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Poems and Poets of Sierra Leone

Hannah Wells

Much of what we hear of Sierra Leone in the news brings to mind images of horror. A country terrorized by its own inhabitants is hard to understand. The greed of a few individual warlords, poverty, and a lack of opportunity conspire in Sierra Leone to create a society familiar with the unthinkable forms that violence can take. I begin with my own story of Sierra Leone.

I lived in Sierra Leone as a college student in the capital city of Freetown for six months in 1993-1994. At that time, the war was not anywhere near its present state of devastation, but the signs were there: soldiers with AK-47s, checkpoints, evening curfews, and a city swollen with refugees from the eastern and southern provinces of the country where the war was taking place. But since everything was new to me, there was no way to know how tenuous a peace the capital was enjoying.

I was lucky to have experienced this window of time with the people of Freetown. For me, Sierra Leone does not bring images of suffering but images of life, of people who found joy in the simple activities of daily life, who had a wonderful sense of humor, who were worried yet hopeful that their country would be steered in the right direction. I met sincere, intelligent, community-conscious and forthright people in Freetown, who were aware that their country was among the poorest in the world, and were concerned for their future.

Part of my responsibility as a student was to complete an individual project. My advisor suggested poetry, based on my interests, and explained that there were virtually no publishing houses in Sierra Leone, yet that didn't stop Sierra Leoneans from writing a lot of poetry. The goal was to create an anthology of poems, complete with individual biographies and poems. At first, the task seemed daunting, since I knew no poets and I had no phone. But that is one of the magical aspects of an African city: word of mouth. After I found the first poet, I had a new list of names to contact, and then those interviews produced more references. Typically, I would go to where the person worked or lived, enjoying the adventure of finding the place, and introduce

myself and what I was doing. Every person I approached was happy to participate because writing poetry was a talent they were proud of and they appreciated the attention given to it.

The people I interviewed, both men and women, were teachers, librarians, ministers, writers, business people, artists and government officials. The questions I asked in the interviews were open-ended so that the person could speak about what was most important to them. Many understood it was an opportunity to express their hopes and dreams, their cultural values, or their frustration with the government. Others saw it as a chance to express their sadness or their theories as to why the rest of the world pays so little attention to Africa. Each interview had a life of its own and by the time I returned to the United States, I had collected the works and biographies of over thirty poets. In this collection you will meet six of them.

Elvis Jacob Hallowell, 1965—

Elvis Jacob Hallowell draws on a defined inspiration to create his work. A self-aware and perceptive individual, he boldly communicates his ideas. "I have a dream for my writing. This dream also embodies the dream I have for my country. That her literature will stand prominent among world literature. It's time to feed the world with new values - Sierra Leonean values."

To discover the relationships of Sierra Leone's history and culture is Hallowell's sincere quest. His poetry is both autobiographical and soul-searching in regard to his people's national identity. "I refuse to come to terms with my country's history.... I write about my country's historical figures. I condemn the fratricidal brother. I blame the elder generation. I write about my country's politicians who damage the country. And I write about the unborn child who is to inherit it all."

Hallowell calls for a re-examination of the self. "My poems are calling for the urgent revision of my country's history. If it reflects the true story of her past, my generation shall inherit a rich legacy. Sierra Leoneans must consider themselves unique because they are Sierra Leoneans while others are not; and because of that the whole world waits to see what the Sierra Leonean dream is."

When asked about any sources of discouragement, he discussed the severe shortage of publishers but made clear this situation could not impede his efforts. "I remember Toni Morrison saying in an interview, 'so even if publishing did grind to a halt, I would continue to write.'" He awaits the publication of his first collection of poems, The Sierra Leone I Love.

Hallowell grew up and was educated in Kenema. Currently he works for the United States Information Service Library and continues to write poetry and essays. "When I go out to the streets, I look at the hopeful faces of my countrymen and write a poetry of hope."

