

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Peace Corps/Foreign Missions Project

Freetown, Sierra Leone, Africa

O. H. 675

REV. ~~ROBERT~~ REED DIETERICH JR.

Interviewed

by

Joseph G. Rochette

on

November 6, 1984

Rev. Robert Reed Dieterich Jr.

Rev. Robert R. Dieterich, Jr. was born on October 2, 1941 in Millersburg, Ohio, the son of Robert R. and Elizabeth Jeffras Dieterich. He graduated from Washington High School in Massillon, Ohio and continued his education at the College of Wooster, receiving a B.A. degree in 1963. Dieterich also attended Boston University School of Theology (1967, S.T.M.) and Columbia University (Teacher's College: M.A., M.Phil., A.B.D.).

Rev. Dieterich has been a minister with the United Methodist Church since 1970. He also served as a missionary in Freetown, Sierra Leone from 1970 to 1975. Here he worked with various literacy, education, and urban ministry development programs. He has since been an instructor of Anthropology & Development at Columbia University, 1978-81; and Rutgers University, 1981-82.

Rev. Dieterich currently lives in Struthers, Ohio with his wife, Constance, who he married in 1965, and their three year old daughter, Catherine. He is the minister for the United Methodist Church on the corner of Sexton and Stewart Streets. Rev. Dieterich is also a member of the American Anthropological Association.

Joseph G. Rochette

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INTERVIEWEE: REV. ROBERT R. DIETERICH

INTERVIEWER: Joseph G. Rochette

SUBJECT: Missionary formation, relationships between church and local customs, living-working environment, government-military disturbances

DATE: November 6, 1984

R: This is an interview with Reverend Robert Dieterich for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Peace Corps/Foreign Missions, by Joseph G. Rochette at the Methodist church on the corner of Stewart and Sexton on November 6, 1984 at 1:34 p.m.

To get started could you give us a little bit of background about where you come from and where you went to school and things like that?

D: I grew up in Ohio. My father was a Methodist minister so we lived in a lot of different towns. I graduated from Massillon High School, went to college at Wooster, finished there and then went to seminary at Boston University School of Theology. I finished my theology work and worked in Boston for a community action program; it was then called the OEO. War and poverty turned out to be a scrimmage, if anything.

After working in South Boston for a couple of years I got a call one night from a friend of a friend who told me about a project in West Africa. At that time the board of local ministries of the United Methodist Church was going to have particular programs in what they called urban ministries to twelve cities in the world. They were very grandiose schemes on how they were going to raise twelve million dollars, a million dollars for each city; these were going to be twelve cities in the Third World, and there were three cities named in Africa. One of them was Freetown, Sierra Leone. Because I had been working

as a community organizer in the manpower training program in Boston they wanted to know if I would be co-director with the team of Sierra Leone and set up program developing urban ministries in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I got a call from someone to meet them so we could talk and about ten months later I was in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Following what was supposed to be three years I stayed for four and then continued in the program in New York City for a fifth year.

R: What kind of preparation was there as far as culture, language, things like that?

D: I was working as a missionary for the board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. The project was funded ecumenically so I was secunded to this project. The training that the church usually did were two types for missionaries. A lot of it was group work, that type of thing, raising issues and dealing with the problem, what it was like to live in another culture. I had been through a lot of that stuff in the seminary so when it came to the training I said, "We could get a group of missionaries together and they could do the touchy-feeling type things." There happened to be a summer course at Fordham University being taught by the faculty of the University of Accra Ghana in Legon. It was initially worked out that as far as preparation I was going to be spending twelve weeks in Accra at the university there. Because of timing and getting things going it didn't work out that way, but they did have a short course on African history and economics and those types of things at Fordham University. So there was a six week course in New York City. That was basically meeting together with the faculty of the University of Accra Ghana, especially the Institute of African Studies there. We went through a whole lot of introductory stuff. I had had some courses at Boston University, which has a very good department on African studies. I did study the Mende language with a Mende speaking pastor from Sierra Leone who was living in Brooklyn at the time. For about ten weeks I went to his house once a week to learn Mende. I discovered in Freetown, Sierra Leone that Mende was only one of the languages that I needed. Very quickly you pick up prejudices of the people who come from there. There was a missionary who was coordinating it and she had always worked among Mende speaking people so she assumed that if you came to the city you should speak Mende. It would be equally important to speak Temne or Limba. There is a lingua franca form of Sierra Leone called Krio. I probably would have better spent my time learning Krio. I did pick

