INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-14

City Hotel
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Freetown, Sierra Leone

Freetown

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Dear Peter,

"1953. 'Colonial' Sierra Leone. All during that week the older kids at school had talked about MARABU WACH NET and LANTERNS. The mouths of the younger kids hung open in awe as they listened in anticipation....

"1963. Independent Sierra Leone. The non-Muslim families still came on the outing, but this time you could not tell Muslim or Christian or pagan apart. Sierra Leone's youth had already set out on the road to UNITY....

"1973. Republican Sierra Leone. Very few families still went on the outing. Many had seen it all. There was very little new to see. Sporadic bursts of fighting were common. Sierra Leone's future parents had grown into young adults. They now moved around in pairs. They had become too educated or already too old to participate. It was no longer 'the thing' to do so....

"The fiesta lost its glitter. The magic began to wear off. Many people watched from their windows if they happened to live on the route. Nightclubs did a roaring business..."

In that cri de coeur, Dele Charley, the playwright mentioned in my last letter, bemoans the deterioration of one of Freetown's traditions. The lanterns are actually floats, built by neighborhood groups in a rivalry similar to New Orleans' Mardi Gras parades. The lantern procession is held on the last night of Ramadan, the Muslim fast month. In an article for the Sierra Leone Daily Mail, Charley suggests that the festivity, which apparently is unique to this country, be made part of the national holiday celebrations in April. That fixed date would avoid the dampening of spirits caused when Ramadan, which progresses through our Western calendar year, occurs in the rainy season.

Insuring good weather for the parade only solves one of the problems that have led to its demise, however. More serious is the competition from movie theaters and nightclubs, and the disaffection of the sophisticated younger generation who refuse to get excited about anything so old-fashioned as a lantern parade. This year the parade was rained out completely, though in years past the crowds used to dance through downpours.

It is evident that Freetonians have succumbed to the at-

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tractions of the West. While old men wear somber suits, thin ties and white shirts, middle-aged and younger men dress more flashily in patterned shirts, wide ties and bell-bottomed trousers. The youngsters and the poor make do with whatever Western-style clothes they can get their hands on. Fashionable women wear dresses, skirts or pants. Many brush their hair out straight, using barettes, bands or lotions to keep the kinks in line. Only the older women, who still wear the wrap-around lappa cloth, and the Muslim men, in their gowns and knit or woven caps, maintain the link with traditional African clothing styles.

Day and night Western pop songs or their Afro-Latin derivatives belch out of bars, restaurants, record shops, stores and homes. As in big cities in the U.S., the radio-cassette player, the bigger the better, is the poor man's status symbol. The rich have their cars, mostly Japanese and European compacts. Bicycles and motorbikes are rarely seen. Pedestrians jam the streets, the blare of car horns fills the air.

Still, there are signs that this is not Atlanta or Jacksonville—cities that, with its half a million inhabitants, Freetown is comparable in size. Babies doze on mothers' backs; muscular men haul freight on wooden carts through the crowded streets; vendors sell clothing, tapes, cigarettes, candy, pens and other sundries from shaky wooden tables on the sidewalks. Few buildings are more than five stories high, there are no gleaming new skyscrapers. Deep gutters carry much of the city's waste to the ocean during the downpours that come almost daily this time of year. Residential Freetown is largely made up of ramshackle wood houses and shacks of rusting corrugated iron. Open-air markets sell fish and meat, vegetables and fruit, sugar and spices, all in piles on mats on the ground or on tables, swarmed over by flies. Women and girls sell bananas and peanuts from metal trays carried on their heads.

Freetown is the most beautifully situated city I have ever visited. It is spread across rolling green hills that come right to the sea's edge. Walking the streets, one sees ever-changing vistas of ocean and billowing land. During the rainy season, which lasts from May to October, the steep slopes of the hills are cut by frothing torrents.

These streams first brought Europeans to this spot, for they were famed for the purity of their water. Their location on a peninsula forming the southern edge of a broad estuary made it a perfect spot for a settlement, or so it seemed to the English government, which established a home for freed slaves here in 1787. The original settlers were from London where, after Lord Mansfield's ruling that slaves could not be reclaimed on English soil, the growing number of indigent blacks alarmed the rich and distressed the kind-hearted.

