

Lifting Bumpah To Another Level

How a Sierra Leone paramount chief leads transformation

BY ARLENE GOLEMBIEWSKI

On a steamy West African afternoon in 2013, the best offer I had was to find some shade and sit still while a trickle of sweat ran down my back. My friend Charles said, “Let’s go sit in my father’s grapefruit orchard where it’s cooler and have kids pick grapefruit.”

Children carried our chairs a short way to a grove of old grapefruit trees. We watched boys shinny up the tall trees to where they were nearly out of view. “That’s far enough,” Charles called out, concerned for their safety. The trees we sat under were at least 50 years old. The citrus was as sweet as any I’d ever eaten.

We were in the small town of Rotifunk, the seat of Bumpah Chiefdom, Sierra Leone, in lowland tropical rainforest just north of the equator. The Bumpah River snakes through Rotifunk as a stream before opening into wide estuaries 30 miles downstream and emptying into the Atlantic. The river’s natural tidal flooding creates verdant wetlands for traditional rice growing, a farming practice unchanged in hundreds of years. And it makes it hard to escape constant sweating.

LIFE AFTER AN 11-YEAR REBEL WAR

I had served as a Peace Corps teacher in Rotifunk nearly 40 years before. Things felt familiar and unchanged on my first return trip to Bumpah Chiefdom. Forty-thousand people in 215 small villages still live a subsistence existence on a dollar a day. All farming remains manual. Houses are still made of mud wattle or mud bricks with thatched roofs. As in 90 percent of the nation, there is no electricity. At nightfall, Rotifunk goes dark.

But then I saw that life was worse than 40 years ago. During an 11-year civil war and seven years of rebel occupation, Rotifunk was burned to the ground. Now 60 percent rebuilt, the town’s piped water system is long gone. The roads are a nightmare. It takes four hours to drive 55 miles to Freetown. There are no wage-paying jobs. The weekly market draws only petty traders. The railroad that made Rotifunk a flourishing agricultural trade center was dismantled. Forests that protected streams were leveled, so children now

walk greater distances to carry water home. Schools are primitive, classrooms overcrowded, and few have qualified teachers.

I returned for the first time in 2011 with the Friends of Sierra Leone, thinking it would be a one-off trip to connect with my past. But I reconnected with my friend Charles Caulker, a fellow teacher in 1974. I had gone on to a career at Procter & Gamble and he had entered government administration and was now Paramount Chief Charles Caulker.

Chief Caulker is one of the longest-serving paramount chiefs in Sierra Leone with 34 years in office. Beyond the national government in Freetown, paramount chiefs are the only civil authorities in rural chiefdoms. I soon learned what a remarkable life he’s led as a traditional chief, war hero and national leader.

FRUIT TREES AS SALVATION

On that stifling afternoon on my third visit to Rotifunk, I forged a partnership with Chief Caulker to help him develop his chiefdom. I formed Sherbro Foundation, named for the historic local tribe, when Sierra Leone was still lifting its head from the trauma of civil war and another 10 years in the aftermath. In 2018, I received the NPCA’s Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service for my Sherbro Foundation work in supporting Chief Caulker’s vision of rebuilding his war-torn homeland.

Chief Caulker wants every child born in the chiefdom to receive a secondary school education, an ambitious goal for a nation in which 70 percent of the people cannot read or write. And he wants to move his people from abject poverty to self-reliance.

Chief Caulker waited many years for aid from his government or NGOs but eventually realized, “We must do this on our own.” He spoke to me in his soft but resolute manner. “We have an abundance of fertile land, water and our agriculture traditions. That must be our salvation.”

“When I grew up,” he said, “we had a tradition of growing fruit trees. Everyone had oranges, mangoes, bananas and coconuts to eat in their backyard garden. When a baby was born, the umbilical

cord was planted with a tree that became that child's tree. The small child could see the tree growing as he grew.

"Your grandparents helped you water the tree, and you grew up with a respect for the environment. I loved my coconut tree dearly. You learned if you took care of your trees, they would take care of you and feed your family for many years." But the tradition of planting trees for newborns was lost during the war and old trees neglected.

"We can use this tradition people love to show them, by raising fruit trees, not only can they eat the fruit, they can sell it and save the money. In 12 years, they'll have the money for their child's secondary school education."

That was the origin of our Orchards for Education Program.

