

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-15

City Hotel  
Box 24  
Freetown, Sierra Leone  
August 29, 1980

The Poets of Sierra Leone

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

I have begun my study of Western cultural influences on Sierra Leone with a look at the literature this country has produced.

I was surprised by the dearth of artistic writing from the colony and country of Sierra Leone. Freetown is the site of the oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa, if one does not include the Islamic centers of learning of the sahelian empires in the Middle Ages. The colony earned its reputation as the Athens of Africa because of Fourah Bay College. Many leaders of the territories of British West Africa and of the new nations of Ghana, Nigeria and The Gambia studied here. Yet the number of illustrious Sierra Leonean writers is small, and no outstanding work of fiction, poetry or drama has come out of this country.

Dr. Eustace Palmer, head of the college's English department, attributes the lack of creative writers to the circumstances of the colony's settlement. The Creoles of Freetown disowned their African heritage and imitated their British rulers, at least where intellectual matters were concerned. Uprooted from their tribal homes, in many cases having gone through the degradation of slavery, and in some instances experiencing freedom in Western society, the educated Creole saw British culture as a fixture in an unstable world. He looked to England for intellectual and moral guidance and believed his British teacher who told him there was no such thing as African culture, philosophy or literature.

One must also take into account the general purpose of British colonial rule. A Spanish historian, Salvador de Mada-riaga, has contrasted the motives behind the imperialism of England, France and Spain. While Spanish expansion found its justification in religious conviction, the French were more concerned with propagating an intellectual order "to shine the light of her genius over the whole world." England, meanwhile, concentrated on more practical matters. Her interest in a colonial empire was economic; her colonial administrators were pragmatic men intent on maintaining law and order so commercial enterprise could thrive.

So when wealthy Creoles sent their children to school, they

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expected them to become doctors and lawyers and civil servants, and the British educational system in Africa was geared to produce such men. In the process, it also produced politicians and statesmen, men like J.E. Casely-Hayford and J.B. Danquah of the Gold Coast, Chief Oluwa and R.A. Savage of Nigeria, E.F. Small of The Gambia and James Africanus Beale Horton and Bankole Bright of Sierra Leone. Many of these men were distinguished essayists, journalists and orators, but they were not literary men. So while the British West African intelligentsia were far ahead of their French West African counterparts in demanding political rights, they lagged behind in the reaffirmation of their cultural heritage.

The Creoles found it difficult to adapt to the new emphasis on African values that came with independence because of their close association with the British and their alienation from the indigenous Africans around them. Nigeria, which of all the British West African territories had the least division between an educated elite and traditional society, took the lead among anglophone West African countries in the development of literature after independence. Ghana has produced several writers of note. Even The Gambia has its internationally recognized poet. To date, Sierra Leone has no preeminent writer, although this may just now be changing.

This scarcity of literary artists is a sign of the continuing division between the Creoles of Freetown and the indigenous Sierra Leoneans. The provinces have had political control of the country since well before independence. The government denies allegations in the outside press that the Creoles, along with the Lebanese, control the economy. Freetown and its Creoles have always dominated literary scene, however, and this is probably a reflection of their hold on the educational establishment.

Sierra Leone's literary development is weakest in the novel. The only two novels it can lay some claim to that have received international attention were written by Gambians who went to school here, The African by William Conton and The Second Round by Lenrie Peters, the poet mentioned above. Both books owe their fame to the time of their publication, the first half of the Sixties when almost any book by an African affirming his African identity received an audience. The novels are simplistic and poorly written. Conton turned to history after his one excursion in fiction; Peters has developed as a poet.

There are other novels by Sierra Leoneans, Yalisa Amadu Maddy's No Past, No Present, No Future, for example. In Dr. Palmer's opinion, though, no really good novel has been written by a Sierra Leonean. When it comes, he expects it to come from the provinces. He advised me to concentrate on the poetry and drama of Sierra Leone, so that is what I have done.

