

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF WRITING IN POST-WAR SIERRA LEONE:
POETRY AS A DISCOURSE FOR PEACE

by

JOANNA KAY SKELT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers how creative writing contributes to social recovery and conflict transformation and uses Sierra Leone as a test case. In order to do this, existing theory in relation to the role of the writer and conflict in Africa is examined and a detailed social and literary context outlined.

The civil war of 1991-2002 prompted a poetic outpouring amongst new and existing creative writers despite a chronic lack of readership. Interviews with poets based in the capital, Freetown, reveal strong social motivations to write combined with heightened feelings of agency experienced as writers. An examination of texts provides insights into the process of recovery amongst Sierra Leone's writer-intellectuals.

These combined investigations suggest that writing offers an important location for peaceful counter debate and for re-imagining and recreating the nation in the aftermath of war. Poetry texts and discussions amongst writers come to represent a significant discourse for peace. The very practice of writing in a severely impoverished environment offers a radical form of social engagement while writing in English serves as a unifying force.

This thesis contributes a new sociological perspective on literature and conflict which may be transferable to other post-war and volatile settings.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFRC – Armed Forces Revolutionary Council

APC - All People's Congress

IPAM - Institute of Public Administration and Management, Freetown

MPLA - People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola

NGO – Non Governmental Organisation

PEA - People's Educational Association

RUF – Revolutionary United Front

SLBS – Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service - became SLBC (Corporation) in 2010

SLPP – Sierra Leone People's Party

WASSCE - West African Senior School Certificate Examination

DEDICATION

With gratitude and in memory of Pat Skelt

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: The role of the writer and war in Africa	23
The writer as cultural nationalist and freedom fighter	27
The writer as spokesperson, educator and critic	37
The role of the writer and conflict in Africa	55
CHAPTER 2: Sierra Leonean literature: setting the context	73
Towards a definition of Sierra Leonean literature	74
The marginal nature of Sierra Leonean literature	80
Literature in historical context	87
CHAPTER 3: Field work: Freetown's writers and readers	121
General conditions, reading culture and writing places	130
Participants	145
Field work summary	154
Key findings	172
CHAPTER 4: Examining the texts	177
Approaching the texts: ways of reading	179
What poetry in English represents to the Sierra Leonean writer	183
Lice in the Lion's Mane: Poets and Poems of Sierra Leone (1995)	192
Songs that Pour the Heart (2004)	203
Kalashnikov in the Sun (2009)	217
CONCLUSION	229
Writing as a location of peace	231
The social function of writers in a post-conflict context	234
Poetry as a discourse for peace	236
APPENDICES	
1. FIELD WORK COMPLETED BY DATE	255
2. SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRES	

General questionnaire used during 2006/7	258
Writer questionnaire used in 2008	260
Reader questionnaire used in 2008	263
Follow up questionnaires for writers used in 2010	265
Follow up questionnaires for literature trainers used in 2010	266
3. ADDITIONAL FIELD NOTES	269
4. KEY POEMS	
From ‘Lice in the Lions Mane’, 1995:	
<i>The Cotton Tree</i> by Sydnella Shooter	301
<i>Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh</i> by Moses Kainwo	303
From ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’, 2004:	
<i>Orders from Below</i> by Mohammed Gibril Sesay	304
<i>At Tellu Bongor</i> by Oumar Farouk Sesay	305
<i>Lamentations</i> by Sydnella Shooter	307
Poems submitted by author:	
<i>Farewell to my Dying Native Land</i> by Tom Caurray	308
<i>Healing Wounds</i> by Tom Caurray	312
5. OTHER POEMS	
From ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’, 2004:	
<i>On Being Commissioned to Pray</i> by Mohammed Gibril Sesay	313
<i>My Root in Flames</i> by Sydnella Shooter	315
<i>Sights at PZ</i> by Bridgette Olamide James	317
From ‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’, 2009:	
<i>Go Was Am</i> by Raymond De Souza George	319
<i>The Winding Road</i> by Eldred Jones	320
<i>Staring</i> by Oumar Farouk Sesay	322
BIBLIOGRAPHY	
Sierra Leonean Primary Texts	324
Secondary Sources	328

INTRODUCTION

Thesis overview

An examination into the nature and extent of writing (and reading) imaginative literature offers an important indication of the health and functioning of a society. In this thesis, the analysis of the social function of writing in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, West Africa (since the onset of civil war in 1991 and after its cessation in 2002 until 2010) offers a litmus test of the nation's state of being. Sierra Leone was already grossly-underdeveloped before the conflict began and in the initial post-war years it has faced the task of war rehabilitation, recovery and social renewal coupled with the on-going challenge of extreme economic hardship. Sierra Leone has a relatively small population for a West African country of fewer than six million and estimates suggest that at least 50,000 people died as a result of the violence¹.

