Considering Ibrahim Abdullah’s Review Essay of Gibril Cole’s *The Krio of West Africa*  
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Ibrahim Abdullah’s scholarship on Krio history in the past couple of years has shown the absence of rigorous research, which is manifest in the way he could bulldoze his way into scholarly writings on Sierra Leone history by abandoning the canons of historical scholarship. The problem then with Abdullah’s writing on Krio history is that he has abandoned the canons of scholarship that I elaborate hereafter to gain some undue advantage or to deceive the reading public into accepting his own analyses.

These canons indicate that if a scholar, historian or otherwise, has a scholarly interest in a particular subject, that scholar would first attempt to avail herself of extant writings on that subject, evaluating the strengths, weaknesses and biases of such writings, and proceeding from there to further research on that subject. As the research progresses, this helps the scholar to better evaluate the earlier writings and therefore to determine how her own research would agree or disagree with those writings and thus create the foundation for the ‘new approach’ or the contribution to scholarship she is about to make on that subject. At no time has it been acceptable that a historian could abandon engaging existing writings on a subject she is pursuing so as to make a new thesis seem acceptable. This is why the scholarly world insists on peer review of materials submitted for publication to work against such designs. In today’s scholarly world, however, publishers are guilty of abandoning this canon, sometimes out of ignorance or to promote some hidden agenda.

With respect to Sierra Leone history, that of the Krio is the most researched and documented. Much of the earlier writings by European scholars and a couple by Krio scholars like Arthur Porter and Akintola Wyse more recently have operated in a framework of the nineteenth century colony of Sierra Leone set up by the British. However, writings since the 1970s, particularly by Sierra Leoneans, have attempted to correct the views of the early authors. Most notable on the part of the Krio language is the work of Clifford N. Fyle and Eldred Jones titled *A Krio-English Dictionary* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980). This work has a lengthy Introduction and bibliography by the linguist, Clifford Fyle, who scoured the extant literature on Krio language and culture.

The pace of production of knowledge on Krio history quickened in the twenty-first century. In 2004 a publication titled *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World* (Bloominton,
Indiana University Press, 2004) carried two chapters, one by Gibril Cole and another by C. Magbaily Fyle, on the Yoruba connection with Krio society, specifically treating issues like language and Islam. Two years later, we were greeted with the edited work by Gibril Cole and M. Dixon-Fyle titled *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006). This text contained essays mostly by Sierra Leoneans, departing from the idea of Krio society as elitist. This work was followed in 2007 by a Ph.D. dissertation by Joseph Bangura at Dalhousie University on the subject *The Temne in Freetown History: Rethinking the History of the Sierra Leone Colony*. Bangura was reminding us of the influence of the Thaimne in Freetown history, as the Thaimne were the overlords of virtually the entire peninsula where the British colony started in 1787, and where eventually Krio society emerged.

There was a flurry of activities in the last two years in Krio history by Sierra Leoneans. In December 2013 in *Weave*, C. Magbaily Fyle published a piece titled “Nationalism should Trump Ethnicity: The Krio Saga in Sierra Leone History”, addressing Krio attitudes and the importance of non-“Liberated Africans”, particularly the Bullom, in the mix of what became Krio society ([http://weavesl.org/ojs/index.php?journal=Weave&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=37&path%5B%5D=56](http://weavesl.org/ojs/index.php?journal=Weave&page=article&op=view&path%5B%5D=37&path%5B%5D=56)). It was in that year that Gibril Cole’s work on *The Krio of West Africa* that Abdullah critiques in the last issue of *Weave* was published. Cole would not have known about the *Weave* article by Magbaily Fyle and so could not have incorporated research there in his work.

But then came the 2014 developments. On June 5, 2014 there was a book launching in Freetown of the work edited by Ismail Rashid and Sylvia Ojukutu-Macauley titled *Paradoxes of History and Memory in Post-Colonial Sierra Leone*. The same evening, there was a lecture at Fourah Bay College by Abdullah titled “From Creoledom to Kriodom”. The burden of the lecture was to literally condemn all writings hitherto on the Krio and advance Abdullah’s perspective of the Yoruba element in Krio history as dominant. The lecture was published in two parts in a local newspaper, *Awoko*, starting on June 17. This publication drew a reaction from C. Magbaily Fyle titled “From Creoledom to Kriodom: A Rejoinder”. Both published lecture and rejoinder can be accessed on the Internet at the *Awoko* website awoko.org/2014/07/07- and also on the Patriotic Vanguard website of July 10 ([www.thepatriotivanguard.com](http://www.thepatriotivanguard.com)).

