

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-18

City Hotel

Box 24

Freetown, Sierra Leone

September 26, 1980

The Press in Sierra Leone, part 2

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

Dear Peter,

"I love America. I love what Americans stand for. They believe in hard work and getting well paid for it. I love America."

Such effusive affection for our country is especially cheering since it comes from the editor of the government-owned Daily Mail, Arika Awuta-Coker. He has visited 16 states and has a brother who works for the Washington Post. Since he has more responsibility than anyone else connected to the government for shaping what Sierra Leoneans think, his sympathies must be to the advantage of the US image here.

Primarily, though, Awuta-Coker is a supporter of his country and its rulers. He makes no excuses about propagating the government line.

"We don't print anything that would have a degenerative effect on the public," he told me. "Our news evaluation is always geared to presenting the policies of the government, or at least insuring that the government is not negatively presented."

He meets with President Siaka Stevens once a week to get his views on current events, local and international. The editor is in daily contact with the minister of information and can get in touch with any other member of the cabinet whenever he wants to make sure what the official position is on any issue.

However, he is not told what to write about or what to say. Having accepted his position as a spokesman for the government, Awuta-Coker is given a fair degree of freedom to do his job as he sees fit.

"Normally I have the right to present my own viewpoint, even to criticize. I wrote a critical editorial about the housing situation, for example. At times I've even questioned our foreign policy stands."

Yet his role as government critic is a bit hypocritical. Because of his close links with the country's leaders, he already knows their reaction to his views before he writes, and he would not try to change them by manipulating public opinion. Writing a critical editorial is little more than an attempt to retain his legitimacy.

"I try to stimulate the interest of our readers. I can't always present things from the government angle and expect

Bowden Quinn is an Overseas Journalism Fellow of the Institute studying colonial influences on West African nations. His current interest is the cultures of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

readers to respond."

Awuta-Coker writes one editorial a day, which appears on the front page of the paper. The editorials are mild in tone and usually positive in approach. Topics and the stands he took on them this month have included OPEC—the world should unite to resist oil production cuts; the Cuban astronaut—a source of pride for the Third World and for blacks; the Olympic boycott—damaging to international sports; the OAU talks on the Western Sahara conflict—another display of Stevens' outstanding leadership.

Perhaps a more effective, if insidious, means of shaping public opinion through the newspaper is the news features and analyses that make up a large part of the Mail. On the average, four or five of these articles appear in an issue, which has only about 18 stories in its eight pages.

In a sampling from two weeks of the Daily Mail in September, about 50 of the 215 articles were features or analyses. Of these, only 10 were by local writers. The majority, over 30 of the articles, were news service stories dealing with African or Third World affairs. The rest of the articles were of foreign events, several of which could not have been of interest to many readers and appeared to be used as fillers.

The foreign news service stories come from a variety of sources. Reuters is the only major news agency the Mail subscribes to, but it buys articles from some feature services, including one called the International New Press Agency that appears to have close links with the French government.

Articles from this agency take a strong pro-French—and sometimes subtly anti-American—line, and seem designed to appeal to Third World countries. My suspicion that INPA was not your normal Western news agency was confirmed this week by the French embassy's announcement of a five-day visit to Freetown by the INPA publisher, and major writer, Dr. Francois Archambault. He came as the guest of the French ambassador to hold "top level discussions with distinguished personalities in the country" and to strengthen "the relationship between his agency and Sierra Leone in general," according to the Mail's account of the French embassy's announcement.

Having become a little irked by seeing frequent articles about how wonderful France is and how much it is doing for the Third World, I was amused and gladdened to read an article by Gwynne Dyer in the Mail this month that began with this statement: "The world's last colonialist, someone remarked last month at the celebrations marking the end of six decades of Anglo-French rule in the New Hebrides, will be a Frenchman."

Ms. Dyer is an independent news columnist who writes on all sorts of international affairs. There is a decided leftward tilt to her writing, but her views are always well thought out and sometimes unpredictable. Awuta-Coker was introduced to her on a trip to England. Her articles arrive by mail and appear erratically, on an average of once a week. Hers is by far the most radical writing that appears in the Mail. Although the paper has a pro-African and pro-Third World bias that might be denounced as Communist ideology by some people in the US, the Mail is basically quite conservative. Awuta-Coker said he gets material free from Tass and the New China News Agency but rarely uses any of it.

