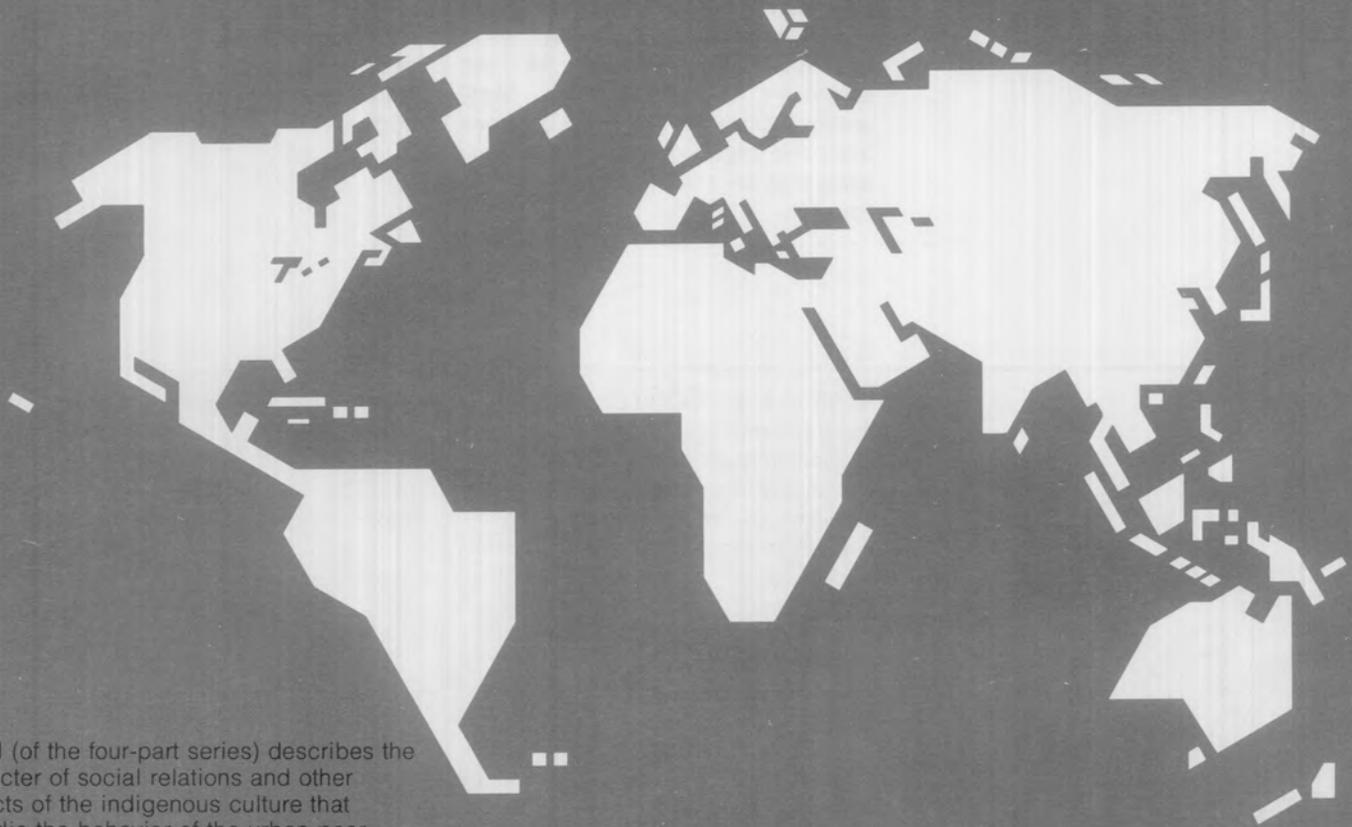


The Unofficial Urban Courts in Freetown  
Part II: Conditions of Life and the  
Culture of the Urban Poor

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



Part II (of the four-part series) describes the character of social relations and other aspects of the indigenous culture that underlie the behavior of the urban poor. Three Freetown residents report their observations of conditions that produce the need for litigation.

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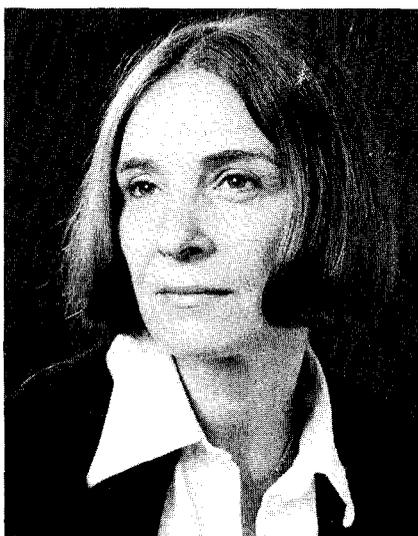
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The first in this series of *AUFS Reports* on the unofficial courts in Freetown developed the history of the institutionalization of tribal headmen. The position of headman had its roots in the sociopolitical culture of the people of the Sierra Leone hinterland who migrated throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the city of Freetown, bringing with them the traditions and customs of rural society. Since the imposed institutions of the colonizers were relatively impermeable, the ethnic communities constructed a new basis for urban social interaction that relied heavily on the norms and values with which they were familiar. The economic pressures and the character of life in the city required considerable innovative skills and traditional patterns were transformed. It is, nevertheless, necessary to understand some of the fundamental principles of this traditional culture in order to appreciate the importance of the unofficial courts to the majority of Freetown residents.

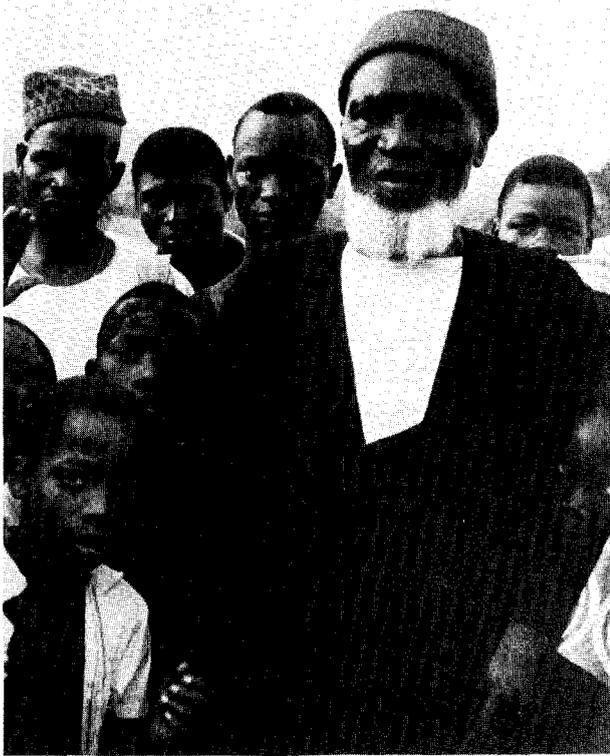
This Report explores aspects of the organization of social relations among urban Africans. Perhaps what has been described as the over-litigious character of African society, when understood against the background of traditional values, will suggest that African leaders would be well-advised to encourage the persistence of many aspects of their own culture and institutions and to reject the intrusion of alien values.