up Krio when I spoke there and it is more important to speak Krio unless you are in a totally Mende speaking area. So I've forgotten most of the Mende.

R: Was there any kind of formation once you got into Sierra Leone?

D: Yes. This project was initially started by the United Methodist Church, but they felt that to deal with the social problems of urbanization in a West African city, of course initially it should be ecumenical from the very beginning. But they went around in doing it backwards. For example, most of the "money" was Methodist. The assumption was that the Methodists would go in and start a program and would get the other churches to join in. In terms of planning ecumenical cooperation that is probably the wrong way to do it, especially given the unique history of the United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone. There had been a United Brethran Church; that joined to form the United Methodist Church. The United Brethran Church in Sierra Leone was a dominant Protestant mission body in the country of Sierra Leone. When the church missionary society from the Church of England and the other missionary societies were doing most of their work in Sierra Leone it was in Freetown, the capital. They were doing it with an ethnic group who traces their history back to liberated slaves, liberated captives, and also to repatriated Americans, who at the time of the Revolution went to Canada because it was better to be free in a British Colony than a slave in an independent country. They then were repatriated because of the British antislavery movement led by Wilberforce. They arrived at Sierra Leone in 1789. There was some of that type of background in the antislavery movement, but it was also an attempt to start a business, a trading business in West Africa, so it wasn't all bent for the glory of the antislavery movement. It was an attempt at colonization; it really didn't succeed because of a misunderstanding, I think, of the basic economy, what had happened in that area because of the slave trade. It ran into some very difficult times and it wasn't until 1807 when the British admiral declared slavery illegal throughout the Atlantic Basin. Freetown became the admiralty court. That meant that all slave ships that were captured by the British, their captives were released at Freetown, Sierra Leone rather than being returned anywhere throughout Africa. You had over 200,000 captives released in Sierra Leone and they became a nucleus of an emerging ethnic group. It is much smaller now because many of the people found their way back to their own country or moved in with the traditional ethnic groups there. Those that remained in the capital city became a separate ethnic group no different than the others except they had a language that was based on English partially and also an attitude toward Europe that was different from the

traditional native groups there. It created an elite of blacks that blocked the development of the rest of Sierra Leone.

At Freetown I ended up working with many people who were Creole and many Temne. There is always that kind of split in the country. My second day there I was told I was invited to a reception. It was a reception at a large church downtown and I went in and the entire press corps was there from the four major newspapers, the archbishop of West Africa and the Catholic church was there, the archbishop of the church of Sierra Leone, which is a form of Anglican church he is the archbishop of West Africa too. Of course, the heads of many other churches were there and they walked me in. I was just getting used to things and they said, "Here is the person who is going to build up urban ministries for Freetown, Sierra Leone." Then there was a two hour press conference. I don't know when I've been through a more uncomfortable time. It was just awful. I have no idea what I said, but I guess I didn't blow it too badly. Very luckily one of the other co-workers I went with was a very special person; he was president of the trade union congress of Sierra Leone and had been around for a long time; he was Creole, although unlike most Creoles he did speak Mende, Temne, and had spent time living out of the captial city so he had ties to the country. He was very good and we got along and worked together very well. We started working in six neighborhoods, and our first push was in doing literacy work.