To put the development of poetry here in perspective, let me step back again to look at West Africa as a whole. It is generally felt that no worthwhile African poetry in English was written until shortly before independence. The reasons for this show so clearly the European influence on poetry that I want to review them, although it will take us away from Sierra Leone for a bit.

The first noteworthy collection of West African poetry was An Anthology of West African Verse, published in 1957. Today,

the poets from English-speaking territories represented in it are recalled only to be excoriated for their colonial submissiveness, while the French-language poets are extolled for their espousal of negritude. This criticism reveals how much African poetry is judged not on technical merit but on ideological acceptability.

In Mother is Gold, a 1971 review of West African literature, Adrian Roscoe compares the poetry of Nigerian Dennis Osadebay in the anthology with that of David Diop, who was born in France of a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother. Osadebay, says Roscoe, "provides a clear example of a colonial poet who...is unsure of the direction in which he wants his art to move." Roscoe quotes these lines from "Young Africa's Plea":

Don't preserve my customs  
 As some fine curios  
 To suit some white historian's tastes.  
 There's nothing artificial  
 That beats the natural way,  
 In culture and ideals of life.  
 Let me play with the white man's ways  
 Let me work with the black man's brains,  
 Let my affairs themselves sort out.  
 Then in sweet re-birth  
 I'll rise a better man,  
 Not ashamed to face the world.  
 These who doubt my talents  
 In secret fear my strength,  
 They know I am no less a man.  
 Let them bury their prejudice,  
 Let them show their noble sides,  
 Let me have untrammelled growth.  
 My friends will never know regret  
 And I, I never once forget.

Roscoe comments: "The inferiority syndrome, that most devastating result of colonialism, is here in all its glory....The mixed emotions of this colonised Nigerian are expressed in a style which...owes nothing to Africa. There is no picture of the homeland, nothing to suggest the existence close at hand of an ancient poetic art laden with metaphor and teeming with imagery."

By contrast, Roscoe praises Diop's poetry for its "voice of negritude...a strident voice, often angry and accusing, but a voice which carries a tone of conviction, of self-knowledge, of fervour for aims that are clear and well-defined." He cites the poet's "Defir a la Force."

You who stop, you who weep,  
 You who one day die without knowing why,  
 You who fight, who watch while Another sleeps,  
 You who no longer laugh with your eyes,  
 You, my brother, full of fear and anguish,  
 Raise yourself and cry No!

This poem, Roscoe asserts, "makes its point bluntly and leaves us convinced of the poet's determination vigorously to champion the African cause." So, for Roscoe, one poem is good because it

is assertive, the other bad because it expresses confusion.

Diop was killed in a plane crash that destroyed most of his poems as well. His surviving body of work is just twenty-two poems. Yet he is included in every anthology of African verse I have read. Even allowing for deficiencies of translation, his poetry is mediocre. Its anticolonialism has given Diop immortality.

It is true that the first great modern African poets were francophone, the Senegalese Leopold Senghor and Birago Diop. Both these men lived in Paris in the Thirties, it was there that their reputations and their talents developed. So not only did they spring from the soil of French intellectual imperialism in Dakar, where it was most concentrated, but they blossomed in the artistic hothouse of Paris in one of its most prolific periods. Africans from the British colonies had neither of these advantages. No wonder much of their poetry was in the stilted Victorian style. Such poetry was probably favored by most colonial educators, to whom modern poets like Eliot and Pound may have seemed much too iconoclastic.

The poetry of postindependence Africa has been greatly influenced by two Europeans, the German Ulli Beier and the Englishman Gerald Moore. Through their anthology Modern Poetry From Africa and their contributions to the literary magazine Black Orpheus, these men have made African poetry what it is today. Beier's presence at the University of Ibadan helped make Nigeria the leader in the African literary world. Donatus Nwoga of the University of Nigeria, in a 1973 essay in the periodical African Literature Today, said the two men's influence contributed to the "obscurity" of recent African poetry.