The Krio saying "Place no dae wey beg man no dae" (there is no community of people, no matter how small, without a leader), expresses a principle of interpersonal relations reflecting the society's need for a leader who is available to hear and settle disputes. We know that conflict and

disputes are endemic to social relations in every society; West Africans have devised a pattern of authority and rules for interpersonal relations to cope with their own peculiar problems.

Social, economic, and political relations in the indigenous rural society all have at their core the ties of kinship. In a village, each person belongs to what is commonly described as an extended family. A family consists of all the people who can trace a relationship to one another through birth or marriage. This family system provides for the recruitment, nurture, socialization, and allocation of social status of each member at each stage of his life. Whatever crisis an individual might face, the solution is to be found within the structure of the extended family. Even the wider political structure of the village and chiefdom is understood in the idiom of kinship. Families are themselves linked through marriage.

When two people meet, there are only two bases for determining their behavior to each other: they are either kinsmen or strangers. Much information is encoded in the terms of address. When they determine their relationship within the system, they will know how to behave. The kinship terminology (or terms of address) dictates the code of behavior any individuals must adopt in their relationship even if they have never met before. The term "stranger" does not carry negative connotations but the rules for a stranger's behavior are also related to his state of "unrelatedness" to the community. He will, if he enters a village, present himself to the village chief and state the reason for his presence there. He customarily gives a small gift or "shakehand" and if the chief accepts it, he signifies that he has



*Authority is vested in the elders. The older one becomes the more respect others pay.*

accepted responsibility for the stranger's presence in the village. Everyone will be told about it and, if the stranger remains, he will be allocated some land for his farm and, sooner or later, will be linked into the village community through marriage.

A very important aspect of this family system which encourages its maintenance and stability is the authority vested in the elders. The older one becomes the more respect is due from others. When a person dies and becomes an ancestor, his relationship to the living is crucial because ancestors serve as mediators between the living and God. Thus the older the individual, the closer he is to becoming one of the ancestors upon whose goodwill the well-being of the society depends.

The economy of rural Sierra Leone is based on subsistence agriculture: the people manage to produce most of the things necessary for their survival. The cooperation required by a subsistence economy has the effect of suppressing individualism, and everyone must submit to the authority of the community. The prestige system

of such a society might be regarded as being completely upside down by the more materialist in our own society. Those most admired and respected are not individuals who have amassed wealth for their own use; on the contrary, admiration attaches to those people with a reputation for unstinting generosity. Positions of highest status belong to those with the greatest number of people dependent upon them for support and favor.

Conformity to the norms and values of the indigenous culture is encouraged by a complex system of religious beliefs and sanctions, and by the very nature of village living arrangements. With houses in close proximity and the intimate contact engendered by working conditions, privacy is virtually unattainable. As a result, the individual's behavior is continually subject to the scrutiny of others. Nonconformist action is likely to evoke immediate disapproval or reprimand.

Because of this face-to-face character of social life, every situation of conflict at once involves many people and the need to resolve all disputes is obvious. Tensions that arise and are allowed to fester become a threat to the community's survival and could easily lead to the splitting of a group. Rules for the settlement of conflicts and disputes are designed to restore social harmony and village unity. The principles of adjustment and compensation to "cool the heart" are regarded as most important. The individual is responsible to the community for his behavior and similarly the community is responsible for the individual's.

The modern phenomenon of the "battered child" could not occur in such a setting, as I discovered through personal experience. When my son misbehaved on a particular occasion, I decided that "paddling" him was the appropriate treatment. I was in the kitchen and so I took the nearest thing at hand, a wooden spoon, and was about to apply it for the second time when our steward grabbed my hand and prevented any further punishment. (I was also to discover later that this act could not be considered presumptuous.)<sup>1</sup> All parents are expected to become angry

1. The steward would probably have restrained himself from interfering in the quarrel with my son had I not used a wooden spoon. Spoons, according to indigenous categories, are "female objects" and to hit a male child with a spoon is believed to endanger his later virility.



*In the village, privacy is virtually unattainable, the individual's behavior is continually subject to the scrutiny of others.*

with their children from time to time. In the village, as much rage as one likes may be expressed; but before any physical harm could come to the child, others will have arrived on the scene to interfere—as did my steward.

The rules of dispute treatment are based upon the kinship system. When any quarrel—however trivial—occurs, it always involves others, who serve as intermediaries. A minor issue will be dealt with by the head of the family or some other elder in the group. A more serious dispute will be taken to the elders of the village and the village chief. If a conflict involves wider issues or is so serious that the village chief cannot solve it, it will be heard by the Paramount Chief (the government appointed head of a larger geographical area). Today one may even find people taking cases to Siaka Stevens, the President, for settlement, if these other agencies have failed.

Even if a husband and wife have a disagreement, it is not settled by direct communication between them: other relatives intervene and mediate. If, for example, a husband has for some reason been angered by his wife, he will not usually inform her directly; he will simply refuse to eat the food she has prepared. Instead of asking him for an explanation, she will go to someone older within the family whom they both respect, and tell this person that her husband is refusing to eat. This relative will approach the husband for an explanation. This kind of quarrel will usually be resolved only after several relatives

have become involved and the issues thoroughly discussed. Finally a resolution will be imposed upon them.

