The Historical Context of Sierra Leonean Literature

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Sierra Leonean literature is steeped in the history, culture, economic situation, and even geography of the country. Whether it be Cheney-Coker’s The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar, which takes the reader back to the historical situation before the establishment of the colony of Sierra Leone (Malaguetta) and the subsequent turbulent development of that community; Yema Lucilda Hunter’s Road to Freedom, which similarly portrays the determination of the settlers from Nova Scotia to be free and their establishment of the new community with its vibrant religion and culture; Raymond Sarif Easmon’s representation of the mannerisms of the Creoles and their relationship with the indigenous peoples in Dear Parent and
Ogre and The New Patriots; Yulisa Amadu Maddy’s study of Creole class-consciousness, and snobbery, and religious hypocrisy in his plays; Lemuel Johnson’s presentation of the cultural and political consequences of alienation and colonization in Highlife for Caliban; or J. Sorie Conteh’s portrayal of the disastrous consequences of the scramble for diamonds on the Sierra Leonean character and psyche in his novel The Diamonds; there can be little doubt that the literature of this small country is inextricably intertwined with its context and cannot be understood in isolation from that context. This essay will therefore start with a discussion of the historical context, before proceeding with an analysis of the literary context, in order to show the literary developments that led to the works of the authors discussed in the book and upon which they built. The material here is based on the writer’s (Eustace Palmer’s) personal knowledge of the situation, quite a good bit of which he himself lived through, and on his own analysis of the works concerned.

Like many African peoples, the peoples of Sierra Leone have a history going back hundreds, maybe thousands, of years before the dawn of imperialism. One of the strictures that Patrick Bernard lays against Syl Cheney-Coker in his chapter on The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar in Knowledge is More Than Mere Words is that Cheney-Coker writes as though the history of Sierra Leone starts with the arrival of the returning former slaves to the territory and as though the people who were there before this arrival had no history. Of course, even in the pages of Cheney-Coker’s novel it is implied that a vibrant society preceded the coming of the former slaves and that the members of this society looked on the coming of the new settlers with foreboding and anxiety. However, one understands Patrick Bernard’s point, which is that Cheney-Coker ought to have devoted much more attention to the presentation of the history and culture of the peoples who inhabited the lands that later became known as Sierra Leone.

Some of the major ethnic groups that presently constitute the country of Sierra Leone—the Temnes, Mendes, Madingos, Limbas, Lokkos and Susus—have their roots in groups that could be traced to major West African medieval empires and states with proud cultures and administrative systems that worked. Inevitably, however, these peoples could not avoid being caught up in the contact between Africa and Europe that started in the fifteenth century. The first recorded landing of Europeans in what is now Sierra Leone is that of the Portuguese Pedro Da Cintra in 1462, whose name and the date of whose arrival can still be seen carved on a rock outside the harbor of Freetown. Indeed, it is generally assumed that it was he who gave the name Sierra Leone—“Lion Mountains”—to the country because of its mountainous terrain and either
because he mistook the rumbling of thunder for the growling of lions, or because one of the hills that rise almost sheer from the sea looks like a crouching lion.

The Portuguese and other Europeans who first ventured to West Africa from the fifteenth century came first as legitimate traders looking for the gold that West Africa had in abundance. However, as is well known, the trade in gold was soon replaced by the trade in humans and the country now known as Sierra Leone was one of the areas in West Africa from which millions of slaves were forced to make the middle passage to the new world to labor on the plantations of Brazil, the West Indies, and North America. There are those who would claim that the first slaves in North America were brought from Sierra Leone. There is now extensive documentary evidence in the language, artifacts and agricultural practices of the people (particularly the Gullah people) on the islands off the Carolinas and Georgia that a good many of the slaves that were taken to those states came from Sierra Leone. People from certain parts of Sierra Leone had excellent rice producing skills, and that made them particularly valuable in those southern states. Bunce Island in Sierra Leone still has relics of the fort in which the slaves were kept in horrible conditions before being forced on to the slave ships for the Western world.

Sierra Leone’s modern history, too, is related to the Slave Trade and its consequences. One of the most momentous events in world history was the American war of independence. The British who were fighting against American insurgents enlisted the support of some slaves by promising them land and freedom when the war ended. Unfortunately for the British, they lost the war and could not fulfill their promise of granting these slaves land within America. However, the British still possessed Canada, and they redeemed their promise by giving these now-liberated slaves land in Nova Scotia, but Nova Scotia proved completely inhospitable for the freed slaves who now expressed the view that they would be much better off if they were repatriated to Africa from which they had originally come. Thus began the “back to Africa” campaign that resulted in the establishment of the territory of Freetown or the “Province of Freedom” as the British called it. In order to establish Freetown in 1787 as a haven for these returning former slaves, the British entered into negotiations with some of the local indigenous rulers whom they paid a paltry sum (some people put it at sixty pounds) for the area the new settlers would occupy. But it was not just the returning former slaves from North America who found a haven in the new territory. The British also took to Freetown and its environs some rebellious slaves from the West Indies called Maroons and a number of black people from London and surrounding areas called “the black poor.” These were the so-called “settlers.” When the British formally abolished slavery in the early nineteenth century through the “humanitarian”
efforts of people like Granville Sharpe, Lord Macauley, Lord Mansfield and William Wilberforce, they decreed that any British ship that came across a slave ship on the high seas bound for America had the right to take the ship, liberate the slaves, and take them to Freetown. Thus a fourth group called the “liberated Africans” was settled in Freetown. The colony of Freetown, as it soon came to be called, was thus made up of these groups of people who came to be known as the “Creoles.”

The Creoles came to Freetown with Western sounding names like Thomas Johnson and Palmer, because during the days of slavery they had been given the names of their slave masters. They also came with the Christian religion because they had been baptized into Christianity during slavery. Numerous churches soon sprang up in the new territory. Even those who were “recaptives,” that is those who never reached the shores of America but were rescued by the British on the high seas, were baptized and given Western names as soon as they were given a haven in Sierra Leone. They came with a language, “Krio,” that was based on English, and with a certain measure of Western education. Those who were relocated from America had originally come from various parts of the West African coast from Mauretania in the North to Angola in the south, and the researches of historians like Akintola Wyse have even demonstrated that many of them were originally from some of the ethnic groups of present day Sierra Leone like the Mende and the Temne. However, hundreds of years of separation from the African homeland had caused various degrees of alienation and detribalization and some of the new settlers actually looked down on the indigenous people and the indigenous cultures they encountered.

There was some measure of resistance and antagonism from the indigenous people to the new settlers, and the first group that came in 1787 was almost completely wiped out by a combination of this hostility, disease, and natural disasters. A second group that came in 1792 proved hardier and, of course, their numbers were soon augmented by the recaptives. In 1792 Freetown became the first of Britain’s colonies in Africa and a veritable outpost of Empire.  

