Nationalism should Trump Ethnicity: The Krio Saga in Sierra Leone History¹

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This presentation is part of a broader concern about the relative significance of nationalism vis-à-vis ethnicity in Africa, particularly in Sierra Leone. It has been my thesis that the Sierra Leone system and Government have, since independence, made little effort to nurture a strong sense of nationalism in its citizens and this has given rise to a much greater sense of ethnicity among its peoples, resulting in elaborate complications in the arena of politics and relations between Sierra Leoneans. This, in my impression, is not the way to go if we want a healthy and progressive society, moving more reliably towards development.

In this connection, the history of the Krio society has been allowed to fester with misleading perceptions of its development which Sierra Leonean historians, who had been in a position to correct them, have literally encouraged. This has led to somewhat divisive tendencies among Sierra Leoneans, when in fact Krio history, if properly understood, has a keen potential of uniting and fostering nationalism in Sierra Leone. As will be demonstrated here, the emergence of Krio society included all ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, far more than has hitherto been made apparent. This singular character of Krio history is what we intend to promote henceforth. Promoting this means disabusing our minds of some of the prejudices inherent in Krio thought. It is this point, it is hoped, this lecture will address.

First, an explanation of terms. The best explanation I can give to the term nationalism would be, “pertaining to nation”. In other words all of those issues related to our thinking about ourselves as belonging to that entity, that nation called Sierra Leone. That Sierra Leone is a nation or a nation state as political scientists might call it, is not in question. The issue lies with the perception of people from that nation about themselves as Sierra Leoneans. This is an issue of identity, a prominent topic in African discourse today. In the Sierra Leone context, the related questions would be, “do I accept myself as a Sierra Leonean? If I do, what makes me think so? If nationalism involves a sense of pride in that identity, then what do I know about Sierra Leone that would make me speak intelligently and convincingly about my nationality and retain a strong attachment to it?” These are the kinds of questions that fuel the nationalist debate. It does
not appear that the Sierra Leone system has done much to inculcate positive answers to questions like these.

Relating issues of nationalism to ethnicity, the latter term is more readily understood as “tribe” among Sierra Leoneans. I abjure the term “tribe” as it is full of pejorative and intentionally debasing connotations. This term was introduced into our understanding of ethnicity by Western systems and scholarship. Instead of now simply accepting that the term “ethnicity” replaces the word “tribe”, scholarship on Africa has tried to promote the idea of “from tribe to nation”, the title of a work on Nigeria by Ronald Cohen. The implication is that tribes were backward and were gradually transformed into ethnic groups by western influence. This is extremely misleading, as the distorting idea of backwardness is not particularly related to technology, but to a condemnation of African ways of thinking, dress, food, dance, etc. I don’t see how the name Tchaikovsky is superior to Babashola, or why African dress should be called costume, as something fit for drama on the stage. But the colonial process and its aftermath has made us accept terms like “tribe” without question and those of us who question it are often seen as rarities.

The correct word for tribe is ethnicity. We have about sixteen ethnic groups in Sierra Leone. Without deliberately fostering a strong sense of nationalism, ethnicity becomes more prominent. In other words, people continue to have a far stronger attachment to their ethnic sub-cultures, and this begins to border on parochialism. It is thus that the older generation of Sierra Leoneans remains more ethnically conscious while the younger ones, because of more recent healthy social interactions, are more slowly moving away from these prejudices. This transformation from ethnicity to nationalism should have been helped along by our governments as a priority. There are many factors that, if known, could make ethnicities in Sierra Leone become more attached to each other rather than feel apart from each other. But the transformation that could result from knowing and employing these values does not come by chance. These values have to be taught in the educational system. This lecture into the Krio saga attempts to emphasize the unifying factor in Krio history that could contribute to a healthier relationship amongst ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, and move us more aggressively in the path from ethnicity to nationalism. It will be shown that the vast majority of those who became Krio belonged to the ethnicities in Sierra Leone – Mende, Thaimne, Soso, Vai, Limba, etc. And this process of Kriolization was continuing throughout the twentieth century as Krio society, as it came to be identified, became noticeable by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

**Composition of Krio Society**

Let me first of all address this issue of the various groups that coalesced to give rise to what became identified as Krio society by the end of the nineteenth century. It is important to emphasize here that there was no identifiable Krio society embracing all of the various sub groups in the Colony before the 1870s. That group that was identified as “akiriyo” before then,
represented a tiny portion of the Liberated Africans, well before the term gained a more general applicability by the 1870s. Before then, these sub groups identified themselves separately as Yoruba, Popo, Asante, Nova Scotians, Maroons, etc.