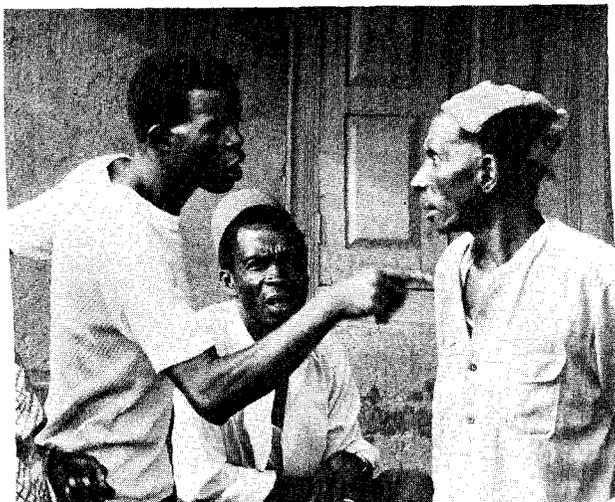
In an argument where two people resort to fighting or shouting at one another, the same process of intervention occurs. Usually, however, the complainant in a dispute reports his case to the intermediary by giving a token sum of money. When the intermediary approaches the other party he will receive a similar sum of money from him. One of the functions of this payment is to bind both parties to keep the peace until the issue is settled. Another aspect of this payment is that, by giving it, both acknowledge their respect for the person who has been asked to hear the dispute and their willingness to submit to his authority.

When referring to the settlement of a dispute between a husband and wife I used the phrase “a resolution will be imposed upon them.” Although the manner in which an intermediary and other elders will deal with a dispute is designed to reconcile the parties, in the final analysis the community also takes responsibility for its decisions as a group. This is perhaps best illustrated by a case which I observed.

My friends Bernadette and Joe invited me to lunch. When I arrived, Joe was at his office and I found his wife engaged in packing her things to leave him. I learned that Joe's girlfriend had arrived that morning at the house and told Bernadette that she had just given birth to a son. As Bernadette had given birth only to daughters, this was an extremely humiliating encounter for her. She was, quite understandably, enraged and moved with her little girls to her father's house.

Some days later representatives of both families met to discuss the problem. Joe's behavior was paraded before both his and Bernadette's family and he was severely reprimanded and advised to keep his girlfriend away from the house. Bernadette was advised to move back home and resume her duties as wife and mother. When I asked Bernadette why she was moving back, she replied simply, “They told me to.”

It should not be presumed that she was doing anything other than what she knew was in her best interest. She valued her status as a married woman in Freetown society. Since her husband



*"Every situation of conflict involves many people. The need to resolve all disputes is obvious."*

had been humiliated in this public meeting of relatives, she did not need to conduct her own program of punishment. They were there to protect her interests in any future quarrel. The relatives, likewise, had assumed responsibility for the couple. By asking Bernadette to return, they had assured her that they would take responsibility for Joe's good behavior in the future. They would be watching him closely and as long as she behaved properly, she could count on them to monitor his actions.

The procedures of dispute treatment, as we shall see in the last two of this series of Reports, are more concerned with reconciliation of warring parties than with application of strict legal principles of right and wrong. The maintenance of cooperation in an economy based upon subsistence agriculture requires that people are able to work in intimate, face-to-face relationships and continue to do so even if they have been involved in a serious conflict. This is quite different from our own society where conflicts that receive the publicity of a court hearing usually lead to total estrangement between the individuals involved. Our own patterns of social organization in modern cities allow us to continue earning our living and leading our daily lives even if we are alienated from a person with whom we have had a dispute. The psychological costs, however, are in many cases very high indeed.

Once Sierra Leoneans move into the city, relationships are no longer primarily with their own kinsmen and the authority of the family becomes attenuated. At the same time, the conditions of life require cooperation, and there is considerable interdependency among migrants. People find themselves no less dependent upon some mechanism for resolving tensions and open conflicts than they were in the face-to-face society of the village and, moreover, they have been socialized throughout their childhood to respond to behavior in terms of their culture.

Unfortunately, the very physical conditions in which they live tend to give rise to discord. In crowded compounds with shared facilities between unrelated people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, it is common to find 20 sharing one pit latrine and one outdoor kitchen. Low wages, high unemployment, and a wide disparity in standards of living between the vast majority of the population and the elite, all exacerbate interpersonal tensions.

Migrants, therefore, attempt to reproduce the indigenous cultural patterns and the customary kinship model of interpersonal relations on fellow householders. A compound is usually organized, with the landlord or an elder resident serving the function of head of the family, even though the residents are unrelated. Neighborhoods also have their specified figures of authority. The most important arbitrator is the tribal headman (described in Part I). His authority is demonstrated by the general consensus that he has the right and the responsibility to decide cases and impose resolutions to conflicts.

As part of my research in Sierra Leone, several assistants were asked to submit, in writing, their observations of the household where they lived and of others in the area with which they were familiar. These descriptions portray aspects of life among the urban poor in Freetown more vividly than any outsider could ever hope to do. For this reason, they are reproduced as an Appendix in their original text.

What emerges from all three is a keen eye for detail and a lucid perception of the environment. Individually their findings are different in some respects—as, perhaps, are their characters per se. If the first two are studious and painstaking in



*"The conditions of urban life require cooperation and there is a considerable amount of interdependency among migrants."*

their approach, they are complemented by the flamboyant style and art of the raconteur in the third.

Before reading them in the Appendix, it is helpful to examine a number of passages that help delineate some of the salient themes. "Not all the occupants of my household are directly related to the landlord... nevertheless, he treats us all with one heart," enthuses the first writer. The landlord, as a father figure, is entitled to "beat the children when they do wrong" and with the older folk he uses "insulting words on them," but his superiority is unquestioned: "...we fear him and treat him with great respect."

The second observer notes that in his household "the landlord acts as arbiter and judge in all disputes," and that although there had been clashes with tenants, no dispute had ever had to be "settled outside the household." He adds that "rent is probably the chief cause of complaint"—and this may have some significance, in the light of the first writer's comment that, in his case, "the whole house is rent-free and all the occupants are dependents of the landlord."

In both instances, the landlord—in a vicarious urban role of the rural headman—remains dominant over the family (or those living beneath his roof), albeit with some consequent modification dictated by the circumstances and with a possible challenge to his overall discretion in all matters.

The comments on privacy—or the lack of it—are enlightening. In each case, the landlord and his immediate relations have their own self-defined quarters, and, in one of them, separate toilet facilities for the owner family and "important visitors or strangers." In this household, it is claimed that the "amount of privacy is quite evident in this compound," which is fenced, with only two points of access from outside. Nor is anyone allowed to enter "somebody else's room without the owner's knowledge." It is worth remembering, however, that the writer shares his bedroom with four others, and this precludes any personal retreat into real privacy.

The second house described was apparently constructed with privacy in mind, but "more often than not this aim is not fulfilled." Occupants are permitted to wander freely through each other's quarters, and do in fact actively encourage regular social intercourse. The writer, who through pressure of work has found insufficient time for this desired contact, has overheard some others "commenting on my indifference."