► Charles Caulker's leadership of the Bumpah Chiefdom inspired RPCV Arlene Golembiewski's efforts to develop her former Peace Corps site through the Sherbro Foundation. Five years later Golembiewski won the Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service.

This year, Chief Caulker will have planted over 3,000 fruit trees on 45 acres outside Rotifunk, thanks to a Rotary Club grant. In three to four years, they'll yield tens of thousands of dollars in annual fruit profits, ensuring children's education for many years to come. The idea has spread across the chiefdom with farmers and households now planting their own trees.

BORN TO SERVE

At 24 years of age, Charles Caulker was ambitious and charismatic, a natural-born leader. He comes from one of the oldest ruling families that traces its dynasty to 1672 when a female ancestor married Thomas Corker, an Irishman sent by the British monarchy to start the first trading company on the Sierra Leone coast. The name morphed into Caulker and the dynasty has thrived 350 years as coastal Sherbro-land's traditional leaders.

Driven by his family's deep sense of public service and armed



with a bachelor's degree in political science and administration from Fourah Bay College, he became the Sierra Leone's youngest District Officer at the age of 30, administering the national government's law in one of 12 administrative districts.

He became Paramount Chief Caulker at just 35 with his father's untimely death. But it was Sierra Leone's rebel war that shaped him. To rise above the violence, chaos and corruption was a test of his principles and courage. He was one of the few paramount chiefs young and skilled enough to organize a rural civil defense unit to fight rebels where military and mercenary forces had failed them.

"We started fighting with nothing but sticks with nails on the end against rebels with guns and mortars," Chief Caulker told me. "We found ways to succeed in face of the impossible because we had to." Under his leadership, they prevailed. Some people called him Sierra Leone's Che Guevara, the educated guerilla leader and military strategist—minus the Marxism.

Chief Caulker served 11 years in Parliament where he chaired seven major committees. For his role in ending the war and reinstating democratic institutions he was awarded Sierra Leone's highest civilian honor, Grand Commander of the Order of Rokel. In 2018, the newly elected president, Julius Maada Bio, asked Chief Caulker to join his 11-member transition team.

LEADING CHANGE

Despite Chief's many accomplishments, here we still were, talking about how to move Bumpah Chiefdom out of abject poverty. It's hard to explain to Americans just how poor is "poor" in rural Sierra Leone. Farms and villages were abandoned for years during the war. People scavenged for wild yams and fruits. There has been only a trivial amount of money to re-build. Anyone with an education fled the Chiefdom and usually the country, creating a relentless brain drain. Bumpah Chiefdom's underdevelopment also stems from its location in inaccessible coastal wetlands. And it's been on the wrong side of the political fence, cut off from resources in a country still strongly influenced by tribal affiliation.

From our 2013 conversation under grapefruit trees came Bumpah Chiefdom's development plan. I clearly remember Chief's words: "We will work on small, beautiful things we can start quickly and have an immediate impact on improving the lives of our poorest people."

Chief Caulker formed his own community-led non-profit to direct the chiefdom's development agenda. The Center for Community Empowerment & Transformation (CCET) is authorized by the



► Bumpah Chiefdom seeks economic stability by returning to its roots in the orchards of the region. Chief Caulker looks over 5,000 orange tree seedlings that he believes will pay for tuition fees to increase literacy.

Bumpah Chiefdom Council of chiefdom leaders and village chiefs.

I followed the Peace Corps model of empowering a grassroots organization for community-led development. Sherbro Foundation supports CCET's lead with organizational consulting and seed money. In six years, CCET developed seven programs serving 8,000 of their poorest people. People eagerly participate in projects and work moves quickly.

THE FEMINIST PARAMOUNT CHIEF

When I asked in 2011 how I could help, Chief pointed to the first chiefdom all-girls school he had just started as his biggest need. "I want my granddaughters and all girls to get a good education at home."

Most girls here lack the \$25 to pay annual school fees. I paid fees for one school and then launched Sherbro Foundation's Girls' Scholarship Program, which has now awarded 1,700 scholarships to over 600 Bumpah Chiefdom girls in four schools. After six years, enrollment of chiefdom girls in junior high is at parity with boys, and they're moving towards the same for senior high.

For 20 years, no Bumpah student had ever passed the West African standardized school completion exams. Chief's center started a free tutoring program to prepare 100 girls for these exams to enter senior high or college. In 2016, three girls on Sherbro scholarships passed the exam and are attending college. The tutoring program and college scholarships we began in 2017 will ensure a steady stream of girls follows in their footsteps.