During the nineteenth century the colony of Freetown flourished. Most of the churches that were built, some by missionary societies from Britain and the United States, had schools attached to them, and education soon expanded in the new settlement. Thus it was that Sierra Leone gained a head start over most other West African countries in the field of education. It was, in fact, from Sierra Leone that a number of teachers were sent to other West African countries. The oldest boys secondary school in West Africa, the Sierra Leone Grammar School, was established in 1845, and the oldest girls secondary school, the Annie Walsh Memorial School, in 1849. Fourah Bay College had been established in 1827 for the training of ministers of
religion and became the first institution of higher learning in Africa south of the Sahara since the disappearance of the ancient university at Timbuctu. To Fourah Bay College, therefore, came numbers of men from all over British West Africa who wanted to be trained for the ministry: Fourah Bay College became affiliated to the University of Durham in England and started giving degrees of the University of Durham. Everyone in British West Africa, therefore, who wanted to have a university degree in Africa came to Fourah Bay College and this practice continued until 1945. Also, because of their facility with the English language, the Creoles proved useful to the British in administration, and so a number of administrators were seconded from Sierra Leone to other parts of the British West African Empire. Freetown (Sierra Leone) therefore proved to be the educational, religious, and administrative hub of British West Africa. The Creoles also proved very adept in commerce and a number of black businesses sprang up and thrived for a long time.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the indigenous parts of the country were annexed and called the “protectorate.” This brought the entire country under the rule of the British, although Lord Lugard’s concept of “indirect rule” was generally practiced, which meant that the traditional rulers were largely used in government insofar as the “protectorate” was concerned. In Freetown, however, a number of Creoles were brought into local government and a number of famous municipal families emerged, producing aldermen and mayors like Sir Samuel Lewis and Mayor May. Some of the indigenous peoples mounted a strenuous resistance to the annexation of their land. They detested the British and the Creoles whom they saw as allied to the British imperialists. In 1898 there was the famous hut tax rebellion led by the legendary Bai Bureh who has now become a veritable hero in Sierra Leone’s history. After about a year, however, British military superiority prevailed and the rebellion was put down. Sierra Leone’s history then proceeded quite peacefully into the twentieth century.

During the first part of the twentieth century some people, including quite a few from the protectorate, held the mistaken assumption that the Creoles were calling the shots, and this, combined with the snobbery that some Creoles demonstrated toward the provincial peoples, elicited some animosity for the Creoles. The truth was, however, that the British kept a firm hold of government, though the Creoles were allowed a measure of influence over the local government of the capital, Freetown. The heads of almost all government departments, most of the judges and magistrates, and even the heads of most commercial houses were British or Europeans. A few Creoles were elected or appointed members of the Legislative Council, but so were quite a few traditional rulers or “paramount chiefs” from the protectorate. The members of
the Executive Council, the supreme ruling body that took decisions together with the Governor, were all British. In fact, the British harbored an unconcealed disdain for the Creoles whom they saw as unsuccessfully trying to ape a British lifestyle and mannerisms. Indeed, it can be argued that the British, while being willing to use Creoles in the middle and lower cadres of the civil service because they were virtually the only Western educated people around, actively suppressed them and never allowed them to advance very far. There were a number of Creole graduates who ended their days as chief clerics and never entered that coveted cadre of elites, the senior civil service. Quite a large number, too, never made it as senior teachers in the Secondary schools. Those positions were reserved for the British and the whites. It was only in the late 1950s, when it became clear that independence was approaching and that the independent country would need a cadre of educated and competent individuals to man the country’s institutions that the British allowed the Creoles to be brought forward and to occupy positions of influence and some power.

The transition to independence was quite smooth, unlike the situation in some other African countries where the people actually had to agitate for liberation. A constitution was drafted in 1951 that provided a framework for the handing over of power. A measure of self government was introduced, and in 1953 Sir Milton Margai, the leader of the Sierra Leone People’s Party, became Chief Minister. He and his party were reelected in 1957 after the introduction of universal adult suffrage, and in 1961 the country achieved independence under his leadership and became a member of the British Commonwealth with Sir Milton as Prime Minister and the Queen as Head of State, represented by a Governor General.

Under the genial leadership of Sir Milton Margai, generally regarded as father of the nation, Sierra Leone remained peaceful, largely because Sir Milton was able to maintain an astute balance among the various ethnic groups in the country, including the Creoles, making sure that they were all represented in his government. He also gained a reputation for incorruptibility. On his sudden death in 1964, however, he was succeeded as Prime Minister by his half-brother, Sir Albert Margai, whose regime soon became notorious for tribalism and corruption. The result was that in the elections of 1967 the Sierra Leone People’s Party was defeated by the opposition All People’s Congress under the leadership of a former trade union leader and defector from the SLPP, Siaka Stevens, whose party won a majority of the elected seats. The Governor General, Sir Henry Lightfoot-Boston, a Sierra Leonean himself, declared that Siaka Stevens had been duly elected Prime Minister and appointed him as such. However, within a few hours, the head of the army, Brigadier David Lansana, who belonged to the same
 ethnic group as Sir Albert Margai and was an SLPP sympathizer, declared the appointment invalid since the Governor General had not waited for the election of the traditional chiefs who would also be members of the parliament. The traditional chiefs were normally elected by small electoral colleges, not by popular vote, and some historians and constitutional experts maintain to this day that their practice was to support the elected government of the day and that they would have been bound to support Siaka Stevens. Brigadier Lansana, however, thought differently, and so he staged the first Sierra Leonean coup, declaring martial law and placing the newly appointed Prime Minister under house arrest. An entry under Sierra Leone in the *World Guide 1999/2000* claims that Siaka Stevens was prevented from taking office by “the conservative creoles, the traditional leaders, and the neo-colonialist British” who “considered him dangerously progressive” (200). Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Creoles, who had become disgusted by Albert Margai’s tribalism and nepotism voted for Siaka Stevens in huge numbers. Siaka Stevens’ victory in 1967 could be attributed largely to a coalition of Creoles from the Western area, Konos from the East, and some of the tribes from the North. The traditional rulers were largely split along ethnic lines, so strongly had ethnicity taken hold of Sierra Leone politics during Albert Margai’s regime. The British for their part could not care less. Sierra Leone was no longer particularly important to them. If anything, the British had been alienated by Sir Albert Margai because of his rhetoric and invective during a Commonwealth Prime Minister’s conference the previous year. It was elements from the SLPP and their main backers the Mendes from the South who encouraged Brigadier Lansana to stage his coup.

Lansana’s coup, however, was destined to be very short-lived. Less than a week later a group of younger officers under Captain Juxon-Smith staged a counter coup, ousting and imprisoning Brigadier Lansana, and Siaka Stevens went into exile in neighboring Guinea. During the year in which he remained in office, Juxon-Smith imposed some measure of discipline on Sierra Leone and initiated a series of commissions of enquiry into the conduct of the members of the Albert Margai regime that revealed the extent of corruption, incompetence, and nepotism that had characterized that regime. However, Juxon-Smith was himself incredibly arrogant and power-drunk and Sierra Leoneans who felt they had quite legitimately ousted an incompetent regime by the ballot box, a feat rare in Africa at the time, were impatient to see their properly elected government reinstated and were not used to being ruled by the military. The Juxon-Smith regime was therefore never really very popular and he himself was ousted from power by another military coup in 1968.
The sergeants who overthrew Juxon-Smith invited Brigadier Bangura, who by all the rules of seniority should have been head of the army and who had gone into exile in Guinea with Siaka Stevens, to come and take over the government, and had he been so inclined he could quite easily have installed himself as a military dictator in Sierra Leone. However, Brigadier Bangura believed that the place of soldiers was in the barracks and their duty was to protect, not rule the country, so, on his return he invited the constitutionally elected leader, Siaka Stevens, to come back from exile and take over the reins of government. Siaka Stevens was therefore installed for the second time as Prime Minister of Sierra Leone. Little did Brigadier Bangura and all the crowds who danced in the streets to welcome the return of constitutional government know that the man in whom all their hopes rested would himself become a ruthless dictator and plunge the country into the most catastrophic chaos and poverty it had ever known.