Breaches of faith with the local population in Sierra Leone led to warfare and the scattering of the first settlers. Another contingent arrived in 1792. These were blacks who had sided with the British during the American Revolution. They had been living in Nova Scotia, but they found neither the climate nor the broken promises of their protectors to their liking.

Bad planning, poor administration, disease and thin soil not greatly suited for farming continued to plague the settle-

ment, and it had a tenuous existence until 1808, when the British government took over responsibility for it from the private company that had been in charge. The British needed a base for their naval operations against the slave trade. As more and more ships were seized, more and more Africans were cast upon the colony. These Africans came from all along the western coast and the interior, uprooted from their cultures though spared the chains of slavery. As the colony grew, freed slaves emigrated to it from America and the West Indies.

These four groups—the early settlers from London, the Nova Scotians, the so-called recaptured Africans and free immigrants returning to the land of their ancestors—established a unique culture that can be labeled Creole, the name given to Freetown inhabitants to distinguish them from the indigenous tribes. In the words of Christopher Fyfe, author of the definitive History of Sierra Leone, the Freetown settlers "formed together a distinctive community of their own, neither wholly European nor wholly African."

It is this blend of African and European civilizations that led me to choose Freetown for my study of cultural influences on West African nations. I want to look at culture as it is defined by local historian Arthur Abraham in his Unesco study, Cultural Policy in Sierra Leone: "(C)ulture here means an integrative process combining tradition with modern technological developments." Too often Western influence on African life is depicted as a conflict. Despite his definition, Abraham treats it this way. He describes the young as the "worst victims" of Euro-American culture, with their long hair, platform shoes, drugs and hippie dress styles (and this was written in 1978). He calls cultural education the "main weapon for cultural liberation." By cultural liberation, he means cultural preservation.

The image is of an invasion of "technologically advanced" cultural armies held off by guerilla cadres of the poor, armed only with their love for ancient traditions. I will try to avoid this war scenario in which one is forced to take sides and to make arbitrary judgments of what is good and what is bad. Culture is too broad and closely woven a fabric to pick apart its constituent elements, as Abraham inadvertently makes clear. The hippie styles he decries, weren't these the dashikis and beads that at least indirectly were derived from Africa? Weren't the bulging Afro hairstyles indicative of the rebellion of American blacks against Western culture? When I talked about Western pop songs and their Afro-Latin derivatives, it is only the music returning, like the free Negro immigrants from the American South and the West Indies, to the land of its origin.

So I will not try to split culture into halves, African and Euro-American. I will also try to avoid labels of good and bad unless some practice is obviously harmful to people or society. Like Charley, I may regret the passing of a tradition like the lantern parade. I admire his efforts to try to save it. I will not, however, accuse insidious Western capitalists of somehow brainwashing Africa's youth into buying their records and clothes and going to movies and discos, as Abraham does. I may try to explore the reasons for the attraction of these Western entertainments, but as far as I'm concerned no African is forced to find them more desirable than homegrown pleasures.

While the loss of traditional culture may be regrettable, it may also be inevitable. Attempts to preserve it often smack of dilettanteism. I remember reading Tanzania's Julius Nyerere's rebuff to complaints about the Westernization of the Masai. He said he would not allow Tanzanians to become a living museum for the amusement of Western tourists.

My investigation of Sierra Leone's culture will necessarily be limited. Culture is an almost boundless subject. Webster's defines it as "the ideas, customs, skills, arts, etc. of a given people in a given period." Abraham, in another definition, calls it "the sum total of the nation's life." That's a bit much to study in five months, especially as I hope to spend some of that time in Liberia. So I will confine my study to certain aspects of the arts and modern life that appeal to me. In some areas, like the arts, I may expand my study to include West Africa or even Africa in general. In the next few weeks I hope to write about literature, drama, newspapers and religion.

Regards,

Bowden

Bowden Quinn

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