In such a context, educational provision and facilities have deteriorated and literary infrastructure is almost non-existent. However, I have found that the persistent determination of a small, educated group of Sierra Leonean writers to continue writing and sharing new texts in such adverse conditions has simultaneously created an alternative arena for peaceful democratic contestation, exchange and criticism and for social engagement and cohesion through the practice of writing. This literature-in-the-making is consciously Sierra Leonean and consists, mostly, of poetry written in English relating to the social context and motivated by the desire for social improvement and the entrenchment of peaceful development. A

¹ Reuters (2007) 'FACTBOX-Sierra Leone's civil war' [online]. Available from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2007/08/02/uk-leone-warcrimes-war-idUKL0286217420070802> [Accessed 15 May 2012]

sample of these poems and interviews with their authors form the resource material and field work for this study. The war catalysed new written responses in circumstances where reaching a reading audience was far from guaranteed. Through their practice, writers have become more socially engaged and experience heightened feelings of capacity in terms of the socially transformative potential of literature. Their poems contribute to our understanding of the process of recovery in the initial post-war period through the shifting narrative and emotional landscapes depicted in response to lived experience and constitute a new body of Sierra Leonean war poetry.

Sierra Leone offers a challenging test case for examining the social usefulness of literature specifically how writing relates to conflict transformation and social renewal. My argument is that literature represents a peaceful space or location for writers to document and share stories of war, foster hope and national pride, develop new social ideas and contribute to mending the national imagination. These poems are also an arena for writers to engage – imaginatively and intellectually –with ideas of social change in a manner which emphasises being Sierra Leonean rather than ethnic difference. Indeed, writing is experienced as a positively transformative act and appears to foster engagement and an appetite for active citizenship. Responding and reviewing each other's texts further stimulates new discursive space for writers charged with a burgeoning sense of social purpose.

The poems exposed in this thesis represent new growth and a revitalisation of Sierra Leonean literature despite a national literacy crisis, the lack of reading and scarcity of books. However, whilst the Sierra Leonean writing community is remarkably buoyant and resilient they are marred by an acute lack of internal consumers. This means that writers find themselves in a peculiar position: being spokespersons because they are writers rather than for what they write. In fact, it is the generation of dialogue (as a result of engagement in writing) which constitutes

a discourse for peace through literature in Sierra Leone at present. Writers are developing a critical and emotive national voice as champions for peace informed by discussion and reflection on their writing and, crucially, on their roles. The more conventional and direct transmission of ideas via the reading of the texts amongst the wider population remains, however, extremely limited.

Chapter summary

In Chapter 1, I begin by surveying existing research on the role of the writer in Africa (as cultural nationalist and freedom fighter and as spokesperson, educator and social critic) and then examine studies relating specifically to conflict and peace. In doing this, I demonstrate that a similar study has not been undertaken but that certain contributions, such as that of Chinua Achebe writing at the time of the Biafran conflict in Nigeria (1967-1970), may be helpful and transferable to Sierra Leone's peculiar historical and social setting.

Chapter 2 begins by considering what constitutes Sierra Leonean literature and the reasons for its marginalisation. I then examine the social and literary context of the wider canon of Sierra Leonean literature. This includes an overview of war and post war writing (for which references have been provided in the first section of the Bibliography) and an analysis of the civil war. Finally, I summarise earlier periods of literary history. This chapter reveals the connection between journalism and creative writing in Sierra Leone and the rise and demise of socially incisive theatre for entertainment and non-formal education. The transition from the domination of writing by Krios (the descendants of liberated slaves who form the principal ethnic group in Freetown) to a more ethnically diverse group of writers today is also charted. Syl Cheney-Coker is identified as a pivotal figure whose style of writing provoked

more free-form poetry while the experience of war made poetry the single most important literary outlet within the country.