In the neighborhood described in the third study, it is difficult to find evidence of privacy between *households* in the community. They visit without prearrangement, and "it is no trespass to go into another's compound unceremoniously and pluck a few herbs...or borrow an axe..." although there is the added rider "...so long as you have had no quarrel with that neighbor." An instance is cited of a respected member of the community and his wife, who, on hearing music coming from a house, "...walked unceremoniously into our sitting-room and started dancing to the Limba music."

In domestic quarrels, neighbors are all privy to the nature of these incidents, and consider that they have the right of intrusion "on the pretext of making peace..." There is also the interesting account of the neighborhood closing its ranks when a thief in their community was chased by the police. Because he was known to be dangerous and a bad influence, they made no move to give him shelter, and he was eventually apprehended in another neighborhood.

The colorful accounts—also in the third study—of marital disputes and alleged infideli-

ties demonstrate the rigid codes and patterns that govern this behavior—as well as the judgment meted out in the circumstances.

\* \* \* \* \*

Primarily, the accounts illustrate both the persistence of indigenous culture and its transformation in the face of poverty and urban life. The

pressures of the social environment and the gap between rich and poor are only too apparent. The frequency of disputes indicates the number and variety of problems confronting the “headman” as arbitrator. Together they provide a clear and suitable background against which to consider the history of the institution and the context in which the unofficial courts operate.

## APPENDIX

### Household Description I

The household in which I live is situated at 40 Bye-Pass Road, Kissy. It is commonly known as the Alpha Morlai Household. This household is in a well-populated vicinity. It is situated at the main road linking the city and the Provinces. Also, there are other employment facilities around which again contribute to the busy appearance of the area. The Toyota Motor Garage is but two houses next from ours and employs over 50 workers, frequented all day long by drivers who take their vehicles for services, people who go to buy spare parts, and those who seek jobs. Opposite our house on the other end of the road are two private garages and a truck-building and furniture workshop.

The house is a two-storied building, painted in green, the top floor partly not furnished, though inhabited. It is constructed with concrete exclusively. The ground floor consists of six bedrooms occupied by the landlord, his five wives and his nephew—a husband of two wives. There is a visitor's parlor, a lounge for the landlord and a quite spacious parlor with two beds leaving a narrow passage between them. The top floor consists of seven bedrooms which are occupied by dependents. Among these are two old female relatives who no longer have the desire to be housewives. One is the paternal aunt of the landlord, about 90 years old, and the other a matrilineal cousin, she is about 65 years. The latter is the mother of the gentleman (nephew of the landlord) with the two wives. This man earns his living as a driver and his wives are engaged in selling petty markets—groundnuts, bananas, pears, oranges, *akara* (bean cake), etc. One room is occupied by a relative (male) who has removed from up-country. He has two sons who are attending school on the expense of the landlord,

as the dependent has no job only that he does whatever the landlord asks him to do. The other rooms are occupied by dependents (both scholars and workers). Our house is frequented by visitors and strangers, so it is very difficult to give a precise number of the household population. Anyway, we are not less than 50 people in the household. Added to the main building is a back house where the boys (mostly nephews of the landlord) are housed. This consists of five rooms and all the rooms but one is shared by more than two people. I share my room with four others (one schoolboy, two school-leavers who are presently seeking jobs and a fellow who works for the Ministry of Agriculture).

The whole house is rent-free and all the occupants are dependents of the landlord whom we regard as head of the family.

The landlord was born in the Western Area—at Newton Village—24 miles from Freetown. He was brought to Kissy in his early age to learn Arabic. He is about 60 years of age, married to 5 wives and a father of 11 children. All but four (infants) are attending school. The landlord also pays school fees for the children of his deceased brother (two of them) and for children of other relations brought to him. He had no formal education but can read a bit of English and can sign his name. He is well learned in Arabic and most of his records are written in Arabic. Earlier, he was engaged as a *Karmokoh* (Arabic teacher). Then he had about 20 *karandes* (scholars). He was also practicing as a Muslim psychiatrist—he was very good in this field and was being patronized far and wide. This was his occupation for over 15 years, but in 1961 he was elected as the Temne Tribal Headman of Kissy. Due to the pressure of work he had cause to abandon his former career. He continued as headman up to



*"The crowded compounds with shared facilities between unrelated people from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds together with extreme poverty are some of the conditions which tend to give rise to discord in the city."*

1967 when he was deposed by the then military regime. Since then he retired from the office of headman and was making his living from rents collected from his other two houses. To subsidize his income, he had bought two "poda-podas" (passenger vans plying the Western Area). He is wholly and solely responsible for feeding the whole household and does his best to try to satisfy his duties as head of household.

Not all the occupants of my household are directly related to the landlord. A good number are children of his cousins, some are relatives of the wives and others are children of his acquaintances. Nevertheless, he treats all with one heart. All of us have other relatives in Freetown, but find it more convenient and safer to stay in this household. The tribal composition is dominantly

Temne. Other tribes include Mende (one only), and Sherbro (two). It is not uncommon to see other tribes like Fullah, Susu, and Madingo in our compound, for every now and then we host people of these tribes. But for three people, everybody is a Muslim. Not to forget, all the wives are Temnes who have come from up-country. They have other relatives in town—brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. All five wives make markets—cooking, provisions, and hardware. The landlord also has other relatives in Freetown but a good majority is up-country.

Other buildings in my compound include the kitchen—an open room built with concrete blocks with corrugated iron sheets roof. The women use it in common but each of them (i.e., the five wives) has made it possible that she has a fire place. Cooking for the household is done in turns (three days each) by the wives,<sup>1</sup> likewise sweeping the compound. There are two latrines (a cesspit construction) and two apartments—one for general use and the other for landlord and wives and which can be used by other important visitors or strangers. At the back of the latrines is the bathroom apartment. These are three separate rooms—one for the young men (boys), one for landlord, wife, and visitors, and the other is for the women.

Unlike the women, most of the menfolk of this compound have got some sort of education. Education ranges from elementary (the children) through technical schools and secondary school. Although there is a disadvantage for the majority of the household not receiving a formal education, yet there is hardly any embarrassment for certain misunderstandings as most of the occupants were brought up in Freetown.