Within three years of his restoration to power, Siaka Stevens and his All People’s Congress declared the country a republic with himself as President, severing all ties with Britain. This included the delinking of the currency from the British pound, thus precipitating its rapid decline. He then proceeded quite methodically to eliminate all opponents and rivals and even those who had been instrumental in bringing him to power. These included the honest but politically innocent Brigadier Bangura who, when he saw the direction in which Siaka Stevens was moving, attempted an incompetent coup, was arrested, tried, and ruthlessly executed. They also included political allies who had been with Siaka Stevens from the start, such as Ibrahim Bash Taqi, whose brilliant journalistic skills had been credited with swaying people, especially those in the Western area, to the APC cause in the 1967 elections, and the highly educated Dr. Sorie Forna, Siaka Stevens’ Minister of Finance and a possible contender for the succession. Dr. Raymond Sarif Easmon, a highly respected medical practitioner who, like Ibrahim Bash Taqi, had led the onslaught on the Albert Margai regime with some very acerbic articles in the APC paper, fell out with Siaka Stevens when he realized how ruthless a leader he had become, was promptly accused of treason, tried, and narrowly missed being executed. The same fate befell Nancy Steele, possibly Siaka Stevens’ leading and most stalwart female supporter.

Siaka Stevens’ drive to consolidate his hold on the country as its absolute ruler and stifle all opposition culminated in the referendum he staged in 1978 to establish a one-party government. The “yes” vote meant that the APC was the only party in the country and all others were subsumed within its ranks. Siaka Stevens and his APC now came to dominate all institutions in the country: the army, the police, the public service, the business world, and even the university. Preferment became virtually impossible if one were not a member of the party,
and with APC spies everywhere, the expression of dissent was effectively muzzled. Like Joseph Mobutu in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Siaka Stevens behaved as if the country were his private property and, in league with some prominent Lebanese businessmen, he controlled the leading enterprises, such as the diamond mining industry, the profits from which went to enrich him, his family, and his leading supporters.

Inevitably, the country’s economic condition worsened rapidly. This economic decline was accelerated when Siaka Stevens decided to host the OAU annual conference in 1981 at which he was installed as OAU Chairman. Hosting the conference involved extremely grandiose projects, like the construction of large hotels and living quarters for the delegates which had to be financed by huge loans. The foreign debt ballooned, inflation soared, the value of exports declined, corruption became endemic, and, of course, the living conditions of ordinary Sierra Leoneans took a dive. There were shortages of essential commodities like rice (the staple food) and sugar, frequent power cuts, and fuel shortages. Within a short time salaries and wages became completely inadequate to support working people and their families, and most of the country was plunged into extreme poverty while they saw the members of the ruling elite prospering and constructing mansions through corruption, the irresponsible and illegal exploitation of the country’s resources, and the adoption of the most authoritarian measures.

It is a measure of Siaka Stevens’ political astuteness that he was able to maintain power and even die in his bed in spite of the widespread discontent in the country. His success in this regard has been attributed not just to his ruthlessness, but also to his superb knowledge of the Sierra Leonean psyche and psychology and the characteristics and values of the various ethnic groups that make up the nation. There are those who now believe that if he had directed the brilliance he displayed in exploiting the country’s resources for his own personal profit and keeping the country subordinate and terrorized toward improving the nation’s welfare, Sierra Leone would have been one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. He certainly had the brains, the charisma, and the personal authority to do it. However, this was not to be.

In 1985 Siaka Stevens handed over power to the head of the army, General Joseph Momoh, who had been handpicked by him to lead the country. Momoh, who converted himself to a civilian, lacked Siaka Stevens’ drive, authority, charisma, and brains, and the country continued to plunge headlong into decline. The perfect conditions were thus created for the emergence of a rebel movement that sought, as its primary objective, the overthrow of the Momoh regime. As was now the case with a number of African countries, the movement started from outside. It was called the Revolutionary United Front and it was led by a former army
corporal, Foday Sankoh. Its members were a mixed bag of dissidents, malcontents, unemployed youths and young idealists, some of whom had received revolutionary training in places like the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Liberia, and many of whom were influenced by the so-called “Green Book” of Colonel Guaddafi, the revolutionary leader of Libya. They were certainly encouraged by Charles Taylor, who had gained the upper hand in the brutal civil strife in Liberia that followed the ousting of Presidents Tolbert and Doe and who had his eyes on Sierra Leone’s diamond wealth.

The rebel onslaught started in April 1991 and was launched from Liberia with two border towns being occupied. Thus began the most savage and barbaric civil conflict that Sierra Leone, or any other African nation for that matter, was ever to experience. It was to last for another eleven terrible years in which hundreds of thousands were brutally killed, millions displaced from their homes, and thousands, including young children and even babies, maimed for life. The members of the RUF seemed to specialize and revel in discovering new refinements in terror like asking their victims whether they would rather have their hands amputated at the wrists or the elbows; getting young boys, who had clearly been drugged before hand, to kill their own relatives in the presence of other relatives; getting mothers to pound their own babies to pulp in mortars; locking people up alive in houses and setting the houses on fire; and abducting young girls and taking them into the bush to be used as sex slaves. The presence of numbers of people without arms and legs in the streets of Freetown to this day attests to the unspeakable horror of this darkest and most violent period in Sierra Leone’s history.

Whatever idealism first motivated the RUF to take up arms and launch the rebel invasion soon disappeared and the conflict soon revolved around who would control the country’s enormous diamond wealth. It was significant that the invasion was launched from the East where most of the diamonds were located, and the rebels were able to lay hands on this enormous source of money (blood diamonds as the phenomenon came to be known) and use it to purchase sophisticated arms and recruit more members, so that the official military forces were helpless against them. Of course, many still believe that the notorious Charles Taylor was getting his own cut out of the proceeds of the diamonds.

It became obvious, soon after the rebel invasion was launched, that the Momoh regime, that had demonstrated its incompetence in lots of other ways, was completely incapable of stemming the rebel tide. On April 29, 1992, some young officers, led by Captain Valentine Strasser, staged yet another coup overthrowing the Momoh regime, sending Momoh into exile in Guinea, and establishing the National Provisional Ruling Council, or NPRC. These young
officers who took over from Momoh were well-intentioned, but they were inexperienced and lacked the financial resources that were available to the RUF who were in charge of the diamond mines and were gradually taking over most of the country. They therefore proved no more effective in repelling the rebels than Momoh had been, though with the help of some mercenaries hired from the firm of Executive Outcomes they were able to contain the onslaught somewhat and even regain control of the country’s Rutile and Titanium mines. The breathing space achieved from such a horrible war even enabled the NPRC, partly bowing to international pressure, to promise elections and the return to civilian rule. However, when it became obvious that Valentine Strasser was preparing to go back on his promise to hand the country back to civilian rule, another coup was staged against him, and one of his former lieutenants, Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio, seized power.

The promised elections were duly held in April 1996 and resulted in the Sierra Leone People’s Party being returned to power, since their candidate Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, a former United Nations diplomat, was elected President. However, the parliamentary elections that were held at about the same time did not give any of the contesting parties a majority, since the system of proportional representation was used, and, though the SLPP gained the largest number of seats, it only had 27 out of a total of about 64 seats. However, Kabbah formed an administration that was essentially an SLPP government. The rebels still continued their activities, particularly in the Eastern sectors of the country, and the economy was still in shambles. The situation was not improved by the fact that a huge proportion of whatever resources were available was devoted to the war effort. In May 1997 dissident groups within the army led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma ousted President Kabbah, set up the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and invited the RUF to join them in government.