Chapter 3 focuses on field work. I start by explaining my approach to conducting field work, describe conditions facing writers at the time of my research and provide detailed background information about both writers and readers. I then summarise findings from interviews with writers, from running a reading group and working in schools in Freetown. The experience of war has stimulated new writing. Most of these writers demonstrate a strong social motivation, are consciously writing as Sierra Leoneans about their country and feel a heightened sense of purpose, engagement and belonging through the practice of writing. As writers, they have a textual outlet and a platform to consider and discuss national issues. This chapter is supplemented by data in Appendix 3: Additional Field Notes.

In Chapter 4, I consider how to approach the reading of Sierra Leonean post-war poetry and what poetry in English represents. I then review three collections of Sierra Leonean poetry which I obtained in Freetown and discuss a sample of selected poems (many of which were written by poets I met and interviewed). These reflect the authorial concerns of educated writer-intellectuals struggling to construct a literature for peace.

In the Conclusion, I reformulate the poetic response to war and social crises to reveal key phases of post-war adjustment and recovery. I propose that writing in Sierra Leone offers a location for peace and that poetry provides a discursive space via the texts and practice of writing in which to engage, revise and rethink social ideas, past and future narratives. Such a space may be utilised to explore how communities can re-imagine and build shared narratives in the aftermath of conflict. Belonging to this body of writers represents an alternative meeting point in which ideas may be put forward which run counter to prevailing discourses

and in which ethnicity and party affiliations are not foregrounded. The experience of writing and meeting other writer-intellectuals promotes a belief and desire for social change and an enhanced sense of capacity as community animators. To ensure the survival and longevity of literature, however, this energy needs to be used to translate texts and create new connections and audiences within the country.

Choice of research topic

Having originally visited Sierra Leone for my MA field work on rethinking peace education (see Skelt, 1997), I later came across an article by the writer and critic Caryl Phillips (2003) who had visited Freetown and written about the difficulties facing writers there. During his visit, Phillips met with a representative of Sierra Leone writers who had set up a small office of the international writer's organisation Pen. Phillips asks the Pen president, Mike Butscher, what role he imagined:

writers might play in a country whose average annual income is a mere US\$470 per person, and in which life expectancy is 34.5 years?...What relevance is writing in a nation whose social and economic infrastructure appears to be permanently close to collapse? (Phillips, 2003)

As a poet and writer myself, I started to think about the actual function of writing in such a setting and whether writers in any way contribute to peace promotion and consolidation. I had previously worked on a teaching book using literature for the teaching of peace education (Midwinter, C. (2005) *Making Sense of World Conflicts*. Oxfam publications: Oxford). I have also used creative writing as a means of consultation in areas of social deprivation in the UK e.g. to explore responses to the local environment in Perry Beeches, Birmingham. Therefore,

this research topic combined my academic, work and creative interests. I had also worked for several NGOs in West Africa and, whilst working there, met writers who took for granted their social role and responsibility in a way which differed markedly from English writers. This had been the subject of many comparisons and discussions.

After beginning research, I worked again in this field e.g. on a literature and citizenship project called the Freedom Town Project between schools in Birmingham, UK and Freetown, Sierra Leone. Later, in 2012, I took part in Poetry Encounters, a joint poetry commission with Syl Cheney-Coker exploring our relationships with England and Sierra Leone and the impact of place on our work.

Another motivation behind this research was that I was interested in the extent to which writing was capable of transforming society. Ashcroft calls the “transformative work of a text... “the way in which text transforms the societies and institutions within which it functions” (see Ashcroft, 1989, p.168). I wanted to find out the transformative potential of writers and writing *inside* the country rather than by writers in the diaspora.

Positionality

My background, beliefs and political leaning will inevitably seep into this research despite attempts to remain unbiased. Of these, by far the most important is that I am a poet myself and believe that literature plays an essential role within society. As such, I have, perhaps, tended to orient myself towards poetry and focus on this form of writing though it is poetry that has flourished more than other forms of written English in post war Freetown. Owing to a combination of factors such as the lack of publishing opportunities, the lack of time for

writers working in other jobs and the emotionality of experiences that writers have been through and live under, poetry became the most immediate and significant form of literature in Sierra Leone during this period of study (2006-2009).

My position as a fellow (albeit English) writer enabled me to occupy an unofficial, semi-embedded position with access to other writers. I was open in sharing my research ideas as well as, very occasionally, my creative writing. Prior knowledge of Sierra Leone and being an employee of Macmillan in Freetown also legitimised my position somewhat favourably.

