The markets swarmed with people haggling over prices. The noise, the color, and the ripe smell of the markets are a part of the culture that everyone should experience—at least once.

The little add-on air conditioner in the Peugeot struggled to keep the passengers in the front seat cool, but it did little for those in the back seat. The dirt road we now traveled was not only rough, bouncy and winding, but, in addition, it had to be the dustiest road I had ever seen in my life. The dust rose with each passing vehicle to the height of a two-story building. Opening a window was completely out of the question. To see where we were going, sometimes we would have to stop until the dust raised by some passing vehicle settled. It seemed strange that such a dusty road would be lined on both sides with some of the thickest jungle in the world.

Finally, we reached the house, located in a little settlement called Brewaville. There we met a number of the Liberian church members who had come to welcome us. The people of West Africa are, for the most part, very friendly and hospitable. They are pleased to have visitors and they love missionaries for the message that they have brought and for the social and educational benefits derived from their labors.

It was good to be in a house surrounded by things familiar to us as Americans. Even though the electricity was off as much as it was on, and even though the well was going dry, we were glad to be there.

The dry well did cause some difficulties. We learned to take a bath with a single teapot full of water, for both lather and rinse. Sometimes we would go to a nearby river to bathe and wash clothes.

We had only been in Brewaville a few days when we had our first experience with driver ants. It was late at night and we were in bed when we heard a loud shouting outside. All of us flew out of bed and into our clothes. The missionary shouted to us, "The driver ants have come!" We didn't know what driver ants were. We had seen ants before, so what was the big deal?