There were broadly speaking three segments of peoples that came ultimately to be identified as Krio by the late nineteenth century. The most vaunted were the Nova Scotians and Maroons, who together came to be called “Settlers” in the Literature. They were the first arrivals who formed the Province of Freedom, as it was first called. The first group of 1787, termed as the Black Poor, had literally disappeared by the time Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony in 1808. A very broad term, that of Liberated Africans or Recaptives, came to be applied to a rapidly growing number of freed slaves landed in the Colony from slave ships captured on the West African waters by the British Navy, starting largely from the beginning of the nineteenth century. These included Africans from various parts of West Africa, the single most prominent among them being the Yoruba, a result of the Yoruba civil wars in Nigeria which yielded captives sold to slavers.

But they also included people from the ethnic societies surrounding the incipient colony, like the Thaimne, Mende, Soso, Limba, Loko, Vai, etc. The colonial government had little interest in their background though this was sometimes recorded. All they were concerned with was to quickly Christianize them, make them into westernized elements with new Christian names. Thus little emphasis was placed on their original names or background. The fact that all of these sub-groups were labeled simply as Liberated Africans or Recaptives helped to submerge their identity into the new dispensation.

There is a third collective that has received little or no identification in the literature. These were the ethnic groups living in and around Freetown at the time the colony was founded. They were not landed in the Colony from slave vessels. Very little is said about them. They were neither Liberated Africans nor settlers. They became the base on which the new colony was planted. They were mostly Bulom or Thaimne since they had been living in the colony when it was set up and remained there, going through the same socialization process that resulted there. The Bulom are among the oldest inhabitants of what is today Sierra Leone. They were found living all along the coastal littoral, from Yeliboa in the north to as far as Sulima in the south, encompassing the entire area of the Colony peninsula. Thaimne political dominance of the peninsula by the eighteenth century separated the Bulom into two parts, the northern and the southern. Thus, for example, you have north of the peninsula today the Kafu Bulom chiefdom and in the south the Nongoba Bulom chiefdom.

By the fifteenth century or thereabouts, a section of the Southern Bulom around Bonthe was influenced by a group of Mande or Mandingo invaders led by a female leader named Serabola in the documents. That part of the Bulom that fell under Serabola’s rule gradually came to be called Sherbro, a corruption of Serabola’s name. Thus people of the colony used to refer to the Bulom-
Sherbro, identifying the Sherbro as in reality Bulom peoples. People of Freetown today like to refer more fallaciously to Sherbro as part of their descent, as a number of Liberated Africans went to live in Bonthe and as Bonthe developed in the nineteenth century in patterns similar to Freetown. Thus any time you hear that the original inhabitants of York or Regent were formerly Sherbro, as I have seen mentioned in writings by Koso-Thomas and Solomon Pratt recently, they are simply referring to the early Bulom peoples around the Peninsula.

This segment of the early inhabitants, the Bulom, is sometimes mentioned in the documents. The names of some of the early settlements that became Krio villages were originally Bulom names like Adonkia, Funkia and Momini which was the original name of York village. As concerns Momini, for example, it is recorded that the colonial government started that village, renamed York, with disbanded soldiers from the Frontier Force. These were settled among Bulom peoples and did not come with wives or other women. As Fyfe mentioned, the Bulom women flocked to them and many of them started cohabiting with Bulom women, having children with them. This same pattern occurred in the other colony villages, giving rise to what became a colony group with new Christian names and western schools, that later became part of the new Krio society.

