Editorial

Let us Weave: Welcome to Research in Sierra Leone Studies (RISLS)

We take great pleasure in launching Research in Sierra Leone Studies (RISLS): Weave, the first fully online, refereed journal that focuses on Sierra Leone Studies, published on an “open access” platform to enable a worldwide readership.

The idea for this journal began with a conversation I had with Abdul Mahdieu Savage (a former colleague and friend from Fourah Bay College) in 2008 about the lack of scholarly journals and/or magazines that publish work on Sierra Leone. Mahdieu’s opinion, which he also said was a challenge to me to fill this gap, was simply this: Why, with many Sierra Leonean scholars and writers around the world, is there no journal that publishes their research as well as scholarship on Sierra Leone generally? We both agreed that Sierra Leone needs a journal that speaks to the country’s research.

After that conversation, I broached the idea with some people I know whose research focuses on Sierra Leone. Thus began a process of dialogs and deliberations among some of the members of the journal’s current, founding Editorial Team. I also took the idea to the Sierra Leone panels at the African Literature Association (ALA) Conference in Burlington, Vermont, USA, in April 2009. We have, when conference schedules permitted, visited this idea and its practical implementation in subsequent ALA conferences. In addition, we continued our deliberations through numerous email exchanges and telephone conversations. As our discussions unfolded, it became clear to us as to what the nature of this journal should be: one that scholars, academics, and writers in Sierra Leone and its Diaspora should have better access to and publish materials in, particularly for Sierra Leone-based writers and researchers who often find it difficult to get venues to publish their works. Evidently such a journal, we agreed, should better facilitate and circulate, produce and distribute work about Sierra Leone and its Diaspora worldwide. (The journal will publish dissertation and thesis abstracts on all subjects Sierra Leonean starting with the second issue.)

Our first consideration was to pursue the traditional mode of journal establishment: we wanted a print-based periodical run by a reputable publisher. I undertook over three years of inquiries collecting and collating pertinent information in that direction. However, the outcome of my research showed that we could neither afford nor sustain such a periodical; moreover, the publishers I contacted dismissed the idea of investing in a new journal with no known readership and contributor base. For example, every publisher I contacted expected, and at times demanded, me to bring them a number (contributors, for example) which correlates with the journal’s potential reach. That, simply, was not feasible.

However, our ruminations and aspirations resonated with the current, extraordinary developments in digital publishing. The phenomenal, on-going advances in the Digital Humanities, for instance, to foster greater, and at times instant accessibility and participation in the way we do research, have transformed, and are transforming, the field
of knowledge production and circulation via electronic communication. Also important is how such innovations make digitally transmitted scholarship a common good by using the Internet to establish links between the academic community and the greater public. Such developments appealed to me. With further research, and with the help of Dr. Umaru Bah, I concluded that the electronic medium is the path for the kind of journal we wanted. Practicalizing our ideas through the online route means that our journal would provide free access to published materials on Sierra Leone and its Diaspora to readers, scholars, and students anywhere who could find their way to an Internet browser.

This conviction led me to anchor our ideas of this journal to the Public Knowledge Project http://pkp.sfu.ca and its Open Journals Systems (OJS) http://pkp.sfu.ca/?q=ojs based in Canada. The OJS is designed to help scholarly journals publish online in an open access format by reducing costs and improving their management. I was drawn to, and convinced by, the system’s publishing, editing, and circulation philosophy. Moreover, I was attracted to the OJS and its collaboration with Creative Commons http://creativecommons.org, which provides flexible methods of protection for authors, writers and educators. We are, therefore, publishing this journal under the Creative Commons license, which means that copyright of all materials produced in Weave is with authors. This license further explicitly permits writers to deposit in open access repositories and post on personal or departmental Web sites, for example, the versions of their manuscripts accepted for publication in Weave. When in 2012 I reported my finding to my conversation partners, they all agreed that the digital route is the way to go.

Thus, this journal is our response to bring Sierra Leone Studies into the current transformations in digital scholarship; it is also our efforts to situate Sierra Leonean scholarship within the changes that are taking hold in electronic communication. We are most proud of the open access dimension of the journal. This is an important step toward creating and developing increased public access to research on Sierra Leone by Sierra Leoneans and non-Sierra Leoneans alike. We hope and believe that using this platform will provide greater exposure to research on Sierra Leone and increase its impact and visibility on the Internet and around the world. For example, the journal will provide full-text links to authors’ works. We affirm that this digital model of publishing will not diminish the rigor of review and editing as practiced in print-based publications. As stated in the journal’s Focus and Scope section we intend, when we can afford it, to have a print version of Weave that will be published concurrently with its electronic counterpart.