Following the project, by the end of four years we ended up with--and it's still going on--sixteen centers for adult education in English. We went through a difficult period of talking about what languages should they be in. People, being ethnocentric like we all are, there was always the argument--well, one should learn to be literate even in the language of your home, your heartland. Rationally it makes a lot of sense, except the people who wanted to become literate knew darn well that it was much better to be literate in a language in which there was something published than a traditional language in which the only published materials are a few Bible tracks. They knew that really didn't make sense. Once one becomes literate, one can then pick up their own language. There was constant arguing that it is easier to learn literacy in your native tongue. Another problem with that is that most people grow up speaking two to three languages. Families in Africa are multi-lingual. It is more of an exception to find a family in which the members only speak one language; at least that is true of this area of West Africa, if not true of others. The students, the people who came for adult education, really insisted that they wanted to learn how to speak English

and be literate in English first. We ended up having to write our textbooks based on Krio because there is very little based on West African Krio. When we got to a certain level we were then able to buy some English for Africans texts that were published.

We moved into some functional literacy programs that had to do with maths, bookkeeping. One of the really exciting things we worked on was we were asked by the port authority to work with the workers in the unions to develop literacy classes. The curriculum we used for that was a portfolio of one hundred photographs. We had gone in with a local photographer and took pictures of everything that went on in the port. It was based on the Paolo Friere Method of basic review to structure people with. The people that talked about it created the words out of pictures and then talked so they could learn it. It became very functional because then it meant that everybody could start dealing with the language and learning it. That was a very exciting project. Some of the things that worked best were the things that happened very quickly.

We ended up with a group that had \$12,000; they had taken an offering someplace. The United Methodist Women in holding a special meeting raised \$12,000, and it was unexpected. We sat down with a group of women from the different churches and we set up a credit union. A credit union is not the best word; the real word is a Esusu. It is a type of lending society founded throughout West Africa, a funding market of women. It gave some strengths to the market women so that they could plan to buy when prices were low. Also, groups of women would come together in groups of four or five to borrow more money. Four or five people can borrow more money than individuals. They kept adding and putting ten percent on for everything they put back in, so it was growing at twenty percent a year as far as a capital investment. It has really gone on very well. I think one reason it was very successful was because of the work leader, the kind of leadership that is determined in a market system. It is matriarchal, authoritarian. I think the price in markets throughout Freetown was set by two or three women. Also, because Sierra Leone has had a history, like most of West Africa, of a lot of the entrepreneurial activity being dominated by the historical leader. There has also been a struggle, for a leadership of women in political positions. There were a few local headmen in Freetown who were women. Freetown was a typical British colonial system where they divided the city up. There were different headmen who were picked by whoever the British wanted. Because of the process of indirect rule it appeared

as if there were strong traditional leadership patterns. You had a position in which British legal systems and traditional law were integrated with these local headmen. In two of the communities where things went really well, two of the headmen were women who were very active in the church. They did some things that I would never have done. They required that if you were going to get a loan you had to attend literacy classes. They made it very clear.

- R: Were there any things that you found that were particularly frustrating?
- D: Yes. In fact, it was so frustrating that it took me four or five years afterwards to figure out . . . the most frustrating thing that sticks out is coming from an American background I learned that basically our economic social success in productivity is based on the strength of our personal skills, business knowledge, our plan. I discovered that there was a tremendous group of very fine, exceptional leadership that was exciting and involved of any group I had ever seen, but yet things didn't work and profits were always going somewhere else and things were falling apart. It took a lot of time and experience in West Africa to understand the process of underdevelopment as being very much tied to development in the West, and seeing that they were not separate economies from what was happening here and what was happening there. It took a lot of time of understanding why and what was happening and why things didn't work. It didn't have anything to do with any theories based on race, color, ability, or anything like that. It just wouldn't compute as far as explaining why there was so much poverty, why there was wealth in the hands of a few, why the country was serving the needs of cities outside of Sierra Leone, why in understanding the historical process of underdevelopment in West Africa one gets to get a clue of what was happening on local social organizations, even the history of the church or the history of somebody's family.