If one examines these three groups that coalesced into Krio society – the Settlers, the Liberated Africans and the original inhabitants, mostly Bulom, it would be seen that the latter two vastly outnumbered the Settlers. If I may quote from my Nationalist History of Sierra Leone, “From 1808 to 1830 the Liberated African Register recorded that over 30,000 Liberated Africans had been landed in the Colony. Thus, (in terms of numbers) as related to a dwindling population of Settlers numbering less than 2,000 by 1826, the population of Liberated Africans was vastly superior” (p.50).

But the literature vastly extols the Nova Scotians as the leaders of the emergent Krio society. The reasons for this can readily be seen. Coming from America, the Nova Scotians were already westernized before they came to the Colony. The rulers of the colony apprenticed Liberated Africans to Nova Scotian homes at the initial stages, obviously providing what was considered tutelage for these new Liberated Africans and providing free labor for the Nova Scotians. Since the values of the Nova Scotians coincided with those of the British rulers of the colony, the latter therefore tacitly endorsed the Nova Scotian settlers as of a superior background, giving them a sense of being above the newcomers. So it is not because the Nova Scotians were superior, but it was the rulers of the colony who used them to emphasize western values. All of this was to end as the Liberated Africans and others began to acquire the same western values and outsmarted the Nova Scotians, some of whom withdrew and left the Colony in disgust.

Thus, it seems to me, the historiography has wrongfully denied the non-settler group the importance they deserve in the emergence of Krio society.
“Krio” and “Creole”

But let us get to the heart of the use of this term “Krio” which has not gained the currency necessary, as even some Krio peoples and historians have not recognized it as the real term instead of “Creole” found in the literature. It is the problem between oral history and written documents, where in fact the former could readily illuminate the latter. Let me use this opportunity to go deeply into the development of the use of the term Krio to apply to this new ethnicity that emerged just before the end of the nineteenth century.

Our first glimpse into the emergence of this term is in a report by J. Miller, Inspector of Schools in the colony in 1841.\(^2\) Miller was referring to obvious segregation in the provision of schooling for certain groups of Liberated Africans in the colony. The situation occurred like this. Children born to the earliest Liberated Africans before Governor MacCarthy’s time, i.e. before 1816, had been apprenticed to the early settlers – Nova Scotians and Maroons—and to the households of officials and trading concerns in the colony. When MacCarthy became governor, he worked out some arrangement with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) which controlled most of the schools in the colony, for the schooling of these newly arrived Liberated Africans, then not that large in number. The colonial government was therefore getting the CMS to open the doors of their schools to the newly arrived. These Liberated African children in the CMS schools then came to be regarded as “colony born.” These latter continued to stick to this identity of “colony born”, as it gave them some sense of a superior status in relation to the rest of the rapidly growing Liberated African population.

According to Christopher Fyfe, “by the late 1820s, most recaptives were from the Yoruba country known in Sierra Leone then as Aku” (170). After Governor MacCarthy died suddenly in 1824 in a war against the Ashanti, the arrangement between the colonial government and the CMS broke down and the CMS began to refuse entry of later Liberated Africans into their schools. The agency of the colonial Government that now provided schools for these newer arrived was the Liberated African Department (LAD). Strained in resources for the provision of schools for such larger groups, the schools were not up to standard. D.L. Sumner, who wrote the monumental work on *Education in Sierra Leone*, stated that “The Liberated African children, orphans and children of native parents, were wards of Government and for them especially the LAD conducted schools”. The lumping together of these unfortunate segments by Sumner typifies the more unfortunate situation of these later comers, mostly Yoruba Liberated Africans as Fyfe has noted, while those regarded as “colony born” stuck doggedly to their new identity. They attended superior schools whose doors were closed to the new Liberated Africans. It was this discrimination against the later comers that Miller analyzed in his report mentioned earlier.