The relationship between the rest of the household and the landlord is one of high regard. Everybody regards him as father, uncle, husband, etc. and we fear him and treat him with respect. He beats the children when they do wrong and with the older folk he uses insulting words on them (i.e., he scolds them). Fighting is not allowed in this compound and the landlord abhors thieving. Nevertheless, people do steal and fight. The wives are apparently cheerful with each other. I say apparently, because co-wives are hardly to be completely free of grievances toward one another. They do quarrel at times but it's

usually settled by the other wives and other relations in the house. The relationship between the boys is very cordial and full of provocations. They quarrel at times but seldom fight and even if they want to fight they move out of the compound for fear that the landlord will ask them to leave the house if they try to violate one of his laws by fighting in the compound. Swearing on medicines is also not allowed in this compound.<sup>2</sup>

Privacy is quite evident in this compound. To begin with the whole compound is fenced and one can only get in at the back through the front door or by the side gate. Privacy also extends in the toilet—the men don't use the women's toilet and vice versa. Neither do both use the landlord's toilet. Free movement in the house is restricted, nobody is allowed to enter somebody else's room without the owner's knowledge. For those sharing room, each has got a box for his private use and no other person has access to it unless the owner authorizes him.

The resort for company in this compound is the *barri*,<sup>3</sup> which stands adjacent to the main house. It is a very spacious building (should I say?). This is a roofed building with only sticks to support the roof, the sides are open. It was erected in 1961 when the landlord was elected headman. This building serves everybody's purpose. We keep company there all day long and the evening is pleasantly spent there. Sitting here, one gets a good view of everything that goes on in the street. In the dry season, we use it as shade and in the rainy season there we hang our clothes to dry when it is raining outside. I am quite sure that there are but few people to shoulder such a responsibility as the head of our house.

### Household Description II

The household in which I live is a two storied block situated in the east-end of Freetown, a densely peopled area. The topmost flat is occupied by the landlord, his wives, children, and other relatives. This flat comprises 6 rooms, and a total number of 40 people, including children, live in it.

The next two flats, each comprising two apartments with two rooms and a sitting room, are let out to tenants. One of the two apartments on the first floor is occupied by a man, his wife, and six

children, one of which, a daughter, is married and has only come home to give birth. The next apartment also of two rooms is occupied by my brother, a maternal cousin and his girl friend, now with a six-months-old-baby, plus three dependents.

The ground floor is occupied by a business-woman, the senior wife in a polygynous marriage to a Fullah businessman who lives next door. She runs a provision store and retains a small room alongside in which she sleeps. The rest of the floor, as was the case in the first floor, is similarly divided into two apartments of two rooms each. One of these apartments is occupied by a young couple and two dependents. The next apartment is occupied by a woman, a divorcee, her child and a dependent. The other room is occupied by a young man, engaged to a girl with a child, but at the moment staying with her parents. This young man shares a room with his younger brother and junior brother-in-law. Each flat has kitchen and toilet facilities which occupants use in common. The tribal composition of my household is of four different tribes—Fullah, Susu, Madingo, and Temne. The landlord is a Fullah but all his three wives are Temne. In the middle floor where I live, except for dependents who are all Temne, all the occupants are either Susu or Madingo. The ground floor, however, is occupied exclusively by Temnes.

Relationships between tenants and to the head of the household are of easy familiarity. Except in cases where petty quarrels arise over children, as when one child beats another tenant's child. The landlord acts as arbiter and judge in all disputes so that cases from the household can only reach higher authorities when the landlord deems it necessary and in the best interests of all parties concerned. It is a last resort.

My brother told of how the landlord had been able to save two of his quarreling girl friends from going to grips in the dead of night. However, relations have not always been smooth. There were one or two occasions when the landlord had had clashes with tenants over the question of rent, especially with tenants of the ground floor. But on these occasions, the landlord's brother has always come in useful. To my knowledge and investigation there has so far not

been a major dispute that has been settled outside the household.

Rent is probably the chief cause of complaint. It is fairly heavy for anyone who has not got a regular source of income. Occupants of the ground floor being predominantly traders or businessmen encounter difficulties in honoring their monthly obligations owing to fluctuation in profits. My brother and cousin, who are employed at the Barclays Bank and National Insurance Company respectively as accounting clerks, are better off and can meet their obligations. The head of the family in the adjoining apartment is also in a strong financial position. He is an employee of the Sierra Leone Airways attached to the Lungi Control Tower. He spends most of the time at Lungi and comes to spend a few days with his family from time to time. His wife is unemployed—a housewife—and depends entirely on him for the well-being of the family, except for assistance rendered by the husband of their eldest daughter who is employed in a Commercial Store as a typist.

The landlord, a businessman, had migrated first to the [diamond] mining area at Sefadu where he had made quite a fortune. Later he had come down to Freetown and invested his money in houses. He runs two houses—one at Lungi and the other here in Freetown. He has been here for over ten years now. There are some of his cousins in town, also businessmen. His wives, of course, came along with him from the Province. The Senior wife who does some trading, but the others are housewives.

In our apartment, except for the two dependents and myself, my brother and cousin have regular jobs and, of course, pay the rent. We were all born and brought up in Freetown, except for the time spent at boarding school at Bo. I have always been in Freetown. We do not stay with our parents, who as a matter of fact live a few streets from us. We have been in Freetown for many years now, and though they still retain links with relatives in the Provinces, we have always considered Freetown as our home.

Occupants of the adjoining apartment had migrated from the Kambia District in search of jobs—at least this is true for the head of the family. They have also lived in Freetown for a

long time now. They have many other relatives both in town and up-country.

On the ground floor, most of the occupants had come to town from Makeni, Port Loko, or Gbinti and have been here now for many years. Some had first stayed with other relatives in town. Once established, they had then moved on to a separate residence. They still maintain these early connections. As one of them told me, you cannot forget anyone who first introduced you to town life. Trading and job-hunting are among some of the motivations to migrate.

None of the residents of my household seem to have relationships to main families in town. Some I suspect may have relationships with families who in turn have relationships with main families in town. In any case, no one has been able to say conclusively. Religion in my household is predominantly Muslim. Only one young couple on the ground floor is Christian.

Formal Western Education ranges from the kids at primary school level through to technical education and to myself at the moment, the only university student in the household. The landlord has had no formal Western education though he is nonetheless learned in Arabic. His wives and eldest daughter have also had no formal education. The younger kids have, however, been sent to school in town. In the other flats, except for the housewives, most of the occupants have attained at least some small level of Western education. Some even hold the G.C.E. "O" Level certificate. The young couple on the ground floor, for instance, are teachers of elementary and secondary school respectively.