My Eyes Are No Mirror

They look at the whole of you
behind your black skin
beyond your new name
rooted in the baobab me
behind your grand ancestors' hut
and tell you when the gods
will meet to exile you

My eyes look beyond shadows
they are no mirror
they see and study reflections
of all black twins
bathed in stagnant water
and tell who the gods so love

My eyes see the first wind
that blows against new black babies
my eyes know what it leaves with them
and what it takes from them

My eyes look between parents
and see how many seeds are there
how many will sprout
how many will germinate

My eyes are no mirror
these eyes that travel above
African lands each black night
with their own torches
that see behind dark nocturnes

In the Middle of My Journey, I Paused

The naked white star
has fallen into the calabash
and the water inside it has tamed black
and the star incapable of reverberating
sinks to the bottom clothed in its whiteness
and I go dipping all my body into it fingerwards
I immerse into the dark water mouthing my name
seeking the root of my birth
in the fragmented star glittering in the woods
in the water like a fish I'm making my change
I'm pushing deep-ward
I'm dipping forward
journeying into the womb of my past
the womb of the past
the mother who sipped the sweet water of my father
saw the white star in my eyes the moment I was born
she cried laughing
she laughed crying
thinking of the years to come
when her son shall drink of Abel's blood

I am in the middle of my journey

I shall take a man to give me a wife
a wife to give me a son
a son to make me a man
all these shall come to pass
in these my salt-water days
or so I dream in the class of an exile
who listens to all that is evoked, behind huge living stones
my days are full of drownings
the fire and the rainbow cannot be reflected
in the calabash of my black water
and what I now reflect
are those who flattered me through and through
starting with my parents who hid behind me
white-washing our values

She Carries It On Her Head Sideways

She carries it
on her head sideways
along the single path
of green and brown
which snakes
the future of her legs

Far ahead
the old sun
shapes her a new day
on the heads of tall trees
whose within
couch simple ideas
refreshed by green leaves
in her cloying sierra

She has
no mind of her's to follow
all she does is
take the autocratic road
like all operational women
she walks
in and out of her memory
her ingrowing memory inconspicuously

Over the years
she has formed an island
with an insularity of shaded views
and its invertebrate myth
curl inwards rising to equal her myopia

Her weary life
of calabash breaks in shreds
but then she gathers the bits under her soft breath
and on its broken map
she begins another journey
on the ghostly weft of the long jagged sierra

Abdoul Madhieu Savage, 1960 -

Abdoul Madhieu Savage's talents are spread over a wide range of public services. He earned a certificate in Philosophy at FBC and now teaches several classes in the Philosophy Department. He is editor of *The Liberty Voice* newspaper and a member of the Public Relations Committee of the NPRC. He has been writing for most his life, initially encouraged by a critical paper contest for which he won first prize in primary school.

What inspires him as an adult is what he sees as the critical "need to emancipate man - not just the African man." His aim is a society of equals. In relating this idea to others, Savage tries to create a punch by simply describing the present human condition. "This can be best expressed through poetry because it's piercing and touches the heart as music expresses emotions, oral poetry is part and parcel of the African soul and culture: there's poetry in our songs and music, in the beats of the talking drum."

Another aspect of emancipation is looking at the past. "Looking at the backgrounds of our coming into being - as a country or a continent - will help us to find insights into problems and how to solve them." Savage says he supports finding the truth in political circumstances. He thinks about "the way Sierra Leoneans live their ordinary lives. Every human situation has the capacity for producing the stimulus to write poetry."

Savage has published short stories and poems in a West Africa magazine, written two plays, and has won awards in essay competitions.