Naming the journal called for productive brainstorming; however once we settled on the title, we also started the process of getting a “handle” for the journal—a handle that is mnemonic and makes the journal easily remembered and searchable on the Internet. Our intention was, obviously, to get a handle that speaks specifically to Sierra Leonean culture as well as captures the journal’s focus and scope. After some creative and provocative suggestions, I came up with “weave”, and we agreed on it.

One of the great achievements of humans is weaving. Humans have been practicing weaving for thousands of years. Along the way, they discovered the amazing capabilities to utilize the craft for symbolic purposes as well as for productive strategies to analyze,
explain and express their religious, spiritual, traditional, intellectual, social, and economic lives and experiences.

Weaving was established in Sierra Leone thousands of years ago. The industry is central to the country’s material culture, and enriches its festivals, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, customs, and practices. The varieties of weaving products—from the “country cloth” to the Kpokpoi and braided or plaited hair, from the Shukublai to fishing nets, ropes, baskets, bags, hats, mats, hammocks and numerous other products—dominate the country’s homes, public spaces, traditional ceremonies, and the personal lives of its people. These products have intricate designs, patterns, and colors that interweave art and geometry. Sierra Leoneans have used weaving products for a variety of purposes ranging from the marker of rank and the building of concepts to the ascription of value, prestige and honor. For example, the famous “country cloth” signified wealth and prestige. In fact, the significance of traditional woven cloth in the political, economic and cultural heritage of the country is well documented. For instance, woven cloth was a means of exchange for goods and services, monetary system to purchase goods or pay taxes, and measure of value to reward labor in many societies in pre-colonial Sierra Leone. As C. Magbaily Fyle explains, Almamy Suluku, ruler of the Biriwa Limba in the 1880s, placed local cloth production under his control as one of his powerful political and economic capital.

Venice and Alastair Lamb in their comprehensive book on weaving in Sierra Leone titled *Sierra Leone Weaving* (1984) offer unique and insightful perspectives on the craft in the country. The Lambs show the centrality of the weaving industry in Sierra Leone; locate its place in our culture; and explain how integral the country organizes its economic, social and traditional practices around it. They further identify the techniques, history, and diversity of what they call the “weaving industry” and the “complexity” of its traditions, craft, skill, and aesthetics in Sierra Leone (11). The Lambs also point out that the industry is widespread, and was long established before European contact. In fact, they show that Europeans discovered a thriving, long-standing weaving industry when they arrived in Sierra Leone. According to them it is, perhaps, the longest surviving traditional industry in the country.

Most informative in the Lambs’ examination of the country’s weaving traditions is their description of the various loom types and their processes for both textile and raphia weaving. For example they identify the tripod looms, which “produce some of the most complex and sophisticated patterning to be found in all of West Africa” (20). They also describe the rafter hook loom which makes the famous Kpokpoi cloths which, according to the Lambs, are “both complex in their overall patterning and contain a quite elaborate repertoire of motifs, all of which calling for great weaving skills” (28). The loom types, they claim, have their distinctiveness as well as their commonalities observable among the peoples and regions in the country. For example, they identify the sangama and gbatamei among the Mendes; the kore among the Limbas, and the Kore kokokoh which is used among the Limbas and the Yalunkas; and the bandor among the Kissis which in its uniqueness, the Lambs say, is a “most efficient piece of weaving machinery, capable of producing cloth of reasonable quality at a high rate” (56). This diversity of looms demonstrates that weaving remains a powerful symbol of the connected differences and
similarities of Sierra Leoneans. In essence, the loom types are like languages, or a metaphor of the linguistic diversity of Sierra Leone.

Indeed, weaving is language or a form of language. In general, woven products, cloths and textiles in particular, are semiotic and linguistic systems. As the Lambs show, the Kpokpoi cloths made by the Mendes and Vais and the huronko (or what we commonly call ronko) among the Limbas, as well as the bila gown they use for initiation rituals and ceremonies, have patterns, symbols, decorations, motifs, composites, and structures that communicate the language of rituals, ceremonies, nature, wealth, and secret society, etc. The signs and motifs on such woven cloths are language details that code and encode meanings.

The correlation of weaving and language, cloth and word, is excellently articulated in the mythology of the Dogon people of Mali; to the Dogon, weaving is not only similar to speaking, but, according to their mythology, both activities originated at the same time and were derived from the same ancestry.

The Dogon ascribe language and weaving to Nommo—a male god who buried himself inside the womb of a female Nommo who had become part of the earth. When the male deity’s mouth emerged from an anthill, it took the form of a loom warped with cotton threads between the upper and lower teeth. “As the threads crossed and uncrossed, the two tips of the Spirit’s forked tongue pushed the thread of the weft to and fro, and the web took shape from his mouth in the breath of the second revealed Word” (Griaule 28). Language clothes the Dogon: “The weaver . . . sings as he throws the shuttle, and the sound of his voice enters into the warp, adding to and taking along with it the voice of the ancestors” (Griaule 74).