With regard to privacy, the very construction of the house is meant to achieve this end. But more often than not this aim is not fulfilled. There is some semblance of privacy though in fact occupants move freely in each other's apartment. Except for the landlord and his family who are constantly kept out of the other flats, all tenants visit each other and have cultivated the idea of leaving their room keys with each other on going out. Within the short time I have been on vacation there have been many complaints from other members of the household with whom I have not yet found time to visit for a chat. I have even caught some of them comment-

ing on my indifference. Consequently, I have planned out a program of visitation so as to exonerate myself from whatever wrong opinions some members may have held about me.

On the question of types of marriage, except for one couple on the ground floor who are Christians and as such contracted a Christian marriage, all other couples contracted either a Muslim marriage or customary marriage. In some cases there was a mixture of both types.

Dowry<sup>4</sup> was paid in each case except for the Christian type. The amount of dowry paid depends on the economic standing of the suitor or his family. The landlord says that for each of his three wives he paid 120 leones, excluding all the other small customary fees he had to pay before the actual marriage. There is another tenant who told me that he paid his dowry by installments, paying a small fee of LE40 in the first instance. This he called "the stop." It gave him, he told me, the exclusive rights to the woman—no other person from hence had a right to visit with the woman to the knowledge of the parents except himself. The next time he was ready to take his wife from her parents, he paid a lump sum of Le.60. He told me that he was of average means and did not want anything loud. Except for the customary rites which included "the proof of chastity," etc. everything was done on the quiet. Another tenant, who has recently left for the Provinces on transfer, told me of how he has for the past ten years been living with a woman to whom he was not formally married either by customary sanction or by Muslim rites. Before they left, however, he called together some elders to regularize their relationship. During the period the woman had given birth to a child. Asked whether their relationship up until then was not irregular, the man exclaimed, "Far from that!" He explained that they had done without the formalities of marriage because their position was recognized by both parents and relatives as regular and right. To him this was the important thing. He had formalized the relationship only as a safeguard for the child, so that it would not be ostracized, and also to satisfy his friends, who seemed to think that they have been living in sin.

Finally, on the question of other irregular relationships, like outside children, outside wife,<sup>5</sup>



*A well-to-do Creole family picnicking at the beach—"A wide disparity in standards of living between the vast majority and the elite exacerbate interpersonal tensions."*

etc., no tenant seems inclined to say. Through investigation, however, I was able to find out that my cousin has given birth [i.e., fathered] to a baby girl by another man's wife. The husband, of course, claims to be the father of the child. If he suspected anything he did not say. But the wife has told me that my cousin is the father of her child. As I understand, my cousin has given her help from time to time. There is also, on the ground floor, a woman who before she took up residence here had separated with her husband. She has a child by that marriage which is in her custody. The husband has since not made an appearance. I understand he is now living with another woman. I don't know what arrangements, if any, were made with regard to maintenance. But I know that this woman is well off and is not complaining.

If my account has been lacking in detail it is not because I lack a descriptive approach, but rather because people are suspicious as soon as an attempt is made to pry into what they consider their private life. If you also take into account the fact that the people are really not as used to me, as they are everyone else, owing to the fact that I am here today and gone the next plus the fact that I am a university student very likely working for the government, I have been able to win many into my confidence.



*Poor children living in a poor village near the beach clean out the discarded tins from the same picnic.*

### **Description III: Notes on a Neighborhood Study**

In march this year I was instructed to carry out a neighborhood study of the area in which I live. There is perhaps very little or no difference in the kinds of hurdles which one may be faced with in a study of this nature whether it be one's own neighborhood or quite an unfamiliar setting. I must therefore begin with the enumeration of some of the important difficulties with which I was confronted when I embarked upon this exercise six weeks ago.

In the first place the interviewer who does not possess self-confidence could decidedly have evaded the more sophisticated [i.e., Creole] households, whose inmates look upon the visitor with suspicion especially as his inquiries are based on what some of them regard as "my own private business." Such was the attitude which often revealed itself in the disposition of the members of this group which can be aptly described as the "sophisticated group" consisting mainly of Creole elements of the higher income group and individuals in their private capacity as contractors, landlords, or professionals.

Much diplomacy and tact were therefore required in dealing with this difficult or disdainful class and necessitated explanations at great pains and lengths of the nature of study the team was doing and of the importance of their cooperation in such a socioeconomic study of each individual household in the neighborhood. This in no way minimized my difficulties. Notwithstanding all

efforts to allay suspicions there were still a good number of this group from whom I could not extract the information sought, and it will be inadequate to treat as essential data the meager information received from the obliging few in this class.

Conversely there was comparatively not much problem with household families comprising teachers, clerks, drivers, etc. on the one hand and laborers or local gin-distillers<sup>6</sup> on the other. What strikes me as indeed very odd is that I had hitherto not appreciated the relatively irreconcilable gap in the socioeconomic structure between these last two groups which are representative of the Mende, Temne, Limba, Kroo, Foulah, etc. who intuitively welcome the interviewer in hopeful expectation of a change for the better in their already parlous state.

A majority had the mistaken belief that my neighborhood survey was aimed at reducing house rents—a similar survey had at one time been instituted by government and some claimed that house rents were still mounting. Some were reluctant in or conservative about telling me how much their monthly earnings were. They nevertheless stated with alacrity the monthly house rents which they were paying to their landlords or their representatives. To this group also it was necessary to explain in detail the purpose of my neighborhood study to avoid further misgivings.

Unlike in developed countries, specifically in West Germany where I spent a few years as a student, neighbors pay each other visits without ceremony. It is no trespass to go into another's compound unceremoniously and pluck a few herbs used for medicine or borrow an axe for splitting wood as long as you have had no quarrel with that neighbor. If a man and his wife quarrel, all interested neighbors can enter their premises freely on the pretext of making peace between the couple.

More than four families do share a pit lavatory but if you are on speaking terms with your neighbors you may make use of their own pit lavatory whilst yours is being used by other members of the compound. But this is simply the credit side of a good neighborly relationship. On the debit side, this free intermingling has become a cause for many court cases in the illegal native

courts because out of the observation of your neighbors' households comes gossip and gossip when it reaches the ears of the one who is gossiped creates quarrels which if not settled in the home eventually reach the native courts in forms ranging from simple abuses, fighting, and trespass to witchcraft allegations.

Sometimes the dependence of one household upon another (e.g., asking a neighbor for an axe to split your own wood or habitually requesting a bottle of cold water from your neighbor's refrigerator) is known to have produced strained relationship thereafter simply because by refusing one day to lend your axe or grant the request for a cold drink as the case may be, you have created enmity: and enmity is exemplified in malice which may later erupt with consequences some of which reach the native courts in different forms.