That was one of the major reasons that after completing four years there I came back and worked towards my Masters Degree and prepared it in international education, basically to go back and work, another helper, to develop further strengths in the literacy program. I decided, though, that I really wanted to stay on and complete a Ph.D. in applied anthropology to understand the global process of underdevelopment, one of the linkages to local community organization and local leadership. After a year of coming back and then being in contact with people in the project and finding out that it was still going well and it was totally under the leadership of Sierra Leonians I decided to stay on in the States and not go back. It was successful and there were things that I really appreciated about it, but I didn't

think it could be repeated and I think there was also a tremendous need to understand that whenever you have a European who remains in that working position you are blocking the development of African evolution. Too many church and multi-national organizations are blocking leadership potential by remaining in positions of importance within local churches or schools or whatever it is.

R: I was curious as to what the environment was like where you were working as far as some of the cultural things, food, just the area itself, Freetown?

D: As West African cities go it is definitely not French. It is not wonderfully laid out on a French pattern like Washington, D.C. You are not separated in any of the neighborhoods you live in from squatter settlements, from rapid urbanization, from open sewers, from all of the problems of West African cities. It is very definitely still a very African city and not a city that appears to be one that is based on a European modeled development. The house I was living in happened to be a house that was built by former missionaries and it was an American ranch style house that was on a compound of a secondary school that was owned by the church. It was a ten minute walk from downtown; it was up on the side of a hill. I shared yards with people, with squatters. We shared water supplies and things like that. We were never, in a sense, separated because we lived in a big house and had a car. Freetown is not large as West African capital port cities. A good population estimate would be 200,000. It is not so crowded there, but typically people will still have a small enough piece of land to be growing food. It's more rural than most urban cities. It is more multi-ethnic than most urban cities because of the history of Sierra Leone. Up until the 1870's the colonial part was settled in downtown Freetown. Europeans and Africans lived together. With mosquitoes discovered as being the cause of malaria then the British developed European enclaves on top of the hills. You ended up with white elite up until 1961 and flag independence that white elite would be the governor general and the ministers of state. Below that there would be a class of Krios who would be the second and third secretaries, the teachers in the schools, the ministers of the churches.

R: While you were there were there any major political overthrows?

D: About a month before I arrived there was an attempted coup d'etate. It failed. There had been an election and it was a question of whether Siaka Jacques Stevens was defeated or not. There was an opposition party which became powerful at the time. They were all arrested about a month before. They were jailed for the first year. Dr. Karefa Smart, who was the leader of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party at that time

was in jail. He was a close friend of, at that time, Prime Minister Siaka Stevens. Siaka Jacques Stevens, Karefa Smart, and the majority of the cabinet members all graduated from the same secondary school, which happened to be Albert Academy, which was an Evangelical United Brethran school. Almost all the leaders following 1961 all came out of this school. The reason it happened this way was because it was the one school in Freetown that had open admission to people who grew up in the provinces. Most of the schools in Sierra Leone had limited enrollment only to Krios. There was one other secondary school in the country that was in Bo, and that is where the sons of chiefs went to be trained to become British administrators. Because of the history of this mission it was the one school in the capital city that had a secondary school that trained Mende, Temne, and Limba speakers. When independence came there was a real struggle as to what group independence was going to pass to. It wasn't going to pass to Creole leaders in Freetown who had fought a long time to establish Freetown as the independent country with the rest of the country then going to be a dependent colony of the capital city, which there would be no vote. They were going to recreate the colonial model. But because of what was happening in the Pan African movement at that time it was not successful. Siaka Jacques Stevens was legitimately and democratically elected President, but it took some power to get his mandate enforced.

R: What was the relationship between your church and local police and customs?