Consequently, for the Dogon “to be naked is to be speechless” (Griaule 82); to them cloth is, therefore, language literally. Accordingly, for the Dogon the “oral word is captured in the textile, and each word itself is given a body of fiber; many words linked together become the body and voice of the textile. Whereas the textile gives form to the word, the word as textile endows the human body with language. Whoever wears this cloth is transformed from an animal without language into a speaking rational being—a member of the tribe” (Sullivan 28).

This connection between weaving as language, or the trope of weaving as language, is also evident in the mythologies of origins and etiologies of ethical and moral behavior among Sierra Leoneans. In the different languages of Sierra Leone, there are folk tales of the spider as weaver, a benevolent creature or a trickster figure (for example the Creole Bra Spider, the Bullom or Sherbro Ba Na, and the Temne Pa Nes). In many of these tales, the spider weaves its way out of complicated situations. Being the source of stories, the spider occupies the central position and is the ultimate symbol of the storyteller in these cultures. The spider gives stories, and by extension language, that express human experiences and speak of the human condition. Its web, and the narratives around it, provides stories people deploy to reflect on the interwoven tapestry of life, nature, morality, and ethics. The spider’s weaving is metaphorically an act of language, and its web the product and giver of thought and stories. This is such the case that the famous and renowned Sierra Leonean storyteller, griot, singer, folklorist, and accordionist, Salia Koroma, had his oral folktales, songs, and proverbs translated from
Mende into English and published as *The Spider’s Web* (1986). Another animal associated with weaving who occupies a paradoxical place in Sierra Leone folkloric lore is the appropriately named weaverbird. Admired as the most renowned builder (of intricate and elegant nests) but not the most revered, the bird is also seen as stubborn, a babbler, and a pest to rice farmers. Frederick Bobor James, a playwright, employs this paradox to tell the story of Sierra Leone’s social malaise in his play *The Weaver Birds* (1986).

In many, if not all, cultures around the world, weaving and storytelling are related. But the analogies of weaving and other human endeavors abound. Thus, “weaving has long been a metaphor for the creation of something other than cloth” (Sullivan 23). Or as David Jongeward states: “Every weaver, when engaged in the act of interlacing one thread with another, participates in a process that for countless generations has been a primal metaphor for creation, including creation of the world itself” (159).

Another analogy of weaving is in the claim that texts have their heritage in textiles. Indisputably, the English noun “text” comes from the Latin verb *texere*, also meaning “to weave” [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text). As the French philosopher, linguist, social and literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes states, “etymologically the text is a cloth; *textus*, meaning ‘woven’” (76, emphasis in original). This view of writing as weaving thus stresses the connections between language/word and cloth. The weaver crafts textiles; the writer can with the same verb fashion and contrive, construct and build texts.

The correlation of cloths/textiles as texts is evident in the way anthropologists can today trace the history and origins of a culture through the record of its textiles. Textiles, like texts, carry meaning and tell stories. For example, textiles in museums can be “read” as written texts (linguistic) and/or signs (semiotics) to furnish important cultural and historical information. Therefore, woven cloths communicate evidence about a society which created it in a manner not dissimilar from a written text. Where words and sentences inscribe texts, the choice of fiber, cotton, pattern, dye, as well as its production method, encode textiles. With reference to Sierra Leone, the Lambs note that there are “numerous items of relevant cloth and weaving equipment in museum collections” in Europe and America (12). The cloths in those museums speak the “language” of our past, and preserve our stories, history, and traditions.

This connection between weaving and textiles and writing and texts underscores our linkage of this journal to weaving. Weaving as writing and writing as weaving, language as cloth and cloth as language, or the nexus of weaver and writer, text and textile, generates discourses through research that emerge as texts. Weaving, by definition, is the interlacing of two sets of yarns or thread or raffia at right angles that produces cloths, etc. By comparison, research is the intertwining of ideas that we produce in writing as texts. A weaver creates his own subject, interpretation, style, context, and emotion in producing a cloth. A writer similarly employs these elements, which she interweaves into the ideas and thoughts that are threaded into books, articles, poems, etc.