The reason for this as earlier said is the relatively irreconcilable gap in the socioeconomic structure between the groups represented in the neighborhood. A man with a television set and a radiogram and whose house is open to members of his neighborhood who wish to watch television or dance to the music of his radiogram is regarded according to the standards of that neighborhood as a kind of social elite of that area even though he may be earning between Le.30 and Le.70 per month, at the same time sharing a similar dwelling house for which he pays a monthly rent of about Le.11 with the same pit lavatory facilities. It is observed that the wives of these fortunate husbands are seldom in harmony with the wives of less fortunate husbands and it is this want of harmony that contributes to petty jealousies from which come petty quarrels, some of which eventually get settled in native courts at great expense to the parties concerned.

Further down the ladder are families which consist of simple laborers each with children ranging from 3 to 6, all living in a squalid one-room or two-room dwelling for which the monthly rent ranges from Le.7 to Le.11. The more fortunate husbands have got their wives to do petty business ranging from coconuts bought at 30 cents a dozen and sold in broken pieces of one cent per piece or 5 cents for the whole, to selling fish or palm oil. The profits can be used to provide the daily food while the husband's

meager salary can be spent on such things as rent, clothing, and other necessities for subsistence.

It is interesting to note, however, that notwithstanding whatever neighborly relationship may exist among the members in a society, a funeral ceremony or a child delivery event often produces among all the neighbors a universal consciousness of one brotherhood in that vicinity.

At this stage it is perhaps worthwhile to state that no less than 23 households have been visited and inmates therein interviewed accordingly.

The first is Rolling Street on which is situated a concrete flat for which a monthly rent of Le.32<sup>7</sup> is charged. It has three bedrooms, a sitting room, and a dining room converted into a bedroom for boys. At present the dwelling holds eight occupants. Apart from the common house-boy, all other occupants, excluding myself are relations of the other gentleman with whom I go into equal shares of the monthly rent for this flat. There is also an apartment occupied by a divorced woman. This apartment consists of a bedroom and a sitting room for which a monthly rent of Le.10 is paid. The woman has two daughters, one she begot from her former husband, the other from her present boyfriend—an Assistant Secretary at one of the Banks in Freetown. The woman, too, is a clerk at the Secretariat, earning more than Le.30 per month.

The composition of the family with whom I share the concrete flat is as follows: husband is a salesman based at Kenema and earning a gross salary of Le.70 per month. The wife is a Schoolmistress holding the Advanced Teacher's Certificate who earns more than Le.90 per month. They have three children and two dependents. In addition to the wife's salary she earns an irregular income out of her private profession as seamstress.

In the compound is also a two-roomed dwelling house owned by the landlady of the concrete flat. For this a rent of Le.6 is paid monthly by a Pa Kamara, a 50-year-old Limba who works as a messenger at the Road Transport Corporation on a salary of about Le.36 per month, having worked there for 24 years now. He has a wife and six children, three of them are his, and the other three by his wife's first marriage. In addition he



*A stream on the road leading to Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone) where some of Freetown's poor come to wash their clothes.*

has two other dependents, one a niece with two children, the other an unemployed illiterate nephew looking for a job. The niece sells fish at the market during the day and sells *omole*—locally distilled gin—illegally at home in the evenings, and customers who come to patronize her to buy *omole* create much noise at night. Pa Kamara's wife also does business in groundnuts and vegetable sales. Pa Kamara is a respectable member of the neighborhood and he enjoys the unofficial privilege of settling petty disputes among those who come to him with their cases.

In this compound, a pit latrine, a "washyard" and two kitchens belong to all the members living therein.

On Elizabeth Lane is a small three-room dwelling house which at the moment contains ten occupants who make up three separate families. One family consists of a husband and wife, no children but two dependents on the wife's side and one dependent on the husband's side—in short the family comprises five members. Adjacent to this dwelling house is another house containing three bedrooms and one sitting room. It contains only one family: a husband and wife, three children and one dependent who is employed. In the basement lives another family consisting of a husband, wife, and four children. On the whole the compound contains 22 persons who all share 2 pit latrines, 2 "washyards," and a spacious kitchen where more than 4 hearths can

be set up. In the dry season women cook their food in the open air.

The rent ranges from 7 to 14 leones. All the husbands are employed. One works at the Ministry of Works, one at the Ministry of Social Welfare, two at the Ports Authority in Cline Town. Their salaries may range between Le.30 and Le.70 per month.

In this compound an incident occurred which is worthy of note. It is interesting how some women can take the law into their own hands. The woman concerned is the wife of a man who owns an old car, a television, a refrigerator, and a radiogram. In short that family is looked upon as the social elite in that area: the husband is a Mende and the wife is a Limba.

The underpants of this woman disappeared. She inquired from the whole neighborhood as to who could have taken her underpants by mistake, but she got no one to admit to having taken them. On Sunday morning therefore she invited a medicine-man in the neighborhood to swear the person who may have taken or stolen the underpants.

The man came, spread his juju medicine on the ground in front of the house and swore. This system is rather unusual because in the Provinces before one is permitted to swear one must pay a fee to the chief. No one is permitted to swear at random. A few weeks later the child of her neighbor fell very ill indeed from natural causes. Nevertheless the woman is heard to have remarked that the swearing was taking effect because such swearing often starts with attacking the child of the culprit. This remark caused a big quarrel in the compound and all sorts of abusive and obscene words were used by the parties concerned.

After that big quarrel the parties ceased to be on speaking terms with each other for nearly a month—however, the ice has now been broken.

Sometime in April this year, the sound of a police whistle and noise of a running crowd shouting "tief, tief, tief," (thief) made me get up with a start. It was about 7 A.M.

Our whole household stood in the verandah of our dwelling from where we saw a young boy of about 22 years of age and naked down to his

pants come running down the steep hill leading toward the stream. He was being chased by police in squad uniform and a police sub-inspector of the regular force. Obviously this young boy was escaping police arrest.

With the cries of "tief, tief," from the chasing crowd, it was evident that this boy was wanted by the police, but no member of our neighborhood dared give a helping hand to the police. Finally the boy was arrested by other people at Syke Street—a different neighborhood—and handed over to the police who were by then very close to his heels. It is usual in cases of this nature that the "escapist" is often intercepted by brave members of the society as a gesture of giving a helping hand to the police, but in our neighborhood no one dared intercept him.