D: Complex. When I was there it was the first time in the 150 year history of the church that a Sierra Leone was elected and consecrated bishop of the church. The Brethran church became the Evangelical church; Evangelical United Brethran later became United Methodist Church, always taking the name of America for the church. Leadership level at the top was always ministered first by missionaries and then when annual meetings were held we had to have a bishop present according to the polity of the church. They would fly somebody over from America. Sometimes annual meetings were put off for two or three years because they couldn't get a bishop. It created a real problem historically for the church. One of the spinoffs of it was because a lot of the money came from the United States, the Evangelical United Brethran Church had one mission field in Africa and one in the Philippines. They spent a lot of time supporting the church in Sierra Leone. There has been a long history of the church relating to villages and towns in outlying areas.

The relationship to traditional African beliefs has been a difficult one. It is not simple. African leadership

within the church, because of the missionary presence all over the church, has been great in educating people. Somehow the gospel gets through too despite our prejudices and the racism of missionaries. Strangely enough the early missionaries to Sierra Leone were black. But the white missionary presence blocked access to the major pulpits, the major teaching things. You had evangelists, Sierra Leone evangelists, going throughout the country. Some of the major evangelists that made the church grow, there happened to be three of them who were blind who memorized the scriptures. Because there weren't enough missionaries to dominate, especially outside the country, the church caught on and grew in its own place. It also meant there weren't enough positions for indigenous leaders. There were all sorts of independent churches in Sierra Leone. The independence church movement was as strong in Sierra Leone as it is in anyplace else with the exception of South Africa; because of the apartheid system and violence we're holding the people economically down. Based on race they are just much stronger. Two thousand independent denominations in South Africa alone are totally black. But that pattern has also been found in West Africa. Many people, because they could not gain the authority or the respect, formed their own churches or became pastors in other missions that had connections with the United States or Europe. Sierra Leone is one of the few places in the world where you still have a denomination called the Countess of Huntington. The Countess of Huntington was a disciple of John Wesley. She was a very wealthy woman who happened to believe in Calvinist predestination. She split with Wesley and formed her own kind of wealthy group of English gentry; but that started a church in Sierra Leone, although it's no longer active in England. We still have the Countess of Huntington connection, which is a series of chapels and churches. We have AME churches coming out of the split within the Methodist movement of the United States over slavery and racism. The Evangelical United Brethren Church under the United Methodists helped to produce a lot of the Lord Aladura, which is a syncretist Christian church tied very strongly to African tradition. It was very strong in Sierra Leone, Nigeria. The Prophet Harris started in Sierra Leone and then spread his church, the Harris church, throughout Liberia and all of Ivory Coast. The most prophetic movement in that church when it started at the end of the 19th century was when Prophet Harris burned the Union Jack. The independent African church has not only been a way in which Africans have access to scripture, but a relationship to their traditional place, to the fact that the Bible is very closely tied up with the same type of world views. Also, the Bible is a very strong instrument in the struggle for independence.

R: What people or events stand out while you were there?

D: I took a course with some faculty members of the University of Accra. This was in New York. One of the professors there talked to us about going to Sierra Leone. He said, "The first place you go in Africa, you'll visit many other places, but that first place you go in Africa, you establish a feeling toward that country like you've had to no other country. That will always be a part of you." That is true. I miss Sierra Leone like I would miss my own country. I've traveled a lot of places in Africa even though I've seen places where a lot more things are going on.

Various things stand out, the friends I have from relationships I made in Sierra Leone. It would have been very easy to separate myself from Africans. Luckily because of the people we connected with there, things happened. We were aware that that was a possibility; we just didn't let it happen. Our place became a place where a lot of people came and stayed.

There are a lot of things I remember. One of the important memories is the fact that people can come and visit and be with you, but you don't have to talk. That is important. There was a school nearby with friends and people I worked with that would just come. It took a long time for us to realize that people just wanted to come and sit. They expected us, when we were home, to go on and do the things you do at home. We didn't have to sit down and talk. People just came and flocked in and sat down. When we finally caught on to that, learned that, it is a very special gift. It made social occasions just really exciting, parties and dancing. It just doesn't happen here.

R: I'd like to thank you for sharing your experiences with me.

END OF INTERVIEW