It is necessary for the reader to have access to this background as none of these writings mentioned here appear in Abdullah’s Review essay of Gibril Cole’s *Krio of West Africa* in the last issue of *Weave*’s “Point of View and Record” Section, which is not peer-reviewed. However, a couple of emphases captured my attention and so I respond.

The first deals with the acceptable time for the emergence of Krio society as the late nineteenth century, which Abdullah has rejected, saying there is no evidence of this date. The second, related to the first, is that if some Krio in the early twentieth century still identified themselves as Yoruba, then Krio society had not then emerged.

Both issues are related to the broad conception of identity issues that is so popular in the United States of America and I want to address its manifestation in Sierra Leone. Identity is a
multi-layered issue embracing two main features: first, the way you want to be identified, and second, the one not readily considered, how others identify you.

Let us take the first, the matter of self-identification. In Africa in particular, states are made up of numerous ethnic groups that have historically interacted with their neighbors leading to multiple intermarriages and political control by one group over another. This has given rise to varied backgrounds constituting one’s ethnic identity. Thus there is the overarching identity with the state and then that of ethnicity.

Multiple ethnic backgrounds have led to what I have termed “shifting ethnicity”, when individuals describe themselves as belonging to one or the other ethnicity that fits their background, depending on the issue in question. If it is politics, for example, people identify with the dominant ethnic group particularly if they speak that language. This is a gateway to advantage for employment and other perks. They could easily and happily switch identity as necessary and I say, “why not?” If shifting ethnicity is useful to the individual then its use would be beneficial to the project of national unity, so glaringly given short shrift in most African countries, particularly Sierra Leone with its much longer history of colonialism. Shifting ethnicity is prevalent today in Sierra Leone and there is every need to encourage it.

The second element of identity, the one relating to how the “other” identifies you, is the one many analysts do not care about, as it often brings unfortunate memories of bygone events, as in the case of African Americans in the United States of America. Deep down, the way whites want to regard African Americans as descendants of slaves to white masters is responsible for much of the racism there today. And African Americans resent this and would not pay much attention to it except to oppose it.

Let me bring this analysis of the “other” to the Krio history situation in the context of Abdullah’s review essay. Hypothetically, if on June 15, 1935 the statement, “do not call me Joe Bengui” appears in print, it means that on or sometime before that date, someone had called that person by that appellation he seems to detest. One does not need to find the positive etched in stone to draw conclusions about what happened in June 15, 1935 on this issue.

It is the same with Krio ethnicity as being taken as having emerged in the late nineteenth century. For it was when people of Nova Scotian descent in particular objected in writing to being called “Creole” (read “akiriyo”) that it became clear that the term was being used universally to apply to all those who were by that time “Colony born”, another term used synonymously with akiriyo by that time. The vast majority of the Krio people did not know that “akiriyo” was spelt ‘creole’ in written sources. Their familiarity with this term emerged from their knowledge of this entity in oral discourse. But some of the western educated Krio who objected in writing evidently knew that it was the term ‘akiriyo’ that was being rendered as ‘Creole’ in written documents.

I have elaborately addressed the issue of the emergence of the name “Creole” instead of “akiriyo” in my piece on the Weave cited above. Again, it is not because it is not etched in stone that we should reject the fact that the colonial official, Miller, was the first person to record the term “Creole” as “akiriyo” in print in his “Report on Education in the Sierra Leone Colony” in
1843. Miller thought he heard “Creole” when in fact he was being told “akiriyo”. All the available evidence point to this conclusion: Abdullah’s scholarship needs to engage and reflect on available evidence when he finds them, and to come up with meaningful understanding of such evidence. Such data can be in the form of oral tradition which is often necessary to inform and understand the written sources available, or in written form. Historians should note this, instead of dismissing the oral off hand, as Christopher Fyfe did in his piece in *New Perspectives on the Sierra Leone Krio* cited above where he states that the term Kriodom was invented by Akintola Wyse, because Fyfe failed to incorporate the oral evidence.

It has been necessary to dwell on this analysis of the term *akiriyo* since Abdullah and Ismail Rashid have refused to use the term Krio, thereby misleading the average reading public into thinking they have a valid point. One hopes that this response has helped to clear their doubts and strengthen their resolve that historical analysis has to be done following the accepted principles and procedures.