The reason for this, as was later revealed, is that the boy is known by the members of our neighborhood as a dangerous boy. He also belongs to the neighborhood, and any other member in this area would have exposed himself to a great risk because sooner or later, if the boy serves his sentence, in jail or by some stroke of good luck is acquitted and discharged, he would induce other dangerous colleagues to attack the person who had caused his arrest. But as he was arrested in a different neighborhood it is very unlikely that he would again recognize the person who had helped the police to catch him.

The story as was told later is that the boy is a ward of a certain "big man" on Berwick Street who deals in marijuana (*cannabis sativa*). He sends out his ward to collect this dangerous stuff from his companions who wish to sell. Information had reached the C.I.D. about the boy and so it came about that he was watched by the police until he was suddenly met by the police while returning to his boss from his errand on this particular morning.

Not wishing to be arrested, he threw the stuff away and started to run for dear freedom. In doing so he chose the rugged streets with which he was quite familiar in our neighborhood.

On May 5, 1972, Mr. John, commonly known by the neighbors as Pa John, landlord at No. 4 Rolling Street, visited his tenant at Elizabeth Lane under the pretext of inspecting his compound. Then he decided to inspect his pit

latrines. In one of them he saw an unfamiliar face, i.e., a gentleman who was not an inmate of that compound. In a fit of temper he asked the man out of the latrine. The gentleman pleaded with Pa John to allow him to finish up the process of nature, but Pa John dragged the man out of the latrine. It was sad to see the man dressing himself up at the entrance of the latrines.

Pa John later argued that while the pit latrines get filled up, it is the landlord that spends money to have them emptied again. He warned his tenants that they should not permit any outsider to use the latrines. He emphasized that he would give notice to evict any tenant who allowed outsiders to use the latrines.

On May 28 the landlady of No. 2 Rolling Street came to inspect her compound. After making preliminary courtesies to her tenants she went to inspect the pit latrine—it must be noted that this landlady is the twin sister of Pa John of No. 4 Rolling Street. She noticed that the seat of the latrine was partly broken but Pa Kamara explained that it was due to wear and tear as the seat has never been replaced. Thereupon the landlady asked all tenants to listen to what she had to say. She said she had heard that other people were using the latrine. She warned that no outsider should be allowed to make use of the latrine. The latrine was only for the members of No. 2 Rolling Street. "Even if my own mother comes and requests the use of that latrine, do not allow her to use it, let alone anyone else," she concluded in words to that effect.

About three weeks before the landlady came and gave her instructions about the use of the pit latrine, inmates of No. 12 Elizabeth Lane had been using this latrine with the kind permission of the inmates of No. 2 Rolling Street. No. 12 Elizabeth Lane has a flush toilet which had a blockage and the inmates were using this pit latrine until their flush was repaired.

It is suspected that the twin brother who is resident in the area might have informed his sister, resident at Congo Town, that outsiders were using her latrine. If this suspicion is wrong then it is probable that one of the inmates may have given this information simply to satisfy his gossipy nature or as a means of currying favor from the landlady. And it is certain that a tribe



*Foulah musicians and dancers performing in one of Free-town's elite neighborhoods.*

other than a Mende could have done this because the only inmates at No. 17 Elizabeth Lane who were using the pit latrine are Mende, since No. 2 Rolling Street consists of Mende, Creole, Limba, Foulah, and Lokko.

On June 1, 1972 at No. 4 Elizabeth Lane, a man and his wife quarreled. The cause of the quarrel was as follows. The wife has never had a child. She is in other words barren. She, however, has a nephew whom she pampers to a considerable extent. The nephew is a secondary school scholar whose attendance to school is very irregular. He is about 20 years old and he keeps girlfriends.

Originally, he used to go out in the evenings and return very late in the night. At a later stage he used to meet his girlfriends at the homes of an older boyfriend. Finally the girlfriends now visit him at his own home where he stays with his aunt and her husband. His aunt's husband is himself not always at home but on this particular day he was ill and he stayed indoors. Then he saw a girl call at the home asking for his wife's nephew. He told the girl to go away and remarked that he did not want a quarrel with another household as the girl was under, or was supposed to be under, parental care. Then he made the dangerous remark in words to this effect: "I do not blame the boy, I blame his aunt who allows her nephew to do whatever he likes."

The wife grew furious at this remark and a barrage of abuses ensued between the husband

and wife: but neighbors came and cooled them down and peace was restored.

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In my "participant" observation of a dispute within a Limba family—specifically Pa Kamara's family—on November 22, 1971, I mentioned an eleven-year-old daughter of Pa Kamara called Fatma. This girl is still attending elementary school but a taxi driver has already put "Kola" for this school girl. This means this taxi driver, a Foulah by tribe, has already paid some money to the girl's parents as an expression of his intention to marry the girl.

Now the taxi driver made a complaint to the girl's parents on June 14, 1972 that the girl is now behaving as if she does not like him again. He believes that someone is maligning him to the girl, someone is trying to divert the girl's attention from him.

The parents have already received the sum of Le.20 from the taxi driver, which means that they now regard the taxi driver as their future son-in-law. What then was their reaction to the Foulah's complaint? The mother Madam Mabinti was the first to show her indignation. She declared that she was going to swear the person who was trying to poison her daughter's mind against her future son-in-law. No date has been fixed for the swearing but I have requested Madam Mabinti to let me know when she is ready to swear....

• • •

Yesterday, September 24, 1972 Pa Kamara and his wife heard a Limba music on our radio at No. 2 Rolling Street, both of them were feeling fine as they had drunk some locally distilled gin, and so they walked unceremoniously into our sitting room and started dancing to the Limba Music. Mrs. Gbongay, the lady with whose husband I share the present flat, was apparently pleased with the couple for their disposition which she said was based on good neighborly relationship but after the couple had left she confided that the couple wanted to find out whether she was at home or had gone out. Since they know that her husband is based in Kenema the couple was looking for a topic of idle discussion—gossip (i.e., to find out whether or not she was behaving in her husband's absence).

(October 1979)

NOTES

1. In a polygamous household wives take turns sleeping with and cooking for the husband.
2. A reference to an indigenous practice of putting a curse on another individual which will bring him bad luck.
3. Every village in rural Sierra Leone has a "barri"—usually an open building where public meetings take place as well as disputes being heard.
4. The West African term for the gifts which are handed to the family of a girl by her prospective husband as part of the ceremonial requirements of marriage.
5. A reference to a common practice in Freetown where married men establish a relationship of varying permanency with another woman. This institution of "outside wives" developed in defiance of the British policy of eliminating multiple wives. The children of these unions are illegitimate.
6. Local gin is called "omole" and is made of palm wine. Its distillation is illegal.
7. Le.1.00 equals \$1.00.