The AFRC was hugely unpopular both within and outside Sierra Leone, not least because it had invited the hated RUF to join in government. For the second time in the nation’s history, a government elected by popular vote and operating within a pluralistic multiparty system had been overthrown by a seemingly moronic military group, and this fact was not lost on Sierra Leoneans. The outside world, including the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations, was vociferous in its condemnation and something that had never happened in the history of Sierra Leone now occurred: the entire country was blacklisted and, as it were, placed under interdiction, as world authorities and bodies refused to do business with the new government. Flights to Sierra Leone were suspended, so were postal services and aid, and international banking operations came to a halt. This was one of the saddest periods in Sierra
Leone’s history since, because of the actions of a few unprincipled military men, the entire nation seemed to be treated like a pariah. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that within the country itself there was a general strike against the AFRC regime. People refused to go to work for a period of about nine months. The schools and colleges were closed so were most of the commercial establishments including the banks, and the civil service itself came to a virtual standstill. All this resulted in unspeakable suffering and hardship on the part of the vast majority of the population.

Given the worldwide hostility with which it was confronted, the AFRC could not last, even though it was supported by the well-financed RUF. In March 1998, ECOMOG troops, the military wing of ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, led by Nigerians, gained a foothold in the country, eventually ousted the short-lived regime of Johnny Paul Koroma, and reinstated the Kabbah government. However, the government continued to be weak and the RUF, having been forced back into the twilight as rebellious forces, continued its rebel activities in most of the country. In January of 1999 it launched one of its deadliest attacks, a massive surprising assault on the capital city of Freetown itself in which thousands were killed, thousands more wounded, and almost half the city, including prominent churches, mosques, and government buildings, was burnt down and completely destroyed. The four weeks or so when the RUF forces seemed to be in charge of Freetown were the bleakest in the city’s history. During this period starvation was rampant as people were afraid to venture out of their houses and shops and markets were not even functioning. Funeral services could not even be conducted for the numerous dead who were hastily buried in makeshift graves, usually behind their houses, and the RUF wreaked havoc on the population in general, burning some people alive and seizing the opportunity to settle scores and vendettas. Ultimately, however, the ECOMOG forces were able to drive back the RUF.

Sierra Leone’s history from then on consists mainly of a series of complicated negotiations in an attempt to put an end to this brutal war. After the Lome accord of 1999 the RUF was brought back into government and its leader, Foday Sankoh, was even made Vice President. A United Nations peacekeeping force (UNAMSIL) was dispatched to Sierra Leone. However, the ceasefire did not hold as hostilities resumed and Sankoh and the other RUF members of the government were arrested. A new ceasefire was agreed on in Abuja in May 2000 and the task of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of the RUF forces began, but it needed another Abuja agreement of May 2001 for this process to continue and for the Kabbah government to be able to reassert its authority over the whole country. On January 18, 2002,
President Kabbah declared the eleven-year war officially over and he himself won reelection in May 2002. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, along the lines of the South African experience, came into existence, charged with the task of promoting reconciliation and healing through the candid telling of individual stories by those hurt by this terrible war. In practice this would include everyone, for it would be difficult to find a family that was not in one way or another seriously affected by this ghastly conflict. A special United Nations court was also set up to try those who perpetrated crimes against humanity on both sides. Foday Sankoh was indicted on a charge of treason, but he died before his trial could be completed and Johnny Paul Koroma fled the country. The biggest catch by the Special court, however, was the former Liberian leader Charles Taylor, who was ousted by his own country and eventually handed over to Sierra Leone and the Human Rights Court and later put on trial in The Hague. Sierra Leone’s history, then, though marked by sectional rivalries and suspicions, consists of a very peaceful start, even a very peaceful march towards independence, but the country was not to be spared its own share of the military coups, dictatorial governments, and bloody civil conflicts that have plagued most African countries at one time or another. All these events have left a searing impression on the imaginations of Sierra Leonean and can be seen reflected in the creative work produced over the years.

The Literary Context

After a consideration of the historical context, one cannot but come to the conclusion that Sierra Leone ought to have had a head start over other West African countries in literary creativity. The Western Area of Sierra Leone (Freetown the capital and the Peninsula area) was inhabited by descendants of liberated slaves and the black poor from England. These were people who had had contact with the West and the English language and indeed spoke, as their mother tongue, a language that was largely derived from English. For good or for ill modern African literature, when it took its rise, was written in one or other of the metropolitan languages—English, French, and Portuguese—one would have thought that the comparative Sierra Leonian facility with the English language would have led to literary productions in that language in Sierra Leone. Furthermore, it is an incontestable fact that Sierra Leone, because of this unique historical situation, had a head start over other English-speaking West African countries insofar as education and literacy were concerned. One of the first activities of the returned slaves who came back from America and England was to establish churches and schools attached to the churches.
Missionary activity, which was always linked to education, started earlier and was much more intensive in Sierra Leone than in most other African countries. The Church Missionary Society, the Anglican missionary wing, was very instrumental in the establishment and consolidation of the colony of Sierra Leone. It is also a known fact that it was from Sierra Leone that a number of educationists, clergymen, and administrative officials were seconded to other West African countries because of the educational advantages that Sierra Leone had. Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, founded in 1827 initially for the training of ministers of religion, was the first institution of higher learning to be established in sub-Saharan Africa after the decline of Timbuctu in the middle ages.

Also, Sierra Leone did produce writers, though not in the creative vein. Figures like Africanus Beale Horton and Edward Blyden I achieved international recognition in the nineteenth century for their writings on African affairs, but they were not creative writers. Sierra Leoneans have always excelled in the fields of journalism; literary criticism; and historical, political, and anthropological writing rather than in literature itself until recently.

What are the reasons for Sierra Leone’s comparative lateness to arrive on the literary scene? To excel in literary creativity more is required than education, or literacy, or mere facility with language. It requires imagination, cultural as well as national self-confidence, and awareness of and pride in one’s roots and traditions. The truth is that at the time when modern African literature was taking off, the majority of the educated classes in Sierra Leone belonged to the Creole group, a group that had been detribalized, that is, cut off from their roots in the African tradition by their historical experience. They were mainly the descendants of the liberated slaves from the American South via Nova Scotia, of the maroons from the West Indies, and of the black poor from England. Unlike the indigenous people, they had been alienated from the rich source of the African tradition that has been one of the props of creative writing in Africa. They went by largely Western names, and their customs and rituals, though still retaining some African flavor, had become adulterated by contact with the West. They also spoke a language that was greatly influenced by English. All these factors suggest that the Creole community could not be expected to demonstrate the kind of African consciousness that was such a bulwark of African creative writing. Indeed, some of them were taught to look down on some aspects of African culture such as masks. Creole boys who engaged in the then popular practice of baiting masked devils did so at their peril. Some Creoles considered membership of some of the traditional secret societies as being simply beneath their dignity.
African nationalism was also one of the mainsprings of modern African literature. The works of writers like Achebe, Ngugi, Beti and others were fuelled by their consciousness of the traumatic and disastrous impact of imperialism on the psyches of Africans and on their cultural, political, and social institutions. The rise of modern African literature coincided, in fact, with the rise of African nationalism in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. However, the fact is that although Sierra Leone produced its own redoubtable nationalists like I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson and Bankole Bright, its own brand of nationalism was never as strident as those in countries like Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, or Kenya. Sierra Leone did not have to fight or shout for her independence. The party that led the country to independence, the Sierra Leone People’s Party was, in fact, loved by the British and preferred to the more hostile National Council or United Progressive Party. Some people might say that Sierra Leone was granted independence on a platter, and the government was handed over to people the British knew or thought they could control. There was no sign of the force of nationalism, therefore, which could have helped fuel literary creativity. Although the Creoles were the nearest in Sierra Leone to the “assimilés” of the Francophone countries, they never felt that alienation or crisis of identity that led to the Negritude movement, was a feature of life in most of the Francophone territories, and sparked the production of some of the greatest works of African literature. Many members of this Creole group were proud to call themselves “British subjects” or even British, and looked forward to the annual or biennial leave or vacation they took in Britain and that they fondly called “home leave.” The height of achievement for them was for their names to be mentioned in the New Year’s Honors list or the Queen’s birthday honors list as recipients of the coveted K.B.E., C.M.G., M.B.E., or O.B.E. (sarcastically glossed by the irreverent as “Obedient Boy of the Empire”). This process did not suggest either consciousness of a genuine African identity or anxiety over a crisis of identity, or that concern for the dignity of African traditions or awareness of the damage done to indigenous institutions by an alien civilization, that could also have helped fuel literary activity.