Only Their Machines Grind

Only their machines grind
Only their children smile
While with jangled nerves we toil
In tattered sacks spurting sweat
That rolls off our fly-paraded backs

Only we conjure despair
Only our guts know hunger
Only our chests protest queues
That hassle us each day
To our honourable graves

Then the beleaguered sun cracks
And battles rage and ravage
Many their number linger in comers
Some huddled in gutters
Reduced to mere spiteful hawks

As their whole world sank
Master and servant dined together

Sham Retreat

When they first sailed across the Atlantic
Painting our sky with lousy looping smoke
Grey heads pontified on our sameness

As the dubious dialogue began
We settled for far less than they got:
for pipes and Bibles we lost our essence

We shuffled to the shrines
And quarried the stones
with which we erected angelic statues
And laid cornerstones

We sawed the hallow trees
From thence we carved the cross
Then we worshipped neither trees nor stones
And the Zakat provided a choice
But behind the crescents and crosses
We poised with machetes
From the same smithereens

Then the ship came again
with their lethal creations
Toxic waste ... they say:
A treacherous waste of our resources

If she has returned home
It's only a sham retreat
Soon she will come reviving again
For their scenery is too serene

Julius Spencer, 1955 –

Julius Spencer began his schooling at Jalloh University to earn a Bachelor of Arts as an English major. He proceeded to the University of Abijan in Nigeria to earn a Master of Arts in 1982, then a Ph.D in Theater Arts in 1988. Today he is the country's official Information Minister.

Although he is no longer a practicing poet, Julius Spencer is an important figure in the arts movement of Sierra Leone. He wrote poetry many years ago, before he became a major playwright and essayist.

His involvement with Tabule Theater in 1977 is what encouraged him to explore poetry and dramatization. His writing has been inspired by a desire to artistically express his emotional reactions to social and physical conditions in his country. "I am disturbed by the socio-political situation - all writing has been in that direction, even in the theater."

African Woman

Your body as smooth as silk,
Your skin not the colour of milk.
You may be the colour of ebony,
But woman, we adore you.

Swaying to the rhythm of jungle drums,
Dancing to the beat of Bondo drums,
Moving in a crowd of masqueraders,
African woman, we adore you.

Grinding pepper on a stone,
Pounding foofoo all alone,
Wielding a hoe with apparent ease,
African woman, we adore you.

A child strapped to your back,
Moving along the market track,
A baby sucking your breast,
African woman, we adore you.

As carefree as a weaver bird,
Moving to the rhythm from the bed,
Providing all a man would need,
African woman, we adore you.

Defiled you have always been,
"Civilization," they say, you have never seen,
For you, we shall fight and die,
African woman, we adore you.

An African's Plea

My skin is black,
My lips are thick,
My nostrils are wide,
My jawline is pronounced,
Therefore,
I am a negro.
I prefer the guitar to the Bata,
I love the coat more than the Ronko,
I relish whisky more than palm wine,
I would rather have nothing
Instead of what is mine,
But,
I am black and a negro.
I know all about Europe,
I know all about America,
But for the land of the black man,
I claim ignorance.
I can play the piano
And can dance the waltz,
But I can't shake the Shegureh
Nor dance the Gumbay,
Yet,
I am black and in Africa.
Therefore,
Let me live
And think like an African,
Let contradiction,
Uncertainty
And confusion
Be of the past.
Teach me to be an African,
For I was created so to be.
May the spirits of Nkrumah
And Bai Bureh
Sustain me.
May the goodwill of my ancestors

Be with me
In the search for myself,
And
May the power of the black man
Give me the strength and courage
To rise up and say,
I am an African.

Syl Cheney-Coker, 1945 -

Sierra Leone is very proud of their internationally acclaimed poet and writer, Syl Cheney-Coker. He originally intended to become a journalist and attend the University of Oregon for an undergraduate degree. But his aspiration was altered when he started writing poetry in his third year of college. By the time he completed his Master of Arts program at the University of Wisconsin in 1971, he had been published in several American literary journals. His first poetry manuscript was published in England in 1973. His second and third books of poetry were published in 1980 and 1990. Cheney-Coker is now living in Las Vegas, Nevada in a safe-haven for writers.