"The bulk of African poetry is...not obscure," Nwoga said. "But the majority has not received much comment or been brought to the forefront for a variety of reasons. For one thing, Ulli Beier and Gerald Moore, who still retain their pre-eminence and stature in the projection of African literature, preferred to include specifically modern poems—with all the implications of modernity determining their choice—in their anthology...(which) was bound to influence patterns of thinking on modern African poetry because of the editors' clear definition of the determining factors of their choice of poets and the high standards which they demanded in the poems they reproduced."

At the start of his essay, Nwoga quotes with approval this comment from critic Adeola James: "Our literature must be seen as part of the struggle for the liberation of Africa, politically and morally." If a poet in the new Africa was not prepared to write in a modern idiom and to concentrate on the evils of colonialism and neocolonialism, he had little chance of recognition.

Against that background, let me return to the development of poetry in Sierra Leone. In the beginning, such poetry as appeared was mostly a diversion for Creole intellectuals who tried their hands at several kinds of writing. For example, Thomas Decker wrote poems, but he is better known for his Krio translation of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. A Krio poem that has survived through the work of archivist and historian Christopher Fyfe is "For Dear Fatherland," which appeared anonymously in the Sierra Leone Weekly News in 1907. Its condemnation of Africans who trade their integrity for the white man's

goods is still being heard today, as in the plays by Dele Charley mentioned in a previous letter. The poem also provides a balance to some writings by expatriate residents of the period who comment with various degrees of disapprobation about the popular practice of evil servants taking black mistresses during their tours of duty.

Whose kind country dis, me broder,  
 All man do way tin he lek.  
 Set down mix and carry mix,  
 Pick and choose nor day nor way.  
 But nar one word are go talk  
 And de word nar true true word.  
 All man put yase down for yerry,  
 All man put heart down for think.  
 'Creo boy for Creo girl  
 Sa Lone boy for Sa Lone girl  
 If nar wharf boy sef way tin?  
 Plenty wharf boy bill tone hose.  
 Plenty wharf boy get character.'

\* \* \* \*

O my country — O my country!  
 O my dear, my father land:  
 I am sick, aye! I am dying,  
 At the sights that meet my eyes.  
 Aliens! aliens! what do ye mean  
 Thus to spoil my dearest country,  
 Thus to tread upon our daughters,  
 Thus to sodomize our land?

\* \* \* \*

Take de word way are day tell you,  
 He nor pay for trade with Body  
 Temple of de Holy Ghost.  
 Honest labour — honest labour:  
 Simple bread and simple clothing.  
 Near to Jesus, near the Cross  
 Life will be like perfumed Roses;  
 Death will be a glorious gain.

To my ear, Krio has a musical quality that makes it a good medium for poetry. In this poem the lines become a bit singsongy, but I think it could reward a poet who explored Krio's possibilities of expression. Unfortunately, Krio is considered too much of a colonial inheritance and a mark of intellectual inferiority for it to have received much attention. Krio is confused with pidgin English. Although it takes most of its vocabulary from English, it includes words from other European languages and from African tongues. Its grammar is African, and it has a unique orthography. It will take a self-confident poet, however, to fly in the face of prevailing opinion that "the quaint illiteracy of pidgin makes it useful only for light-hearted verse or for tragi-comic effects" (Roscoe). Happily, this is not the case with drama, where Krio is coming into its own.

I must now jump ahead 50 years to continue my review of Sierra Leone poetry. For his Anthology of West African Verse, editor Olumbe Bassir went to great efforts to represent as

much of the region as he could. He includes a poem from a self-published volume by Sierra Leonean Crispin George called Precious Gems Unearthed. It indicates that the art had not developed much in the half century. It's called "How Long, Lord?" Here are the first four lines:

Why so much misery in this mundane sphere,  
Such wretchedness and so much cause for fear!  
Earth was not purchased for the price of gold,  
Nor did God raise it to be bought or sold.

The poet's belief that God is watching the wickedness of the world and will bring justice to it echoes the words of "For Dear Fatherland." The influence of Christianity appears, from the poems I have read, to have been much stronger on the anglo-phone West African poets than on their francophone neighbors. Creole poets are especially affected by their religion, and soon it becomes a point of much internal conflict.