My presence and research focus may have also impacted, to a small degree, on the orientation of certain writers and on the development of their work.

Despite similarities of craft, I was obviously an outsider in terms of nationality and ethnicity and, often, in terms of gender. I am a white-skinned British woman who has never lived in Sierra Leone though I have visited seven times beginning in 1997 when I undertook field work my MA thesis in International Conflict Analysis. I have since worked in Sierra Leone for short periods for Macmillan Education developing social studies resources for Primary School teachers and, in Autumn 2008, I spent three months on a study trip completing the majority of my field work interviews. Since then I have returned twice to work on a schools-based literature project linked with schools in Birmingham, UK. With the exception of my first trip which took me to Bo and Kenema and another education and social visit to Bo in 2008, I have always been based in Freetown and my research and work has been conducted in English. My Krio language skills are not sufficient for undertaking research but as I have not set out to study Krio writing, I have not felt in any way impeded by this.

As a native English speaker and writer focusing on English language creative writing, I have been able to access and relate to writers in Freetown whilst drawing on existing knowledge of the social context, conflict and education issues to inform my study. My cultural distance has, however, enabled me to consider motivations for writing and textual outputs without a vested interest in outcome for one ethnic group or one particular national political agenda.

Interdisciplinary research and fields of study

From the outset, I was aware of the challenge of synthesising ideas and material from different disciplines and building a bridge between social function and literature. I believe the bridge connecting this research is my focus on how writing contributes to peace and my conception of writing as a location for peace. I start out (In Chapters 1 and 2) interrogating existing research from post-colonial literature, social and literary history disciplines to find out how writing is deemed to contribute to society in Africa especially in relation to conflict recovery. I, then, went to Sierra Leone to find and interview writers, gather then analyse their texts. As I did this, my ideas about poetry providing a discourse for peace through the practice of writing and via membership of a body of writers emerged as the texts –though important – were not the only location where discourse was taking place. The texts were constrained by deficiencies in craft and literary infrastructure and disconnected from a local audience yet I found they did provide a location for social engagement and revealed stages in the process of war recovery.

I have viewed literature primarily through a social lens and demarcated my research (in terms of selecting material) by the onset of the civil war to the initial post-war period. I focused my research goals on how writing can contribute to peace consolidation in Sierra Leone in the initial post-conflict phase. The idea of a bridge was, in fact, used by one of the writers I

interviewed, Mohammed Sheriff, a dramatist and poet who explains that, as a writer, he is a “translator of collective experience through English” and that “writing is a textual bridge offering a route out of flesh and blood” (see Boreham, 2007).

I choose to explore those theoretical approaches that ‘speak’ to my topic and in so doing I draw from Sierra Leonean literary commentators Palmer (2008) and Hollist (1981), from Achebe (1989) and, even, from the ideas of Said (2004). I also draw, broadly, from aspects of conflict research e.g. Jabri (1996) and Lederach (2005) in relation to the discursive and potentially transformative function of writing. These ideas help to situate literature as an outlet and space for the renarrativisation and reimagination of past and present which may help embed and consolidate peace within the country. Mostly, however, I have allowed my own field work findings and responses to texts to inform the development of my argument.

It is perhaps not surprising that my initial degree was in politics, my MA in international conflict analysis and my career, thus far, in development education and writing. Political study requires an examination of state-society relationships and effective governance requires the cultivation of an effective citizenry. In this study I am exploring a society where the existence of an educated, literate citizenry whose basic needs are catered for by the state does not exist and hence the writer is placed in a unique position as spokesperson and critic of both the state and society as well as a gatekeeper and translator of international, national and local discourses.

Research plan, timing and methodology

I completed this thesis whilst also working on a freelance basis in a variety of roles writing social studies teaching materials, teaching creative writing as well as teaching first year

African Studies students. My initial research was desk-based and involved familiarising myself with African literature and then locating and reading literature from (and connected to) Sierra Leone. I then had the opportunity to work in Freetown on several occasions and began making contact with writers (both experienced and novice) and completing interviews in my spare time (see Appendix 1 for a list of field work carried out by date). I discovered that Sierra Leonean literature comprised chiefly of poetry in English, local Krio plays (largely used for ‘edutainment’ or drama education) and novels and biographies in English written and published by Sierra Leoneans outside the country. Within the country it was poetry that was experiencing somewhat of a revival as a direct result of responding to social conditions and the deprivation of the war years. I had initially expected to collect and study poetry, plays and short stories in English but my research focus inevitably switched to focusing almost exclusively on poetry.