Reflecting now on six years of CCET education programs, Chief

said, “The programs are changing the lives of girls—giving them direction and ambition. Before, they didn’t know what their futures could be. With every year in school, they’re avoiding pregnancy and looking for partners who share their academic vision for the future.”

In Sierra Leone there is a saying that when you educate a girl, you educate the country. Educated women become the foundation for development with a virtuous circle of increased earning power and fewer, healthier, better-educated children.

I saw more and more examples of traditional barriers Chief has removed that kept women backward. I started referring to him as the Feminist Paramount Chief.

After seeing many women in abusive relationships and listening to countless family disputes in which a husband could end a marriage with

of foreign dollars poured into Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, the epidemic only grew.

One-year-old Sherbro Foundation supplied \$12,000 and Chief mobilized village chiefs to ban traditional burial practices of families washing bodies of the deceased. Local volunteers maintained iron-clad border control of Bumpah Chiefdom keeping out even returning residents, stopping the virus cold. Within one month at the epidemic’s peak, guidance from Chief Caulker’s National Council of Paramount Chiefs cut the country’s new Ebola case rate by 80 percent. The epidemic was soon extinguished.

IT TAKES ONLY PEANUTS

At the Ebola tragedy’s end, I asked Chief again, “How can we help?”

Chief said it was the women householders and small farmers who suffered the most in the epidemic, so he established one of CCET’s most successful economic projects. With Sherbro Foundation’s support, the Women’s Vegetable Growing Project offered women a \$30 bale of peanut seed they couldn’t afford, a tarp to dry the harvest and 100 pounds of rice to quickly feed their family. Within five months, their income was twice what they earned from 12 months of rice farming.

The result is women can better feed children, pay school fees without exorbitant loans, and pay for health care. Empowered to keep growing cash crops, 400 women participants have increased their incomes. Their lives and those of their family members totaling at least 2,000 have significantly improved.

Chief Caulker always has next-level goals. He plans to keep fostering fruit tree growing to develop the chiefdom’s local economy. In a few years, it should support fruit-based cottage industries like pulping and juicing. Fruit income will keep more girls, as well as boys, in school until they become an educated workforce that can attract investment.

And he wants to turn out six to ten young women college graduates a year for the chiefdom. “Do you know what an impact that will have?” he exclaims. We’ll have to keep planting more and more fruit trees to keep up with all of Chief’s goals.

Immediately after learning of my Shriver award, I called Chief to tell him, “I share this award with you.” With any development work, there’s two parts to the story. His on-the-ground grassroots-led work is by far the greater of our two parts. My Peace Corps experience taught me to first ask, “How can I help?” He always responds with clear and practical ideas that have improved the lives of thousands of people becoming models for other rural chiefdoms to replicate. Our partnership keeps getting stronger and more energized with each success. And with each new goal he sets. ●

Arlene Golembiewski taught school in Rotifunk, Sierra Leone, from 1974 to 1976 and later served as associate director of Global Health, Safety and Environment at Procter & Gamble. She founded the Sherbro Foundation Sierra Leone in 2013 and received NPCA’s 2018 Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service.

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a declaration and a small fee, Chief encouraged the women’s society to push for the same rights as men. With overwhelming demands from women, the chiefdom council passed bylaws for women to initiate dissolving their marriages. Next, he moved the council to give widows the right to inherit the property of their husbands.

FIGHTING AGAINST EBOLA

Sierra Leone has only one level of government, a highly centralized national government based in Freetown. Bumpah and two other chiefdoms totaling 100,000 people share only nine police officers. Most rural paramount chiefs are the only authority to maintain law and order and ensure security. They’re custodians of chiefdom land, the environment and customs.

In working with Chief, I’ve had a front-row seat in watching governance and development unfold in one of the most developing of developing countries.

Nowhere was it more evident than in the Ebola epidemic, an episode I wish I could have skipped. Frightened and helpless don’t begin to describe how we felt when the virus hit Bumpah Chiefdom and people died when no one knew what to do.

Chief went into battle mode and assessed the unseen enemy. He saw what Western experts did not see, or could not change, that no one was systematically breaking the chain of deadly virus transmission that had spread to the most remote corners of the nation.

“Arlene,” he told me one day, “it’s a behavioral management problem and only chiefs have the moral authority to stop the major source of transmission: traditional burials.” While millions