The other selection from a Sierra Leonean in Bassir's anthology is "The Continent That Lies Within Us." The poet, Davidson Nicol, was born in Nigeria but grew up in Sierra Leone and England. Like The Gambia's Lenrie Peters, Nicol earned a degree in medicine from an English university, and like so many other African poets, he taught at the University of Ibadan. He has made his mark on African literature with his short stories, like "The Truly Married Woman," rather than with his poetry. He did, however, get great mileage out of the poem in Bassir's volume. It appears again ten years later in a volume called Commonwealth Poems of Today. Names have changed; the title becomes "The Meaning of Africa," the poet calls himself Abioseh Nicol. Except for minor changes of verb tense and form, and the exclusion of some specific references to London, the poem is the same.

Oh, I got tired of the cold northern sun  
Of white anxious ghost-like faces  
Of crouching over heatless fires  
In my lonely bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Go up-country, so they said,  
To see the real Africa.  
For whomsoever you may be,  
That is where you come from.

\* \* \* \*

Now you lie before me passive  
With your unanswering green challenge.  
Is this all you are?  
This long uneven red road, this occasional  
succession

Of huddled heaps of four mud walls  
And thatched, falling grass roofs  
Sometimes ennobled by a thin layer  
Of white plaster, and covered with thin  
Slanting corrugated zinc.

\* \* \* \*

You are not a country, Africa,  
You are a concept,

Fashioned in our minds, each to each,  
 To hide our separate fears,  
 To dream our separate dreams.

\* \* \* \*

I know now that is what you are, Africa:  
 Happiness, contentment, and fulfillment,  
 And a small bird singing on a mango tree.

These excerpts from the rather lengthy poem reveal its message and probably something of the poet's life: disillusion with Europe and Western culture, return to Africa, initial joy, disappointment, greater understanding and renewed hope. I like it; evidently so did the editor of the Commonwealth poems, for he included it again in a similar book the following year, New Voices of the Commonwealth. Other critics and editors have not been so favorable, however. I have not read Nicol's poems in any other anthology, nor seen him referred to as a poet in any of the literature reviews I've read. Yet his poetry is worthy of recognition. It reveals a more contemplative mind than do the poems of many of the other African poets. Nicol does not blindly accept all that Africa contains in her past, nor does he reject everything the white man has introduced to his land.

In "Easter Morning," another Nicol poem in the first Commonwealth volume, the poet takes up the recurrent theme of Christianity. He begins with an incisive thrust into a complicated theological question, and I wonder if he hasn't been influenced by Graham Greene's novel set in Sierra Leone, The Heart of the Matter. The voice is that of The Wounded Christ on Good Friday:

I am not your God  
 If you have not denied me once, twice  
 If I have not heard you complaining  
 On doubting my existence.

I am not your Love  
 If you have not rejected me often.  
 For what then am I worth to you  
 If you are sinless.

Then Nicol turns to the particular problem that faces African Christians, how to accept something of great value from men who deal in cheap goods and deceit. For the African, Christianity presents the dilemma of accepting the unacceptable or rejecting that which everyone seeks.

After me, the stone jars of cheap gin, the  
 ornamental  
 Glass beads, the punitive expeditions, your  
 colonial status,  
 I have heard it all before; hide your face,  
 Bury it, for fear that finding me, you may  
 find peace.

Christianity cannot be taken on the terms it is offered to the African. On Easter eve, The African Priest turns away from the

white man's church to speak directly to God.

Come close to me, God, do not keep away,  
I walk towards you but you are too far,  
Please try and meet me halfway,  
Because you are my all, my all.

Finally, The African Intellectual wakes on Easter morning to search his soul. He rejects the primitive gods of his ancestors:

Where are you now, O Shango?  
Two-headed, powerful  
Man and woman, hermaphrodite  
Holding your quivering thunderbolts  
With quiet savage malice;  
Brooding over your domain,  
Africa, Cuba, Haiti, Brazil,  
Slavery of mind unabolished.  
Always wanting to punish, never to love.

and accepts the Christ he finds not in the missionaries' words but in his own heart.