It was in reference to these new Liberated Africans, mostly Yoruba, separated from the “colony born”, that Miller made the first written recording using the term “Creole”. It seems clear that Miller was collecting information about this orally and he misrepresented the term akiriyo given
to him, and wrote down “creole”. The term “akiriyo” that he was told, was a Yoruba word derived from the penchant for street trading of the dominant Yoruba among this unfortunate group. This misrepresentation is very common in the literature. When Gordon Laing wrote his *Travels in Timmannee, Kooranko, and Yalunka Countries* in 1822, the sound of the name for the Thaimne peoples evidently came out to him like “Temne”, which became the expression of Thaimne ethnicity to this day. Even Thaimne peoples use it when speaking non-Thaimne languages but always say “Thaimne” when speaking their own language. As was common in the literature, every succeeding commentator followed Miller’s written representation of the term, until the written form as “creole” gained currency. Thus it seems clear that once expressed in writing, even if wrongly, by Miller, one of the Europeans who brought the new dominant language, there was no urge for correction, not even by the Africans who were more familiar with the proper term. Later writers following Miller simply repeated the term “creole” as Miller had represented it.

In this environment in the Colony where identities were rapidly being transformed by the dominant colonial rulers, it would have been readily possible to conflate the term “akiriyo”, represented as “creole”, to apply not only to non-“colony born” Liberated African children, but to children born in the colony to all Liberated Africans. This is exactly what would have happened during the 1840s. By 1845 the use of the term “Creole” in the documentation was coming to be rendered more broadly. Rev. U. Graf, a German missionary, wrote in his Journal in 1845 that “Liberated Africans called their colony born children Creole (sic).” A second clarifying reference came from a British resident in the Colony, Mrs. Melville, who described in her book on Sierra Leone “a plainly dressed and rather nice-looking Creole (as all the children of Liberated Africans born after their parents’ arrival in the colony style themselves…”). The term akiriyo was acquiring a broader meaning, referring not only to the earlier group distinct from the “colony born”, but to “all the children of Liberated Africans born after their parents’ arrival in the colony” (emphasis added). But the term was represented in writing as “creole.”

So right down to the 1840s it was the colony born children of Liberated Africans who were akiriyo, to return to the original term, rendered as “Creole” in documentary evidence. Since it applied at that time only to a limited group of the Liberated Africans, reference to it was rather limited as that group was not that important in the configuration of social development in the Colony. This of course would be why A.B.C. Sibthorpe does not mention it in his *History of Sierra Leone* in 1836, while Africanus Horton, a highly educated doctor, simply copied Miller’s representation of the term as “creole”. No one at that time dared to spell the term exactly as they understood it, since the first man who wrote the name was Miller, an Englishman.

By the 1870s, the term was being applied to all children born in the colony, be they from Liberated African or Settler parents and the term gained the broader applicability it has today. To quote again from my *Nationalist History*, “The Nova Scotians and Maroons who considered themselves more Westernized and therefore superior to the Liberated Africans, resented being
identified by the term ‘Krio’, an appellation generally applied to the Liberated Africans whom they considered the ‘lesser people.’ In spite of their vehement objections, sometimes expressed in local publications, the term Krio, by the early twentieth century, came to be applied to all Westernized Africans in Freetown” and the surrounding villages (pp.53-4). Thus in the period when the term gained wider applicability, many of the more vocal Krio who had gained higher education and could write treatises, shied away from the name because they were either unsure about, or hostile to its larger connotation. They rather used such terms as “Sierra Leoneans”, “colony born” etc. in their writings, while others simply began to accept the appellation Krio, written as “creole” to refer to themselves, no matter what their original background dictated to them.

Krios Identifying Themselves

As these developments unfolded and the wider use of the term ‘Krio’ became more evident in the first few decades of the twentieth century, how did Krio people now react to the wider application of the name Krio to themselves? The idea of social order related to those who had earlier or more Western education considering themselves at the top of society, meant that there was a greater emphasis on the “Settler” aspect of their provenance, or they simply remained silent about it if they had strong biological connections with existing ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, a trend that continues up till today.

I will use myself as an example to elaborate the prejudices that Krio society picked up from its colonial rulers that have been inimical to the development of a strong nationalist feeling in Sierra Leone.

My name is Cecil Magbaily Fyle. I have a sister, now demised, who had as her middle name, Borah. I have been asked several times by those who knew me as a young man, where the name Magbaily comes from, some emphatically asserting that I picked it up along the way to assert a more African, Sierra Leonean identity. Let me explain.