Furthermore, the educated elite in Freetown did not really pay much attention to creative literature or even to the arts in general. Professional writers, had they existed, would not have been accorded much status. Parents who found their children reading novels were known to admonish them for wasting time and to urge them to go and read their “school books,” meaning textbooks, instead. Because the educational system was geared toward the production of professionals or successful civil servants, the only works of literature worth reading were those prescribed as school texts, especially those that would lead to success in the Cambridge School
Certificate or Higher School Certificate examinations. When writing was done by the educated elite, it was very much as a spare-time activity.

These factors help explain why Sierra Leone lagged behind other West African countries in literary productivity, but that is not to say that the country did not produce its own writers, even though the Sierra Leonean classic was long in coming. The pioneers of Sierra Leonean modern literature—Adelaide Casely-Hayford, Crispin George, Jacob Stanley Davies, and Gladys Casely-Hayford—were all writing well before the upsurge of literary creativity in Africa in the 1950s. Adelaide Casely-Hayford (1868-1959) was actually born in Ghana of mixed Ghanaian and English parentage. She was educated locally and in England and Germany. Moving to Sierra Leone, she established herself as a champion of women’s education and actually set up a girls’ vocational school in Freetown. It is interesting to note that she married another pioneer African writer, the Ghanaian (then Gold Coast) lawyer, Joseph Casely-Hayford, the author of one of the earliest African novels, *Ethiopia Unbound*. Although she was herself very much a member of the Creole elite, her work derives strength and significance precisely because she distances herself from that elite and burlesques its affectation and pointless aping of Western mannerisms and lifestyles. She was the author of several stories, the most interesting of which is “Mister Courifer,” which was anthologized by Langston Hughes in the volume *An African Treasury*. Her autobiographical work, *Reminiscences*, was published in 1953. All her works give very powerful evocations of Freetown society and exude that personal consciousness of being an African that she finds generally wanting in Freetown Creole society.

Jacob Stanley Davies and Crispin George were early Sierra Leonean poets the content and style of whose works reflected their religiously inspired education and the strength of their Christian faith. Both had attended mission schools and had been brought up on the Bible, the hymnal, and the Book of Common Prayer. Crispin George was a Chorister for several years. His collection of poems, *Precious Gems Unearthed by an African*, was published privately in 1952. The influence of the hymnal on his poems is seen in the archaic prosody, the predominance of the common meter, and the use of biblical or scriptural terminology. This is a typical stanza from “Let Wisdom and Modesty Guide Us”:

Be not so foolish as to boast,
Save only on his might
He only is the Lord of Host
Who doth all things aright.
There are times, however, when the diction and the images used combine to produce an effect that can only be described as grandeur, even when Crispin George is using the basic common meter:

This Heaven’s gift of charm-diffusing
Circlet that we scan,
Whose distance shames the eye-destroying
Glare contrived by man,
This Alpha and Omega of that
Splendour known as light,
Is God’s own token of that day
When right shall vanquish might.

Crispin George can also write in blank verse, and when he does he gives the impression of being liberated from the constricting influence of the hymnal. We see this in poems such as “Help Deferred” and “Ingratitude.” These are impressive poems whose declamatory grandeur has been contrived by the use of appropriate images, analogies, and personified abstractions, as in these lines from “Ingratitude”:

The basest forms of vices that we know
Seem chaste, compared with base ingratitude,
That freakish, misbegotten child of pride
Seduced by basest treachery, void of all
Extenuating pleas adduced by vice.

Crispin George’s poems reveal that he is a profoundly religious moralist with a tremendous faith in God’s love and providence and a divinely and justly ordered universe. There is no doubt or skepticism here, and in this he was reflecting the collective beliefs of his time and milieu. The poems also reveal a characteristic that most members of his milieu did not possess, and that is profound pride in Africa and the black race, as can be seen in “Homage to Mother Africa,” a poem that reveals the combination of religious fervor and genuine pride in “Africanness” that is one of the hallmarks of George’s poetry.
This blend of African consciousness and religious devotion is also a hallmark of the poetry of Jacob Stanley Davies (1879-1957). It is seen for instance in a “Negro’s Prayer.” Jacob Stanley Davies never published his poems, which were written mainly for the enjoyment of the members of his family and close friends and circulated among them, but individual poems have been published in anthologies such as David St. John-Parson’s *Our Poets Speak*. Though not intended for publication, the poems are still characterized by tremendous rigor and Davies shows himself to be an accomplished craftsman who is completely in control of all the elements of the poem. His most successful poem is probably the satirical “Even There!” which, like Soyinka’s “Telephone Conversation,” brilliantly exposes the stupidity of racial discrimination. The absurdity is emphasized because the racial discrimination takes place in the other world after death. There is consternation as the white skeletons refuse to mingle with the black ones, the white angels with the black angels, the white ghosts with the black ghosts, and the white devils with the black devils.

There was a great commotion in the cemet’ry last night
Skeletons in altercation! “twas a grisly sight!”
Said one, “I’ll have you know, Sir, though in this lev’lin’ place,
You’re not my equal here, Sir, you’re of a different race.
Prevent your nigger worms, man, from capering round my bones
I’ll never fester with you here, man, our skins were different tones.”

The artistry here can hardly be faulted; the tone is so beautifully modulated, the choice of words is exact, the verse structure is perfectly controlled, and the situation is powerfully visualized. All these factors combine to make “Even There” one of the most delightful of African poems.

Gladys Casely-Hayford (1904-1950) was the daughter of Adelaide. Like her mother, she was educated in the British tradition and was a member of the local Creole elite. And yet, like her mother and all of these other pioneer poets, she produced poetry that was remarkable for its demonstration of African consciousness and pride in the black race. Indeed, this feature is more marked in Gladys Casely-Hayford’s poetry than in that of any of the others. She published some of her poems under the pen name of Aquah Lalua in journals, but it was only after her death that they were published in anthologies such as David St. John-Parson’s *Our Poets Speak* and Donatus Nwoga’s *West African Verse* and became widely known. The pride in blackness is
certainly present in “Rejoice,” the first few lines of which make a rousing call to her fellow Africans to:

Rejoice and Shout with laughter
Throw all your burdens down
If God has been so gracious
As to make you black or brown.