Yet You Christ are always there.  
You are the many-faceted crystal  
Of our desires and hopes,  
Behind the smoke-screen of incense,  
Concealed in mumbled European tongues  
Of worship and of praise.  
In the thick dusty verbiage  
Of centuries of committees  
Of ecumenical councils,  
You yet remained revealed  
To those who seek you.  
It is I, you say.  
You remain in the sepulchre  
Of my brown body.

"African Easter" is not a great poem, but it presents a thoughtful approach to contemporary African life with an engaging technique. Perhaps, judging by the criteria mentioned above, the poem is not obscure enough to be considered modern, and perhaps the poet is not considered revolutionary enough to further "the struggle for the liberation of Africa, politically and morally."

Another Sierra Leonean poet included in both Commonwealth Poems and New Voices is Gaston Bart-Williams. I know nothing about him except what I can glean from his poems. He obviously has spent some time in the United States and his poetry is more influenced by black America than by black Africa. His "Despondence Blues" uses the language and rhythm of the gospel-singing southern Negro.

All night long Lord  
'ave been waiting for your call  
All night long Lord  
'ave been looking for your hand



If you don't come and take me Lord  
 Them folks will crush me up  
 If you don't come and take me Lord  
 Them folks will crush me down.

He also appears to be more concerned with the problems of America than those of Africa, as in "god bless US."

awake  
 I listen to old jazz  
 soul jazz  
 and dig the strokes  
 the sharp edge of the penetrating steel  
 awake  
 I listen to same home steel  
 digging through Vietcongs  
 and all I did was to get up  
 and wash my face

Bart-Williams does not meet the demands of African critics to concentrate on African problems for an African audience. The rest of us, however, are free to enjoy the pleasant sounds and hopeful images of "Piano Keys."

Your white body  
 And my black body  
 Match hand in hand  
 In harmony  
 As your white body  
 And my black body  
 Produce the notes that fill the air  
 That thrill the air  
 As people listen  
 Yes people listen  
 As your snow-white key  
 And my lamp-black key  
 Strike the notes of harmony.

From the midSixties we come to the present day and three active Sierra Leonean poets: Syl Cheyney-Coker, Lemuel Johnson and Muktarr Mustapha. Unfortunately, I have read nothing by Johnson. He teaches at the University of Michigan and the two volumes of his poetry published in the States, High Life for Caliban and Hand in the Navel, are unavailable here.

Cheyney-Coker also lives and works in the US, but his Concerto for an Exile can be bought here. He has just produced a new volume, A Graveyard Also Has Teeth, which hasn't reached the bookstores here yet, but which is reviewed in the August 25 issue of West Africa magazine. The reviewer calls Cheyney-Coker "one of the two or three finest poets writing in Africa today." I can't believe that.

Cheyney-Coker is praised for that which gave David Diop his fame: anger. The reviewer says his Concerto poems, which are included in the new work, are "fierce, fluent and well aimed." I find them pretentious, overwrought and undisciplined. The main theme is his self-disgust for being a Creole (his "foul genealogy"), for living in the US, for loving an Argentinian.

woman and losing her. Yet he seeks justification and the reader's sympathy in almost every line.

I sing only for myself truly the paradigm of  
sorrow  
all my sickness of head whirling at the whim  
of a wind  
Creole ugliness of blue excrescences flushing  
at the  
deaths of Sierra Leoneans all brothers of my  
misery

("Horoscope")

I am not the renegade  
who has forsaken your shores  
I am not the vampire  
gnawing at your heart  
to feed capitalist banks  
I am your poet  
writing No to the world!

("Guinea")

(The last line appears to be derived from Diop's  
"Defir a la Force.")

and I offered my soul offered all my negritude  
to the sea waves the arms of a woman  
the amazon to whom I offered my negritude  
that senorita who tortured my heart  
during my raw, pernicious winters in America.