He explains that each book grew out of a single idea. *Concerto for an Exile* was a personal analysis of his Sierra Leonean identity, particularly in regard to his country's unique history. *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* was more personal as he mourned the loss of several family members. "In mourning my own tragedies I found empathy with others, thereby universalizing the pain." The element of universalism was further expanded in *The Blood in The Desert's Eyes*, which featured a broad range of common ideas.

It is interesting to note that since Syl switched to prose writing with his first novel *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (also published in 1990), he has not written any poetry. His theory of this phenomenon is that his three stages of poetry writing were personally therapeutic. They represent a progression of ideas and involvement to which he does not wish to return. "The 'I' of the first book was the self. By the third book, the 'I' submerged into 'we.'" What used to come more naturally has, in a sense, completed itself. "I've grown less intolerant of myself," he says. "I've mastered the agony of life."

The following three poems are from his Wisconsin days when he submitted his work to an African perspective magazine called *Ba Shiru*.

Misery of the Convert

A Protestant

I swore I would be chaste
to worship Mary the virgin of saints
my sex is a sterile seed in the wind
it has the sickness of my soul
Christ I have your vanity in my head
century to century summer to summer
ocean to ocean continent to continent
I carry the blessings of your rape
I was king before they nailed you on the cross
converted I read twelve lies in your silly commandments
to honour you my Christ
when you have deprived me of my race

I remember one night
dreaming in a missionary house
I had driven the ancestors out
spitting at their tomtom Gods
I was sane
only when king George died
Sunday was a present for me
grandmother drooling in her room
beneath the shadow of king George
did not begrudge the treats
all in the name of the lord
- one pair of shoes
- one pair of socks
- one pair of shorts

I did not know that to be a Creole and a saint
meant to have sung the ballad of your grief
when the savior himself did not rejoice

Christ you must have been a peasant in your time
you died naked on your cross
it was the church that made you a landowner

and built you a catholic empire
tell me how many slaves you had
I have the asientos memorized in my head

How many burnt offerings do I owe
you my color blind Christ
America eighty percent white
sixty percent black in your gas chambers
don't play on my susceptibility to pray
I have had enough of your forgiveness
I have not fared well against the army of your saints
give me time
four centuries are a long time
to be drunk with your passion my Christ
asking will somebody
tell me my people's name.

2 a.m.

I walk on the streets of New York
and gaze at the moon in her sleep
in this my long exile my wandering exile
my feet have their prints in the sun
I do not remember my own name
as I wander on these treacherous paths
Oh moon you my constant companion
on these perilous streets
hour after hour we have kept the constant vigil
but tell me who will open my people's eyes
the crucified Jew
Christ I have not known
the alter of your prayer
these four years
my madness has blessed my Creole head
I have never known
how to honor my father's name
because I am a Voodoo child
so I wander on these alien roads
Night black night
you the better half of my race
make me not a victim of these vagabond feet
so that my worthless blood
may not be spilled on the hard soil of America.

Agony of the Dark Child

I came to my mother
seeking the warmth of her breasts
she was frightened.
you see, I was dark -
too dark my grandmother lamented
from the pharmacy
medicated bars of soap
drops of oil, drippings of water
and ornamented cures
for the naked body
she was frightened
she told me
I was too dark.

Thomas Decker, 1916 - 1978

Thomas Decker is posthumously becoming a hero. Though his political involvement tarnished his reputation in the eyes of many of his countrymen, some are re-evaluating his contributions to Sierra Leone now that the APC era is past. If one looks at his ideas and the conviction he possessed to demonstrate these ideas, his love for his country becomes apparent.

After teaching in Freetown for 18 months, Decker began his career as a writer and journalist. When he eventually became editor of the *Daily Guardian*, he had already earned a somewhat radical reputation. During this time, he also worked his way up the civil service department ladder.

It was in the *Daily Guardian* that Decker found his forum to discuss the present status of the Krio language. Around the world at that time, negative attitudes toward the various forms of pidgin and creole English flourished. Decker had the pioneering courage to explore the possibility that Krio is a legitimate language unto itself.