Some might say that the sentiment is naive and the prosody simplistic, but this declaration of pride in blackness is unique for her time and milieu. It is also seen in the charming poem “Nativity,” in which she gives the Christmas story an African backdrop. The Christ child is a black child born in a native African hut to a black mother and father; he is wrapped in a blue “lappah” and laid on his father’s “deerskin hide.” “Freetown” demonstrates not only the poet’s justifiable love for the capital city, but also her optimism and her remarkable artistic control:

Freetown, when God made thee, He made thy soil alone
Then threw the rich remainder in the sea.
Small inlets cradled He, in jet black stone
Small bays of transient blue he lulled to sleep
Within jet rocks, filled from the Atlantic deep.

We choose to call these four writers the pioneer writers because they were the earliest writers of Sierra Leone’s modern period. Though they demonstrate an African consciousness that many of their compatriots were still unaware of, their work is largely unruffled by those currents of African nationalism, resistance to foreign oppression, tribal consciousness, and all those other forces which underpinned the rise of modern African literature in the 1950s and 1960s. The work of the next generation of Sierra Leonean writers begins to reflect these forces.

Delphine King published her collection of poems, Dreams of Twilight, in 1962. In a forward to the collection, Chinua Achebe described the poems as “intensely personal without being private,” a judgment which seems absolutely justified. Many of the poems, such as “Reunion Sweet,” “What is this Thing Called Love” and “Destiny” are lyrical expressions of intensely personal experiences. In fact, “Lost Innocence” powerfully describes the loss of virginity. We have seen some boldness in the work of the pioneer poets, but they could never have dared to attempt some of Delphine King’s effects. The calm unruffled surface of the poetry
of the pioneer poets is replaced here by a kind of existential angst: by despair, consciousness of betrayal and of isolation, and unfulfilled restless searching, but there are also acceptance, resignation, faith, and even optimism. King’s African consciousness and social conscience are also stronger than those of the pioneer poets. A poem like “The Child” is about pride in blackness, but it also ridicules the futility and hypocrisy of Africans trying to behave like white men and denounces misguided nationalism. It goes further than Crispin George, Jacob Stanley-Davies and Gladys Caseley-Hayford in upholding Pan-Africanism as the hope for Africa’s future. Delphine King’s social comment is also much more strident. A poem like “The Elite” is extremely clever social satire that ridicules the antics of corrupt, snobbish, social climbers in her society.

The three other members of this middle group of Sierra Leonean writers exemplify an interesting feature of Sierra Leonean writing: the fact that it was largely undertaken by eminent men who had distinguished themselves in their professions and took up writing as a spare time activity, almost as a duty they were expected to perform for their community. These three—Robert Wellesley-Cole, Raymond Sarif Easmon, and Abioseh Nicol (real name Davidson Nicol)—were brilliant, highly qualified professional men. Robert Wellesley Cole (born 1907) studied medicine in the United Kingdom and had a brilliant undergraduate career. He won several gold medals and eventually became the first African to be elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. The brilliance of Raymond Sarif Easmon (born 1913) both in high school and university was almost legendary. After graduating as a doctor he returned to Freetown where he set up a practice that was highly successful until the dictator Siaka Stevens decided to ruin him for daring to oppose him. Abioseh Nicol (1924-1994) was probably the most famous of the three internationally. After graduating with a first class honors in biochemistry at Christ’s College in Cambridge, England, he eventually became a medical doctor and also obtained an MD (in England a post-graduate medical degree) and a Ph.D. in his field. He became the first African to be appointed a Fellow of a Cambridge college and later served as Principal of Fourah Bay College and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone. He eventually became an effective and highly respected international diplomat, serving as Sierra Leone’s High Commissioner in London (equivalent to Ambassador), Sierra Leone’s Ambassador to the United Nations, and Director of UNCTAD, the UN agency responsible for training and development. These men were the cream of Sierra Leone’s intellectual elite. They were all educated in the United Kingdom and were thoroughly at home in English culture and the English lifestyle. They could not therefore be expected to be as strident in the denunciation of the disastrous effects of
English culture and English imperialism on the African psyche, the African personality, and African culture as other African writers. Yet their work resonates with a genuine African consciousness.

Wellesley Cole’s best known work is Kossoh Town Boy, a largely autobiographical novel. It presents a nostalgic picture of Freetown and Freetown society in the early 1920s and the experiences of the young Wellesley-Cole growing up at that time and in that milieu. Although a lucid and highly readable work, the interest of Kossoh Town Boy is largely sociological, the presentation of the mores and values of middle class Creole society being little short of memorable. Inevitably, this novel invites comparison with a similar work, Camara Laye’s African Child, and once this is done several problems emerge. Does it engage in the same idealization of traditional society? Does it also imply the same alienation of the individual from traditional roots by an alien educational system? Does it raise the same kind of cultural and sociological issues? The fact is that Kossoh Town Boy presents an almost uncompromisingly Victorian picture of Freetown society. These people espouse Victorian morality, Christian values, the puritan ethic, and conventional bourgeois respectability. They are proud of being “British,” and expect their children, like the young Kossoh Town Boy, to be like them.

Abioseh Nicol published his first collection of stories, The Truly Married Woman and Other Stories, in 1965, but his first story, the award winning “The Devil at Yolahun Bridge,” had been written in 1951 when he was still an undergraduate in Cambridge and was printed in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1953. It is a sophisticated and skillfully crafted piece that subtly explores the shifting relations between three very different kinds of people in Africa: an English colonial administrator, a white trader from Kenya, and an African engineer. It also shows the power of African tradition and African beliefs and reveals that, in spite of his background, Abioseh Nicol remained at heart a true African. The Truly Married Woman and Other Stories established Abioseh Nicol’s reputation as one of the best practitioners of the art of the short story in Africa and elicited the comment from Adrian Roscoe that Nicol was “in the very forefront of African Short Story Writers” (86).

Abioseh Nicol also gained an enviable reputation as a poet whose works were soon to be featured in the most authoritative of anthologies of African poetry. The poems show an even greater African consciousness and awareness of a genuine African identity than the stories. For this reason they are often compared to the works of Senghor and other Negritude writers. The glorification of the traditional African environment that is a hallmark of Senghor’s poetry is certainly to be found in Nicol’s “The Continent that Lies Within Us.” The poem presents the
nostalgic picture of Mother Africa held by the idealistic African student in Britain who is fed up with the monotony, artificiality and mechanization of Western life. However, Nicol’s poem does not stop at mere glorification or idealization. Like Achebe and other Anglophone writers of that time he also presents the reality that Africa is and does not “gloss over inconvenient facts.” The second half of the poem presents the drab, unflattering reality that confronts the returning graduate.

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 ....

The poem “African Easter” does dramatize the dilemma confronting the African intellectual who is torn between the traditional culture he has been taught to abandon and modern Western civilization epitomized by Western Christianity. Nicol certainly makes us aware of the issues of culture conflict and alienation even though the compelling feeling for traditional religion that one sees in the works of Achebe is not present here.

It can easily be seen why Abioseh Nicol was the first Sierra Leonean writer to capture the world’s attention. He dealt with issues that other African writers at the time were also preoccupied with and he explored them with consummate skill.

Of these four writers of the middle period, Sarif Easmon demonstrates the greatest staying power. A contemporary of Wellesley Cole and Abioseh Nicol, he commenced his writing career at about the same time that they did, but he went on writing long after they had stopped. The value of his work was not recognized as early as that of Abioseh Nicol, but this did not stop him from writing, and he was eventually able to push himself into the mainstream not only of Sierra Leonean writing, but of African literature in general. The nature of Easmon’s early work explains why the literary world was slow to acclaim him. Easmon was part Creole, and both his first play, Dear Parent and Ogre, and his novel the Burnt-out Marriage, are regarded by some as demonstrating some of the worst attitudes of the Creoles. Easmon seems to give his endorsement to a Creole aristocracy that despises the indigenous people and their values. Far from demonstrating a genuine African consciousness, Easmon and his leading characters, particularly in Dear Parent and Ogre, seem to indulge in English mannerisms and yearn for an English lifestyle that is beyond the reach of most Africans. Their conversation is charged with references to Western music, Western literature, and Western art. They demonstrate a fondness for

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champagne and recount their various experiences in Europe when they strolled along the Champs-Élysées or went shopping in London. The language the characters use seems more like archaic nineteenth-century diction than modern English speech, let alone modern African speech. The plot of *Dear Parent and Ogre* seems to depend on melodrama or chance happenings rather than the interaction of the characters and the choices they make. With its emphasis on supposedly clever dialogue Easmon’s play increasingly looks like English drawing room comedy of manners.

Yet this industrious and persevering writer showed himself to be responsive to criticism and capable of change and development. His second play, *The New Patriots*, almost dispenses with the English ambience, and though the author still throws his weight behind an aristocratic Creole class, he does so not because they are Creoles, but because they demonstrate integrity and the highest moral principles. Indeed, in this play, Easmon really gets to grips with some of the most pressing problems that have plagued the continent of Africa: corruption and nepotism, political instability, and tribalism. It is in this way that he demonstrates genuine African consciousness. He shows an unrelenting commitment to the struggle for justice, for equity, and for decency and transparency in public life. In his collection of stories, *The Feud and Other Stories*, Easmon showed that he had found his true artistic medium and voice. These stories, which are among the finest crafted of African short stories, show at last a strong appreciation, by the author, of the genuine beauties of African traditional life, of the beauty of the African continent itself, and the charm of its peoples. It is for these reasons that Sarif Easmon is now regarded as one of Sierra Leone’s leading writers and that a substantial section of this book is devoted to him.

With the work of the younger generation of writers, Sierra Leonean literature really moves into the mainstream of African literature. These writers were born in the late 1930s and 1940s and their work reflects the tensions typical of postcolonial literature. They also manifest a cultural and racial self-confidence far in excess of that showed by their predecessors. These writers—Gaston Bart-Williams (1938-1990), Lemuel Johnson (1940-2002), Yulisa Amadu Maddy (b.1936), Mukhtar Mustapha (b.1943), Syl Cheney-Coker (b.1945), and Dominic Ofori—came to their young manhood at the time when African nationalism was at its height, leading to the independence of several African countries, even though it was not a very potent force in Sierra Leone itself. They were therefore much more aware of the implications of racism and colonialism than their predecessors. Like the middle generation of writers, they had also spent fairly lengthy periods in England and other parts of the Western world as students, but
where the former were mostly privileged scholarship boys who lived a fairly cushioned existence and could therefore accommodate themselves easily to the Western lifestyle, this new generation had had to struggle against heavy odds. They were often exposed to the rigors of racial discrimination or even to the hostility that followed the collapse of empire. Consequently they were forced to examine their situation as black people or as a once colonized people. Far from glorying in the connection with Britain, those who were Creoles were forced to examine the implications of their Creole ancestry, and all of them showed a powerful awareness of the impact of colonialism on indigenous African institutions and values and the alienation in which this could sometimes result.

Stylistically also there are major differences between the younger generation and their predecessors. The poetry of Abioseh Nicol, Delphine King, Gladys Caseley-Hayford, Jacob Stanley Davies, and Crispin George had been characterized by clarity, lucidity, and fluency. The younger generation of poets brings Sierra Leonean poetry into the mainstream of modern poetry, skillfully deploying concentration of thought, personal symbolisms, recondite allusions, and even obscure imagery. They show themselves abreast of all the developments in modern poetry. Where Sarif Easmon’s plays had demonstrated his fondness for melodrama, those of Yulisa Amadu Maddy reveal his professionalism, his more heightened awareness of the conventions and the capabilities of the stage and the need to show the interaction of character, situation, and dialogue. In the work of these writers we see, not romanticism or sentimentality, but a greater realism and earthiness that can be detected even in the language and the registers they deploy.

Yulissa Amadu Maddy and Sarif Easmon are among the leading Sierra Leonean dramatists but the contrast between them could not be greater. That Maddy changed his name from Pat Maddy to Yulisa Amadu Maddy highlights the difference and shows his attitude toward the Creoles and to the impact of English colonialism on African culture. Where Easmon revels in his membership of the Creole elite, places Creoledom on a pedestal, and largely throws his authorial weight behind the values and principles of a Creole aristocracy, Maddy can hardly let slip an opportunity to pillory the Creoles, to condemn their snobbery and what he sees as their contempt for the provincial peoples, and to expose their religious hypocrisy and their ridiculous aping of British mannerisms and other aspects of British culture. Where most of Easmon’s characters are taken from the ranks of the privileged elite, Maddy, in both his plays and his novel No Past, No Present, No Future, takes his from low life and from the ranks of the underprivileged—school dropouts, gang members, prostitutes, and pimps. Where Easmon shows profound reverence for English life and culture, Maddy shows his young characters struggling to
eke out a precarious existence in an oppressive and unsympathetic Western society. Where Easmon’s characters almost flaunt their mastery of the English language and use an archaic, pretentious, and almost Victorian register, the language of Maddy’s characters is earthy and often obscene. Maddy’s practice shows that the younger generation of writers is much less servile toward Britain and British institutions, much more critical of Creole society and Creole attitudes, and much more conscious of racial issues than their predecessors.

This preoccupation with racial issues is certainly seen in the poetry of Gaston Bart-Williams who almost seems obsessed with the predicament of the black race. With brilliantly devastating irony he exposes, in “Letter to Mother From Her Black Son in Vietnam,” not just the destructiveness of war, but mainly the absurdity and simplemindedness of Black American soldiers teaming up with their white counterparts to inflict death on other people of color even though they themselves are being oppressed by brutal American racism in Harlem and elsewhere.

Dearest Mother
I’ve just finished off a few Vietcongs
thank God
the white captain told me I was brave
in fact heroic

In “Piano Keys” Bart-Williams uses the obvious metaphor of the black and white keys to suggest the possibility of harmony and love between the races and therefore the hypocrisy of racial discrimination. The poem “God Bless Us” is typical of Bart-Williams’ art; its stark simplicity belies the remarkably controlled artistry that has gone into its making, particularly the poet’s modulation of language and tone. First there is the deliberate ironic punning on “Us,” which is both the personal pronoun and the United States of America. Then there is the simplicity of the first few lines,

Dreaming
I saw a butterfly in the night
Yellow bright and beautiful

which is almost childlike until we realize that the lines are meant to recall the first line of the hymn “all things bright and beautiful” and the sentiment expressed in the fourth line that “the
Lord God made them all.” But even if we realize this, we are still not quite prepared for the shocking violence of the next line “I watched you call it red and watched you crush it.” The “red,” the reference to “Us,” and the butterfly now take on tremendous significance as we realize that the butterfly is an image of a human being, one of God’s creatures who has been branded as a communist by Americans and must therefore be destroyed. This brief poem is therefore a devastating indictment of America’s irrational anti-communism and the resulting murderous adventures in South East Asia and other parts of the world. By the deft manipulation of irony and sarcasm and the use of very simple and the most accessible of images, Bart-Williams has contrived a very powerful poem. He is an accomplished poet whose terse, crisp, ironic style suggests he could have gone on to become a major African poet had he not been cut down early by a tragic ferry accident in Sierra Leone.