My grandfather, Josephus Fyle, one of the Liberated Africans, had to leave Bengwema, his home town, for York sometime by the mid nineteenth century because of a foot sore that defied healing. He had finally consulted a diviner, as was the custom then when all else failed, and had been told that he should take the train “up line”, meaning to the Protectorate (Provinces of today) and alight at the first stop outside the colony. That took him to Yonibana where he settled, married a Thaimne woman in the traditional way, and started having children, sending them to his eldest son, Elkanah Theophilus, a prominent Methodist minister, to be brought up. I know at least two other of my father’s siblings, Aaron and Fannie, who were brought up this way. My grandfather acted as an informal representative for the colonial government, which took him frequently to the town of Magbele, a thriving center where many Liberated Africans had settled and married, and where an important Methodist missionary station was established. My grandfather eventually died in Magbele or Yonibana, without ever returning to Freetown.
When my father got married to my mother, a more Freetown oriented and western educated lady who had in those days been educated at the Annie Walsh Memorial School and the ST. Joseph’s Convent, he had a stormy marriage, he not having had secondary schooling. By the time he had his fifth child, your humble servant, the marriage had left him psychologically hurt, since he believed my mother regarded him as inferior, not having secondary schooling and having a Thaimne mother. In this state of anger, he decided to go against the accepted norm which indicated that once one had gone through some western education and had a Christian name, one had to follow that pattern, rejecting indigenous names in naming one’s children. My father then gave the name Magbaily as one of my middle names and this was hotly contested by my mother. My father insisted and got his way, and my mother apparently determined that that name would not see the light of day as I grew up. But it remained in my birth records.

I grew up believing that the prejudice against such indigenous names was proper behavior and never mentioned that name to anyone until I went to the United States for higher education in 1970. This was at the tail end of the Black Power movement in America and I was asked by an African American girl friend, “don’t you have an African name”. By the time I was asked a second time I realized that I had one and began thinking, influenced by meetings by Black militant organizations, that there was no reason why the name Cecil was any better than Magbaily. It was thus that I revived my African name.

I told this story to my oldest sister’s brother-in-law, Ayo Cole, a couple of years ago, in a general group conversation related to my preaching that Krio prejudices picked up from colonial rule had stifled our ability to relate in a more healthy way to our brothers and sisters from the Provinces, when most of us had much the same ancestral background as they had. Ayo Cole then responded, in the conversation, that his grandfather, and therefore the father of my brother-in-law, was of Mende ethnicity. I later brought this information to my oldest sister’s attention and she exclaimed that she had never been told of this since she had gotten married to Ayo Cole’s brother in 1956.

This is the route that the development of attitudes among Krio people had taken persistently. Backgrounds that emanated from people from the Provinces were routinely suppressed, as this was deemed unprogressive. This is not exactly so today, but used to be so a couple of decades ago. Krio peoples prided themselves in saying “Ar nor cross Waterloo wan day”, as if this was positive and progressive thinking. Indigenous names from the Protectorate apparently sounded so discordant to Krio peoples that upon the sound of such names many of them would suddenly become at least disconcerted, on the outside hostile to people who had such names. Similar attitudes were displayed by African Americans who had part white ancestry, were “light” in complexion and passed as white people. The African part of their ancestry was suppressed, and often lost in succeeding generations.
This attitude among Krio people has been most unfortunate. And yet there is ample evidence in the documentation and oral history that many who became Krio had indigenous backgrounds from among the ethnic groups existing in Sierra Leone. Quoting here from my *Nationalist History of Sierra Leone*,

The village later called Regent started in 1813 in a place called Hogbrook, with a shipload of Vai people. A few years later they were joined by Recaptive Soso, Mandinka and Jolof peoples. By 1821, Regent included identified groups of Kono, Soso and Bulom peoples. By the mid nineteenth century, all of these were known by western names and were part of those who later came to be called “Krio.” Adonkia was a Bulom village before the Recaptives were settled there. Kissy village was founded in 1812 by Liberated Africans from a kingdom around the Melacourie River in Guinea, an area then called Kisi-kisi. These were mostly Liberated Africans of Soso ethnicity. Waterloo was a Thaimne town before the Aku Liberated Africans got there. Blocks of Mende Liberated Africans, called Kossoh in the Colony, settled east of the Colony in an area that is still called Kossoh Town. Recaptives and the people they met there gradually integrated. (51)