A talk with Awuta-Coker would ease the fears of those who see the Russians taking over in Africa. In college, in the late Sixties, he was an activist, spouting Marx and Mao and calling for revolution, but that talk disappeared when he graduated. He told me laughingly that when he sees an old friend from those liberated days now grown paunchy in his job as a government official, he tells him, "Comrade, you have betrayed the revolution." Awuta-Coker agreed with what a Ghanaian teacher in The Gambia told me, that despite their leaders' fascination with socialism, West Africans are inherently capitalist.

The Mail reflects this conservative philosophy. It is a staid and quiet newspaper, not given to screaming headlines or sordid news. In this aspect it is quite changed from its colonial beginnings. It was founded in 1942 by the London Daily Mirror company, one of several papers the publishers started in West Africa. All these papers had the racy tabloid style of their progenitor, jauntily written and full of crime news.

In issues from 1954, Freetown comes across like a town out of the Old West, or at least the roaring Twenties. People were knocking each other off daily. The pages are also full of advertisements, mostly for patent medicines, grooming aids and food supplements, but for movies and motorcars as well. The editorial tone was strictly colonial and righteous, however. One editorial entitled "The African's Place in Commerce" proclaimed, "Business is business and if the Africans want to play a greater part in the trade of the country they must be prepared to work harder and be more enterprising."

When it did take the side of the African, the Mail supported the Freetown Creoles' attempts to maintain political power over the indigenous tribes of the provinces. The paper firmly opposed the British government's proposal to give the franchise equally to the Colony and to the Protectorate, futilely as it turned out.

It is no surprise that a year after independence the Sierra Leone government bought out the British owners. In appearance the paper changed little through the Sixties, but it is clear the government was in control. Reading issues from the early months of 1967, one has little inkling of how unstable the government of Prime Minister Albert Margai was until elections resulted in a virtual stalemate between Margai's Sierra Leone People's Party and Stevens' All People's Congress. As three successive military regimes spent a year in power before handing over the government to Stevens, the Mail placidly supported each one.

The paper began to change about 1970 as its financial situation deteriorated.

"Our big problem is finances," Awuta-Coker told me. "The Daily Mail has not been able to generate enough funds over the years to pay for what it needs."

In 1962, when an issue cost a penny, circulation was 25,000. Although the price has risen steadily since then, to 10 cents a copy today, revenues have not kept up with expenses. Circulation has been limited by production problems rather than the rising cost of the paper. The Mail has sold out printings of 30,000 copies this year. Awuta-Coker feels it could sell 50,000 copies, half of them in the provinces, but the run is down to 10,000 because of the newsprint shortage.

Commercial advertising has almost disappeared from the paper. Most of the ads are job announcements from government or parastatal organizations, or personal ads selling cars or seeking housing.

One feature that has lasted over the years is the In Memoriam notices, family remembrances of departed members some of whom died as long as 25 years ago. "Gone but not Forgotten" monopolizes a page or more in every issue.

Along with the appearance of the paper, the quality of the writing has deteriorated. Journalism used to be an outlet of expression for the most highly educated persons among the West Africans. Today, most Sierra Leoneans with advanced education work in government. The Mail's local writing is ragged.

The paper has eight reporters plus stringers in all the major provincial towns, but they don't produce much copy. On the average, the paper has two or three Freetown items in an issue, usually crime and court news but not as prominently displayed as in the old days. Despite the stringers, stories from the provinces are rare. When one appears, it usually has national interest. . . involves a politician.

Local news is dominated by national and international events, the latter due to Stevens' position as chairman of the OAU and the use of Freetown as the venue for pan-African conferences. Sport does not get much attention. Usually there are two articles in an issue dealing with the Freetown soccer league. The provincial leagues and other sports get little notice, and international sports get almost none at all.

On the whole, it's a dull paper, and I am surprised by the demand for it cited by Awuta-Coker. Although it is the country's only daily newspaper, a person can get more news, both local and international, from the radio. I wouldn't think many people would be eager to spend 10 cents a day for the occasional feature on Freetown nightlife, and other than the Gwynne Dyer columns the thought pieces aren't of much appeal.

This may be an unfair time to judge the paper. Awuta-Coker said it is in the middle of a major reorganization, and no one is quite sure what anyone is doing. For example, the paper has stopped printing letters to the editor because no one is assigned to read them.

Yet, although I haven't seen any Ghanaian or Nigerian papers, I have the impression from what I hear about them that here is another area of intellectual endeavor where Sierra Leone, which used to be far ahead of its British West African neighbors, is now far behind.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn