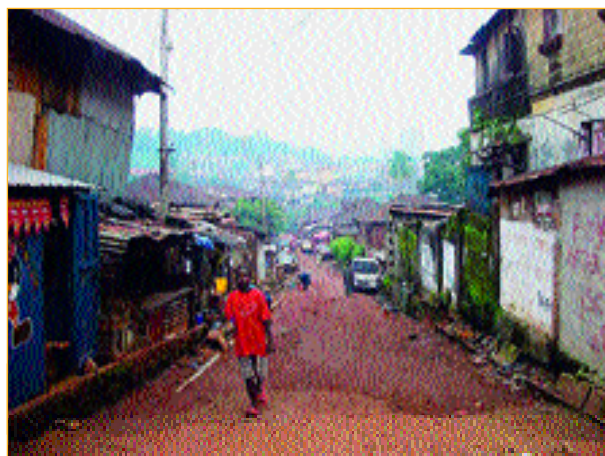


IN WESTERN AFRICA

A pottery project in Sierra Leone

Arno Hastenteufel



Streets in Freetown

In March 2005, we received an enquiry from the EED (the Church Development Service, a Protestant aid agency in Germany). A partner organisation was planning to set up a training centre for young ceramists in Sierra Leone. A simply equipped pottery was already in place.

In order to realise the project with the financial support of the EED, it was first necessary to give an overview of important factors in a preliminary study, such as the quality of the raw materials, the potential of the market and the state of repair of the equipment in the pottery. An analysis of the

state of traditional pottery in the country was to be included in the study. A three-day test workshop to discover the creative potential, current training and motivation of the young Sierra Leoneans was a further revealing aspect of the study.

We arrived in Freetown of 21 July 2005. The capital city of Sierra Leone is situated on the side of a wooded, hilly peninsula, and from the helicopter taking us to the Peninsula, we could make out Man of War Bay with its long, white sandy beaches.

We were warmly greeted by Katharina Schilling, who has been living in Sierra Leone for five years and working for SLADEA, the partner organisation of the EED. Among her many other activities, she also gives seminars all over the country on non-violent communication, which are intended to contribute to preserving the peace in a country scarred by twelve years civil war. For the next few weeks, Katharina was to help us with our investigations with her expert local knowledge.

The first few days were devoted to market research. At the markets in the capital, we discovered besides mass-produced Chinese wares inventively designed ceramics of a very authentic character from the village of Mabetho. In a small gallery, we noticed skilfully

thrown vases and pots from a pottery in Mambolo near the Guinean border. And in Lunsar, 150 km away, there seemed to be a pottery, which alongside ceramic stoves (called "liners") also produced tableware.

At the Ministry of Lands, we met the geologist, Mr Kandeh, who kindly and willingly informed us about soil composition: in many parts of the country, especially low-lying areas, there are clays of various qualities. No analyses are available. There are deposits of pre-Cambrian granite throughout the mountain areas. Deposits of feldspar were to be expected, but had not yet been examined. Interest had concentrated more on rutile, bauxite, chrome oxide and other valuable minerals. When travelling around the country, we were to take the opportunity to collect clay and rock samples.

We left the chaos, noise and stench of the city behind us: electric power is supplied exclusively from diesel generators. Our first stop is Mambolo Pottery. After leaving the main road, we travelled over almost impassable jungle tracks. Outside thatched mud huts, in the shade of huge trees, adults rest. The picture is enlivened by children and animals.

Time seemed to stand still. The idyll is merely a trick of the senses with our

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Since 1994 aid projects in ceramics in Africa and Asia.

Only unglazed ware has been on sale hitherto



Sales stalls of the Mabetho potters



Inventive forms and surfaces in Mabetho



Production takes place on the ground outside a hut





Mabetho potters' village



Small shops predominate



Range of ceramics in Freetown market hall

perceptions jaded by affluence. More than half the population lives below the internationally stipulated poverty line of \$ 1 per day. Seventy percent are illiterate. Child mortality is the highest in the world; average life expectancy is around 26.

We traversed to mangrove-covered plane at the estuary of two rivers to reach Mambolo. The potter, Mr Autaim, told us his life story, of war, destruction and reconstruction, set-backs and new beginnings. Due to the high costs of transportation to the distant Freetown, the pottery scarcely yields a profit. The workshop, in which the two wood-fired kilns were waiting for work, was currently being used for weaving in order to feed the family.

Clay is dug in the swamp between rice paddies. We took our first samples. After securing Mr Autaim's potential agreement to co-operate with us and SLADEA, we took our leave.

Our next journey of exploration took us 120 km into the interior. In Mabetho eight families live from pottery, which is pursued in a very traditional fashion, exclusively by women. The red firing micaceous clay is cleaned by hand. The forecourt of the tin-roofed mud huts serves as the workshop. All of the pots are handbuilt and bonfire fired. Palm wood is the fuel.

Planters, jars, aroma lamps, candle holders are made in great variety. The ware is sold by the nearby trunk road, where each of the potters has her own sales area.

We spent the last few days of our first stay in Sierra Leone in Waterloo, about 35 km from Freetown. This is where the pottery building stands, about 100 sq. mtr. and brick built. The equipment is limited to small tools, two pits for soaking raw clay and a woodfiring kiln built by a local potter. Twenty Sierra Leoneans of both sexes aged between 22 and 32 were awaiting us and were at least as nervous as we were. We worked together over the next three days. We rolled out clay slabs to make simple bowls and plates from them. We decorated them with home-made plaster stamps. First experiments in throwing were undertaken on wobbly wheels.

The Sierra Leoneans were highly motivated and high-spirited. At times we could only make ourselves heard by raising our voices.

By the end of our trip, we were convinced: the potential of the market, the available raw materials and particularly the high level of motivation and talent of potential trainees mean that it makes sense, and it is in fact necessary, to set up the training centre. We

recommended appointing a German ceramist who would be responsible for running the workshop. The position was advertised in specialist magazines, and to shorten the waiting period for the Sierra Leoneans, we were sent back to Sierra Leone in February 2006. This time we worked "properly". In Germany, we managed to develop a perfect stoneware glaze from just two local raw materials, woodash and granite. In our luggage we had with us a used glaze mill to crush the rock and a kit to make a small woodfiring kiln that had already proved its worth in numerous aid projects, designed by our friend and colleague Michael Sälzer.

While Ute Hastenteufel took responsibility for giving instruction in glaze preparation and use, I constructed the kiln together with workshop participants - in ten days it was fired four times to 1260°C. We made the first ever glazed ceramics in the country. All of the participants including ourselves are proud of the unexpectedly good results. And now we are hoping that the local potters will soon be able to take over the running of the pottery so that the wish of one of the participants can be fulfilled: soon to be able to contribute to the development of his region, his village and his family.

CONTACT

Information about further projects by Ute und Arno Hastenteufel on: www.entwicklungshilfe-keramik.de

Glazing the first samples

Practical application of glaze

Building the "Sälzer Kiln"

The new kiln in heavy reduction

The first glazed ceramics in Sierra Leone