("Misery of the Convert")

I suspect the poet of pretense, of knowing where the market is. Dr. Palmer told me Cheyney-Coker has a British accent too pronounced to be natural. The poet professes not to be interested in literary recognition ("prepare to burn your degrees and other academic shit") but complained to Palmer when he found his poems were not taught at Fourah Bay. Also, his exile is self-imposed.

It may be unfair to judge poetry from the poet. On words alone, then, judge these lines from the title poem:

And the guns roared on  
in Sierra Leone and Argentina  
to plunder the tree of agony  
in my soul!

Guns plundering trees?

His thoughts are as unclear as his images. He makes much of his rejection of Christianity, accusing Christ of dying not "to save the world/but to make it a plantation where my people sweat." He shows none of the perception of Nicol in separating the good from the bad in the religion, but lumps them together in a simplistic view of history.

I was a king before they nailed you on the cross  
converted I read ten lies in your silly com-  
mandments  
to honour you my Christ

when you have deprived me of my race  
 ("Misery of the Convert")

The new poems in Graveyard are supposed to be more controlled, more mature, but from the examples the reviewer provides, I doubt it:

at this hour taking off my shirt  
 as if my hour has come  
 at this hour realising how I alone  
 have faced the pestiferous years  
 sweating inside my heart from sea to sea...

hieroglyph of the night hiding inside my  
 coffin  
 are you the primordial brother or the nemesis  
 of the soul?

Finally we come to Mustapha. His works also are unavailable here, apparently for political reasons, but I found one of his poems in a fairly recent (1976) anthology, A Selection of African Poetry. The poem is called "Gbassay — blades in regiment" and it evokes images of mutilation connected with African cult groups. Gbassay, according to the editors' notes, was a cry used by initiates of a Sierra Leone cult in the Fifties.

Push a porcupine quill into  
 My quaint eyes  
 Then plunge an assagai into  
 My fibroid face  
 Then slash my neck and stain  
 The tortoise back rich with my blood

Force a rug needle into my narrow  
 nose: force it right into my  
 Indigo marrow.

Lift my tongue and tie it  
 With a rope from a tethered goat  
 Lacerate my lips with deep sanguine  
 gutters splattering blood like a  
 Bellow in full blaze — blazing yellow

Disembowel my belly and feed the  
 Hawks that hover there hourless-  
 timeless black blue sky  
 And inside a crater bury  
 My ears.

"Is it death?"

It is rash to judge a poet on one poem, but the rhymes and alliteration are so strained, leading the poet to choose an entirely inappropriate adjective in the second line, that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Mustapha, too, owes his celebrity to his heritage rather than his skill.

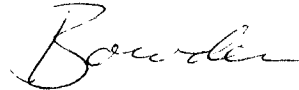
He was born in Freetown to a Muslim family with roots in

the Wolof of Senegal and the Yoruba of Nigeria. He was educated in Europe and the US and has "travelled widely," according to his biographical note in the anthology. He has written a long dramatic poem, Dalabani, which draws on the tradition of the griots, wandering musicians and story-tellers of the Muslim peoples of the Sahel. He seems to derive much of his inspiration from his remote ancestry. I heard a short reading from one of his poems on a BBC broadcast, and I recall images of camels crossing burning sands and a reference to Lake Chad.

Mustapha is also a dramatist, and it was for his work in this area that he got into trouble with the Sierra Leone government. On the BBC program he said of exile: "One was dealing with plays that didn't meet with the approval of the authorities, so I decided to leave." Currently he is working on the "delicate" problem of combining different aspects of African art—dance, drama, music, poetry—into one form. Traditional African society perceived no divisions between these modes, and many African poets are also dramatists trying to find the means of recapturing this inclusivity of artistic expression.

In my next letter, I will look at such attempts in Sierra Leone and explore what effect the government's sensitivity to productions on the stage has had on the development of the theater here.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn