

Colonial Life, Independence and War in Sierra Leone

by Rebecca King Dyasi

Introduction: Sierra Leone is a small country on the west coast of Africa with a population of a little over 5 million people. It is a very diverse society. Approximately 40% of the people are Islamic, 35% are Christian and 20% practice indigenous religions. Its largest African ethnic groups are the Temne and Mende and there are small Creole, European, Lebanese and Asia communities. The national literacy rate is less than 25% and most of the population is poor. The main industries are agriculture (palm oil, coffee and cocoa), light manufacturing and mining (diamonds, bauxite and iron ore). The struggle to control the diamond and bauxite mines is behind much of the recent national conflict. , Sierra Leone was a colony of Great Britain, who maintained control until independence was declared in 1961. Since independence, it has been governed by a series of military governments. Sierra Leone's only democratically elected government took office in 1996, but it held power for less than a year. During the 1990s, Sierra Leone was torn apart by a vicious war to gain control over its diamond mines.

I was born in November, 1944 on the island of Bonthe in Sierra Leone. At the time, my country was a colony of Great Britain. Bonthe was a peaceful island with lots of nesting seabirds and turtles and big ship building yards. It was the port for the city of Freetown and an important stop on the shipping routes along the Atlantic coast between Europe and the Cape of Good Hope. For centuries, ships stopped there for fresh water.

My mother and father were farmers who branched out into other occupations. My father had attended the British secondary school in Freetown, the capital city. A respected tribal elder, he was appointed by the chief as a local court judge. My mother managed a small dry goods shop on the mainland in the village of Jangalo. She sold fabric, kerosene, lamps and hardware; everything but food. We would travel from Bonthe to Jangalo in a little wood dug-out boat loaded with farm products, mainly palm nuts, palm oil and palm fronds, which we used to make brooms for export.

Growing up in Sierra Leone, I learned to speak a number of languages. My father's principle language was Shabu and my mother spoke Mende, so I had to learn both of these languages. Because we traveled to other areas and had to communicate with different people, I also learned to speak Temne, Creole and English.

My Family

I am from a large extended family and we had relatives all over the region. My father had two wives and a total of fifteen children. He was also one of twelve

children. My mother had twelve children, but four died when they were very young. I am her youngest. Because my mother was my father's first wife, I was considered the daughter of both of them. They lived in neighboring villages and I would do chores for both households.

While I attended school I lived with different family members. As a young child, an aunt brought me to Freetown where I went to elementary school, which we called "boxing school." Once, I traveled with a niece of my father to the town of Matrué where I helped sell trade goods and attended a boarding school. Later, I returned to Bonthe and went to a school operated by American missionaries.

Because Sierra Leone was a British colony, children were educated using a standard British curriculum and the teachers were mainly from Great Britain. When we studied history, we studied the history of England, Europe and the British Commonwealth. The only time we learned about Africa was when we studied Europe's involvement. Schools flew the British flag and tests were written by and shipped from the education department in England. Students attended primary school for six years and then went to secondary school. At the end of secondary school, we took a difficult 11th plus exam which determined whether you could continue your education and what subjects you would study.

The independence movement in Sierra Leone began after World War II. Some of the men fought in that war and they learned more about what was going on in the rest of the world. Because of its natural port, ships

from all over the world arrived in Sierra Leone during the war. This contributed to opening up people's eyes and a consciousness favoring independence started to develop. My first memory of the independence movement was a political rally I stumbled into accidentally while in Freetown in 1950 or 1951. I was about seven years old and was sent by an older cousin on an errand to purchase cigarettes. I happened upon this enormous crowd on Adelaide Street, not far from the police station, where a labor union leader named Shaka Stevens was giving a speech. Stevens helped to build a united labor movement in Sierra Leone and later became president of the country.

I was a high school student at a mission school in 1961 when the country finally secured independence. I had to walk a mile and a half to the school and I witnessed constant protests against British colonial rule. Often there were strikes and rioting as workers complained about low pay and demanded independence. I still remember the day when the missionaries had us lower the British flag and raise the new flag of Sierra Leone. While there was much anticipation, many of us were not sure what independence would bring and uncertain about the future.

University Education

Because I did well on my school exams, I was able to attend the university in the city of Jala where I studied to become a Biology and Earth Science teacher. This university was affiliated with the University of Illinois in the United States. After graduation, I was hired by the university to help start a teacher's center where we would prepare new teachers and develop our own educational curriculum for Sierra Leone. The excitement of independence spilled over into the school system and we were thinking how we could draw on local ideas and resources to enhance and enrich science education.

The first time I left Sierra Leone was in the academic year 1969-1970 when I went to London to advance my education. When I

returned home I got married, started teaching in a teaching training college and then taught science in a secondary school until 1978. My husband is from South Africa and he has a Ph.D. in science education. He was invited to teach in the United States at Illinois University. While we were there I earned both my Master's degree and Ph.D.

From the beginning, there were tensions in our new country, especially between the Creoles that lived in the Freetown area and the rest of the country. Because of these tensions, Sierra Leone has been ruled by my military governments for most of its history as a nation. The Freetown people were not originally from Sierra Leone. They were ex-slaves from Nova Scotia who had been resettled in Africa by the British. One of my grandfathers was a descendant of the freed Africans but when he married my grandmother he moved into the interior and joined her people.

Civil War

The problems that led to civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s had their roots in a civil war in neighboring Liberia. The boundary between Sierra Leone and Liberia was drawn by the colonial powers and it is arbitrary. There is no real border, so some people actually sleep in a home in one country while they farm in the next. Many refugees from the Liberian civil war came to Sierra Leone and Freetown became very crowded. Sierra Leone also attracted mercenaries from Liberia who were searching for food and supplies and hoping to find diamonds. The influx of refugees and mercenaries added to the tension between the different regions of Sierra Leone. People in the inland part of the country felt they were not represented in the government and were not as developed economically as Freetown. Soon Sierra Leone was plunged into civil war as well. At the center of the conflict was the struggle to control the diamonds.



Panning for diamonds. Source:
www.cnn.com

A major problem facing Sierra Leone and other African nations today is that the wealth of these nations is usually not owned by its people. The diamond, bauxite and titanium mines of Sierra Leone are owned by foreign companies. The titanium mines are destroying the environment in Sierra Leone, especially the rich farmland, forest area and fresh water of the coastal region.

As a result of the mining, the area is being overrun by the sea and the American owners do not seem to care. When the mining companies leave, nothing is left and the people become very disgruntled. In Sierra Leone, the economic and political system does not seem to be working for the benefit of the people of the country. I am not sure who to blame, but I know the system is not working.

It Was A Horrible Time

by Mariama Bah

I was born in Freetown, the capital city of Sierra Leone, in 1987. I lived there with my mother, my sister and my brother. My father went to the United States to find work.

While I was still a young girl, there was a civil war in Sierra Leone between the “village” people and the “city” people. It was a horrible time. The rebels were from the villages. They walked around with rifles, cursing at people. If they caught someone they did not like, they cut off the person’s hand, a foot, or sometimes both hands.

My neighbor was captured by the rebels. They gave him a choice. They said that they would either cut off both of his hands or kill both of his children. He had them cut off his hands. Now he can do nothing for himself. His wife must feed him and wash him.

When the rebels came, my mother took us to hide in the hills. We walked for two days without food and water. When we went home we found that our house was burned down. My father’s younger brother was dead.

We came to the United States to live with my father in Brooklyn. I heard that the civil war was fought over diamonds. I do not know if it is really true.