In short, weaving is a metaphor also of the way research is done. Ergo, associating this journal with weaving not only recognizes a veritable Sierra Leonean industry and craft, but also provides our approach to, and definition of, Sierra Leone Studies as a field that encapsulates the broad spectrum or skein that interlaces all disciplines—from the
Sierra Leone Studies as a woven cloth—rich, varied, and interconnected—approached and practiced from multiple disciplines. The works we publish in this journal will reflect the many threads, dyes, hues, cotton, raphia, strands, etc. that constitute Sierra Leone research. Seen this way, weaving elucidates not only the critical and creative texture of Sierra Leone Studies, but also the central emblem that captures the identity of Sierra Leoneans. According to the Lambs, the basis of Sierra Leone weaving is strip weaving in which narrow slips of cloth, sometimes as many as one hundred, are sewn together to make larger pieces of garments. Sierra Leone, with its different peoples and ethnic groups, is, like strip weaving, an aggregation of segments strung together to make a whole—the nation.

So we invite you to come weave, spin, knit, quilt, braid, plait, and sew, etc. with us. Talking about the distinctiveness of the Vai inflection of the Kpokpoi cloth in the Beving Collection, the Lambs note: “No two of these cloths are alike. While all clearly fall within the Kpokpoi tradition, each shows the inventiveness of an individual weaver giving full expression to his imagination and skill with a surprising degree of freedom from formal restraints. This individuality contributes enormously to the beauty of these cloths, some of which will surely be acknowledged one day as ranking among the masterpieces of African art” (121). This is the ethos we will pursue in Weave—to publish articles and other works that, while they all contribute to the fabric of Sierra Leone Studies, are distinct and different enough to fully express the individuality of each researcher and writer.

I want to thank the members of the Editorial Team for their willingness to serve on this new project for altruistic reasons. I also acknowledge their untiring efforts and contributions in making this journal come to life. Let me mention in particular Dr. T.B.R. Yormah and Mrs. Elizabeth Kamara, two members of the Editorial Team based in Sierra Leone who worked tirelessly—at times with no electricity to access the internet to do the journal’s job, at other times with slow internet connections that will take hours to open an email or download a two-page document—for their patience and dedication to carry the journal’s work in such difficult conditions. I also want to thank the Office of the Provost at my institution, Franklin & Marshall College, for putting at my disposal two members of our Academic Technology staff, Jason Brooks and Anthony J. Weaver, Jr. who configured and put into place the operational infrastructure of the journal. With my non-knowledge of software and operating systems, this project would not have reached this stage this fast without their input and help. I also thank Karun of KarunCollection for granting us permission to use the image “Sierra Leone, Hammock” as the journal’s logo gratis. (When I sent a similar request to the British Museum for approval to use an image of a Kpokpoi cloth in its collection, I was asked for a “Logo fee for a duration of 10 years of £565 +VAT”.)

Please note that this Inaugural Edition of Weave is made up of solicited materials. My gratitude goes to the contributors who made this possible: Professor Eustace Palmer (Doc P), Dr. Yormah, and Dr. Braima James for giving us permission to produce their work previously published elsewhere; Dr. Ishmail Rashid for his article, which is being published for the first time; Professor Eldred Jones for agreeing to grant us an interview, and Mrs. Kamara for conducting that interview; Mr. Samuel Kamara for consenting to do
the book review at a short notice, and also for spending his own funds to purchase the book; the late Tatafway Tumoe, like his older brother Saaba Tumoe also a talented writer who died too soon, for his poems; and Dr. Mohamed Kamara for agreeing to write the “Afterword” to the poems as suggested by the Drama, Fiction, and Poetry Editor, Dr. Pede Hollist.

A new venture (in this case e-venture) like this disputably necessitates risks: of succeeding (or not), of being queried as a suitable option to available ones, or as to the motives and the rationale of those who start it. Nonetheless, we chose to take this chance, hoping for a better distribution of Sierra Leonean research and writing via the electronic medium that has become available and vibrant in recent years. As Professor Jones reminds us in his interview in this volume, Sierra Leone’s journal history and publication has had a checkered past because of the difficulties of printing and circulation. Can *Weave* buck this unacceptable trend? With your support we believe we will.

Patrick S. Bernard, Founding Editor
Notes
1. They identify eleven loom types; eight are cotton/textile and three are raphia, p.18.
2. It should be noted that spider folktales are found all over West Africa.
4. I owe most of my ideas here to Sullivan.
5. For example, they identify those in the Beving Collection in the Museum of Mankind in the British Museum.
6. When I was in Sierra Leone in 2008, I had engaging conversations with Tatafway about his creative writing, among other subjects. When I told him that we were in the process of launching a journal, he was elated. The next time I met with him, he had copies of some of his poems, which he handed to me, saying that he hoped they would meet the standard for publication in the yet-to-be launched journal. I have kept those poems since; we do him the honor of being the first poet to be published, although posthumously, in Weave.

Works Cited