All of this is from evidence documented by Historians of Sierra Leone, notably Christopher Fyfe. Both Koso Thomas in his memoirs termed *The Winding Road*, and Solomon Pratt’s titled *Jolliboy*, claimed, from oral history, that the villages of York and Regent respectively were originally inhabited by Sherbro peoples. I have already explained the connection between Bulom and Sherbro, often confused in the oral tradition. Original inhabitants never went away when these newcomers arrived. In fact, Fyfe comments that when the disbanded soldiers got to Momini, later called York, the Bulom women flocked to them, as mentioned in the documents.

Why then must our history talk only about Nova Scotians and Yoruba, when we have significant evidence of larger numbers of people, from surrounding ethnic groups already present there and still coming to the colony in large numbers, going through the same socialization process at different stages in time but being unrecorded in the history? This is what I refer to as the unsung majority. Of course, as migration to Freetown increased by the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, differing ethnicities began to form discreet ethnic settlements around the capital, as people of like cultures like to live together.

My thesis here is that we need to put a more positive spin on this material and help thereby to foster a sense of pride in our ancestral ethnic backgrounds that tie us to the rest of Sierra Leone, a proper step towards national integration and the promotion of nationalism. The prejudices fostering such dysfunctional attitudes are also related not only to anthroponomy, but also to religion, dress and other factors that the colonial rulers had considered abhorrent. Since I do not wear a western lounge suit, I have experienced some bad attitudes shown to me, particularly in Church, for not wearing that mode of dress. The banks in Sierra Leone describe it as ‘dress down’ day, when their workers go to work wearing mostly African attire, as if you dress up only
when you are wearing a lounge suit. I have refused to present myself to the Dinner Club and the Masonic Lodge because I have refused to wear a lounge suit.

Do not get me wrong here. I am not suggesting that the lounge suit is abhorrent. All I am saying is that the attitude that disposes one pattern of dress above the other is prejudiced. These are different modes of dress and nothing is there to make the western mode superior to others. The same argument applies to food patterns, forms of religion, personal names, locally produced goods, etc.

The intention in this analysis is for us to disabuse ourselves of negative ways of thinking about our indigenous history by providing legitimate arguments that would make us look at such information positively, contributing to a more aggressive integration of our various ethnicities, moving up one level towards a stronger sense of nationalism in our beloved Sierra Leone. Most of the time our inability to talk positively about our traditional background as a whole is based on the fact that we learnt none of this in the “exalted” education we received in school and our minds were easily prejudiced in the process. This, I repeat, was the intention of colonialism, to affect our psychology in ways that will make us reject our indigenous values and get completely tied to western values, a very ready basis for the exploitation of Africa.

We are a product of both values. None, I repeat none, is superior to the other. Western technology may be well advanced but no society defines its cultural values particularly based on its technology. We look at the finer points of civilization, music, art, thought, religion, etc. Let us not become resolute in defining our own civilization in a negative way. A more positive stance will give us the necessary independence of thought to evaluate technology as it is more applicable to us and make us better able to bring our own thinking to these issues, even to issues of our commitment as individuals to defending our nation against rabid corruption and the like.

Notes

1 This article was first presented as a lecture to the Krio Descendants Union at its annual meeting in Atlanta, Georgia August 31, 2013.

2 Miller, J. The Report of J. Miller, first Inspector of Schools in Sierra Leone, is included as an appendix to the Madden Commission Report in Colonial Office Records CO267/170/171/172. It
is also an appendix to the *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the West Coast of Africa, Parliamentary Papers*, 1842, xii, pp. 383-386.

³ Graf’s Journal is available in Church Missionary Society Records, CA1/0105.

Works Cited