Syl Cheney-Coker is now regarded as Sierra Leone’s foremost writer and one of Africa’s major poets. He is the author of several collections of poetry including *Concerto for an Exile* (1973), *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* (1980), and *The Blood in the Desert’s Eyes* (1990). His impressive novel, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), won the African Commonwealth Writers’ Prize in 1991. If Gaston Bart-Williams is obsessed with the predicament of the Black race, Syl Cheney-Coker seems obsessed with the implications and consequences of his Creole ancestry. That this involves a slave ancestry and a hybrid culture seems to fill him with a deep disgust that is expressed in sordid and violent images of nastiness and self-castigation. In both the poems and his novel there is severe condemnation and ridicule of the Creoles for their snobbery, class-consciousness, hypocrisy, lack of cultural self-confidence, pretentiousness and even cruelty.

Cheney-Coker’s aversion for the Creoles is partly due to what he considers their religious insincerity and hypocrisy. A superficial Christian devotion merely masks, as he sees it, immorality and lack of genuine Christian charity. This leads him to an attack on Christianity itself, which he sees as an alien religion associated with the slave owners and with imperialism. In his boyhood, Cheney-Coker had himself been a choirboy in one of Freetown’s leading churches, but he now sees it all as an elaborate charade that does nothing to soothe his grieving soul. Christ now becomes the one who lied to him at Calvary, who did not die to save the world but to make it a plantation where Cheney-Coker’s people, the black people, sweat.

Cheney-Coker is really a cosmopolitan writer whose poetry shows a variety of influences. He himself mentions the influence of the Congolese Tchicaya U Tamisi, another African whose poetry falls very much within the mainstream of modern poetry, but one can also
detect the influence of the French Symbolist poets like Rimbaud and Mallarme and the South American Pablo Neruda. Other influences on his work, thematically and artistically, include the continent of South America itself and her people. Some of the poems are about his relationship with an Argentinian woman with whom he seems to have fallen disastrously in love. He also sees the history and predicament of both Sierra Leone and Argentina as inextricably linked. In his novel, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, Cheney-Coker makes use of the magical realism technique, a technique usually associated with South America. Of course he need not have got this technique from Latin America, but his use of it reveals an artistic affinity with that continent and its culture.

Like Pablo Neruda, Cheney-Coker is very much concerned, in both his poetry and his novel, with social comment. This is probably one of the major differences between him and the pioneer poets and one of the features he has in common with the other younger Sierra Leonean poets. He is disgusted by the malaise that he sees all around him in Sierra Leone in particular and in Africa in general. There is denunciation of the brutality and tyranny of African leaders, of the shameless opulence of the bourgeoisie and the total neglect of the toiling and starving masses. At times the tone becomes strident as Cheney-Coker forecasts the revolution when the masses will rise up in anger against their rulers. All this suggests that Cheney-Coker is a major African writer who deserves the attention he has been given.

Lemuel Johnson was one of the most difficult and at the same time one of the most interesting of the younger generation of poets. A late professor of English at the University of Michigan, he had published by the late seventies a number of short stories in various periodicals, an English translation of one of Raphael Alberti’s Spanish plays, and an important study of the Negro as a metaphor in Western Literature—*The Devil, the Gargoyle, and the Buffoon*—and two collections of poems. The first collection, *Highlife for Caliban*, is, like the poems of Cheney-Coker and Gaston Bart-Williams, concerned with the predicament of the black race and the consequences of enslavement and alienation. The “Caliban” of the title is taken from Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” where the white Prospero enslaves, colonizes, and oppresses the black Caliban, proceeding largely from the assumption that he must be subhuman, oversexed, born to serve, and incapable of being civilized. However, Johnson’s work moves beyond a mere denunciation of imperialism. Once Caliban is liberated from Prospero’s domination he too behaves like a tyrant and adopts the lifestyle of his former oppressor. Caliban’s behavior in Johnson’s work thus becomes a metaphor for the representation of the political conduct of
Africa’s new governing elite who, once they step into the shoes of the former imperialists, engage in the same ostentatious lifestyle and behave with even greater arrogance and brutality.

Lemuel Johnson’s interests and artistic practice are even more eclectic than Cheney-Coker’s. For instance, in the “His Excellency” poems in *Highlife for Caliban* he places the tyranny of the new generation of leaders within a wider frame of geographical reference by showing that the Kreen-Akrore tribe in Brazil are just as apprehensive as African peoples of the new men of power—the scientists and the anthropologists. The mowing down of Czech citizens in 1968 by Russian tanks is an even more monstrous form of imperialism and in “Excellency VI” the behavior of French extremists in giving a hero’s burial to the traitor Marshal Petain is seen as the ugliest form of nationalism. Lemuel Johnson’s style also reflects this eclecticism. His poetry thrives on allusions drawn from very disparate sources: history, geography, anthropology, Picasso, Modigliani, Ingmar Bergman, the Pope, the Bible, and Shakespeare. There are also translations and renderings from various languages. It is this very wide range of allusions and his concentration of thought that largely combine to make his poetry appear difficult.

One of the most interesting literary developments in Sierra Leone was the emergence of vernacular drama in the late 1960s. Before this phenomenon, drama in Sierra Leone had been largely a middle class preoccupation. Performances were done by middle-class people for the entertainment of a middle-class audience, quite often in the stuffy atmosphere of the British Council Theatre. Even the plays of Maddy, which broke new ground by dealing with the concerns of working-class people in sometimes earthy language, were still directed at a largely middle-class audience who were literate in English. By writing plays in Krio, dramatists like Dele Charley and John Kolosa Kargbo opened the doors of the theater to all and sundry and immediately punched the stuffiness out of it. People did not now need to be educated to go to the theater and so they went in droves and more or less took possession of it. Where audiences before this had been largely passive spectators, the new audience was an active participant who could identity with the characters on the stage and often either shouted advice or hurled insults at them. Like Maddy before them, the new dramatists felt free to present characters and deal with subjects that had been considered taboo. This period also saw the beginnings of professionalism in the theater. Acting companies or groups developed, each with its own resident dramatist and with actors drawn from ordinary people who nevertheless developed their talents and expected to be financially rewarded from the profits of the play, even when they had other jobs. Vernacular drama soon turned its attention to social comment and very effectively exposed the social and political malaise in the country. It had such a tremendous impact that the government got scared
and imposed a severe censorship on plays. This limited the activities of the dramatists for a while, driving them underground. The country’s disastrous economic situation and the civil war also robbed vernacular theater of its vitality, but with the end of the war and the introduction of democratic rule, there was a resurgence in vernacular drama. Unfortunately, two of the leading vernacular dramatists, John Kolosa Kargbo and Dele Charley, died prematurely. Also, many of these plays have never been published because they were written in Krio and it is difficult to find publishers willing to publish work in Krio.

Other interesting developments include the growth of a considerable body of poetry published on the Internet (Leonenet) and the emergence of new novelists like Tibbie S. Kposowa, J. Sorie Conteh, and Alasan Mansaray.

Notes

1. The piece was first published as the “Introduction” to Knowledge is More than Mere Words: A Critical Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature. (eds.) Eustace Palmer and Abioseh Michael Porter. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. 2008.
2. I have written extensively elsewhere on the development of Sierra Leonean writing in articles such as “The Development of Sierra Leonean Writing” in A Celebration of black and African Writing, “Sierra Leone and the Gambia in European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa, and “Sierra Leonean Poetry in English” in The Arts and Civilization of Black and African Peoples.
3. Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony in 1808

Works Cited

Primary Works


**Secondary Sources**