In Neville Shrimpton's article, "Thomas Decker and the Death of Boss Coker," he wrote, "During the latter half of 1939 Decker's agile mind was to move quickly and incisively over a number of central problems: What was Krio? Was it bad English? Was it the same as Pidgin English? Was it definable as a separate language system? Did it have any future? Could it be written? Should it be written? If it was to be written, how should it be spelled? On the whole the conclusions he came to in these months are now generally accepted."

Decker put these conclusions into action in several ways. He was the architect of the first Krio spelling system apart from an imitative English spelling. He slated portions of the Bible and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* into Krio, later produced a Krio performance of the play, and wrote several of his own Krio poems. Perhaps his most poignant artistic argument was in his play *Boss Coker before St. Peter*. Boss Coker was refused admittance to heaven because he insisted on speaking English when it was Krio that he spoke best.

But for the Colonist-cultivated Krio aristocracy, who believed that in order for Sierra Leone to grow the people must speak English, Decker's ideas were degrading. From their viewpoint, Decker

was an enemy of national progress. This was Decker's cue to point out the far-reaching ramifications of his argument. For he was not only arguing for the sake of the language, but for the sake of the culture intertwined with the language.

Although in many cases Thomas Decker had to suffer for his beliefs, he would have been consoled to see the progress Sierra Leone has made. As his son said, "If he were alive today, he would be happy. Krio is being taught in schools, it's on radio and TV, people are, writing poetry and plays with it." Indeed, everywhere we look, Krio is blossoming before our eyes.

Yestadey, Tidey en Tumara

Yestadey jes tan lek den sai
wey den dey kip fayasai asis.
Yabas kanda en af-af kol
en ohl kanaba tin lib dey.

Di bad tin pas ohl wey lib dey
na plenti blak-blak en asis.
If yu sheyk dem tumohs tumohs,
dohti go kohba ohl di pleys.

A tink na debut get bes-pat pan yestadey.

Tidey na lek fain daiamohn
wey dem gi yu foh yusefsef.
I lek yu wer am oh sel am,
na yu wan go meyk ohp yu maind.

So teyk tem foh meyk ohp yu maind;
duya wach au di go dey go
en du weytin yu wan foh du
wit ohl yu at en ohl yu sol.

Tidey, fain-fain tidey, na yu en Gohd get am.

Tumara in jes tan lek drim.
Sohntem di drim Idn kam bi tru;
sohntem natin noh dey pan am.
Pan ohl dat man kant tap foh drim.

Boht ohl di seym foh trai foh drim
swit drim nohmoh boht tumara
en abop sey ohl dem drim ya
dem ohl go kam bi tr-u bambai.

Na mankain drim en Gohd nohmoh get tumara.

Moses Kainwo, 1955 -

The outspoken Moses Kainwo grew up to become a Methodist Minister. His religious training was acquired at the Sierra Leone Theological Hall and Church Training Centre and Fourah Bay College. Currently he works for Action Aid, a British NGO.

Moses admits to his Christian bias and advisory flavor in his poetry. "Every poem of mine is didactic," he says.

Moses' objective is to get his readers to search themselves "for all the good in them." Common themes include learning not to blame others when things go wrong, instead seeking your own role in the error, or speaking for your own rights rather than waiting for someone to speak for you.

Both music and quiet inspire him to write, but he says his greatest source of inspiration is anger. Kainwo's longest poem "Beautiful Land" was written at FBC in July of 1990 as a response to the political situation "in an outburst of anger." He concludes with, "Poetry is my way of telling the world what I think of the world, because the tone of speaking is too harsh."

Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh

dear mr sun-core

hold

i know your lenses are blind to kaflondo's staff

i know your wavelength is deaf to kauondo's voice

but hold

innocent blood queries my throat

please field marshal

please president of next world

please chief justice of injustice

hold

touch wood

grant the insane your sanity

grant the cocoa your freedom

grant the unborn your hope

please mr sun-core

hold

and let the handshake speak