From the outset, I sought to distinguish my research by focusing on writers based in Sierra Leone (both established and amateur) to explore the role that writers and imaginative texts play in this particular context. I wanted to test how the immediate violent past is made sense of and re-imagined and how potential futures are articulated through literature.

My field work was undertaken solely within the capital city, Freetown. This was because I was able to travel and stay in the Freetown area relatively easily during short trips for work and study. It is also the capital city and hence the main meeting point and base for newspapers, media and writers in English. In 2008, I undertook a three month period of field work in Freetown when I conducted most of the interviews and ran a reading group at the Central Library. During this period I also made notes in response to my experiences and attended writing events at the British Council and at several hotels in Lumley. I lost several files of materials and notes when my bags were stolen in a taxi in 2009, but apart from school

resources and photos, few important research materials were lost except for some reading group notes taken at the sessions.

After this field work period, I then began the process of writing up findings and analysing texts. I also ran a conference panel on my thesis topic at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham in May 2009 to gather more data and discuss findings. Although some new texts have emerged, I have endeavoured to limit the textual focus of my research from 1991 to the end of 2009 only. The key poems I examine are drawn mostly from the post-war period i.e. 2002-2009 though dating such poems is inherently difficult and some poems are published in repeated collections. I have, therefore, used the initial publication date or the date the author claimed to have written the piece. The last field work interviews I carried out took place in 2010.

Note that I did not select texts via quality or literary recognition or other standard. Most Sierra Leonean writers, unless the recipient of awards or publishing contracts, are self-appointed.

For my purposes, I considered creative writers to be people who wrote regularly, attempted to share and publish their work and improve their craft through attending writing groups, for example. I am not particularly concerned with literary quality or craftsmanship but with the act and intension of writing and how such writing is (and could be) transmitted and received.

Note, too, that I have not sought to focus field or desk research on therapeutic aspects of poetry though, for example, in Chapter 1 Obiechina (2002) explores therapeutic aspects of Achebe's poetry and in Chapters 3 and 4 it becomes evident that writing enabled a release or catharsis in response to the war. In fact, I would suggest that writers move from personal outpouring to a concern for wider society as they start to write more and distance themselves from the conflict period. In this way, they move from personal engagement to a broader social engagement through poetry. Of course, writing may help to externalise feelings and

experiences and offer a form of healing as the writer is able to distance himself from events and emotions through the arrangement of words and to transform the experience into a creative text and return it (through poetry and fiction) back to the world. However, in this thesis I am interested in the social rather than the personal role of writing.

I have tailored research methods to my thesis requirements combining detailed literary and social desk based research with the gathering of primary texts, field work interviews and participant observation. Although I began with a research question in mind, elements of grounded theory are present in so far as reflection on field work experience guided my thinking on the importance of discourse amongst writers and their sense of agency as writers.

The following methods were used sequentially:

- Desk research and survey of creative writing and critical literature
- Data collection: field work questionnaires, structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups (for the reading group) and participant observation
- Date collection of creative texts
- Analysis of field work findings, empirical evidence and textual analysis
- Synthesis of overall findings in response to research question.

Issues and assumptions

In undertaking this study, I have confronted several unresolved debates within the field of postcolonial literature and beyond. These include whether it is possible and meaningful to define national literatures, whether we can assume and assign a social usefulness to literature and, thirdly, whether an overridingly elite activity such as imaginative writing in English in West Africa has any impact on, or significance to, local residents of nation states. These

questions are threaded throughout the thesis. I have assumed certain positions with regard to these debates which I explain below. I will also explain why I have chosen to frame my research around the event of a civil war taking place and discuss concepts and definitions used within the thesis.

National literature

A nation's literature which is a sum total of the products of many individuals in that society is then both a reflection of that people's collective reality and also an embodiment of that people's way of looking at the world and their place in its making. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1981b, p.5)

I do not question the existence of Sierra Leonean national literature in this study but actively seek to uncover new texts (principally poetry) and add to this little known canon. Sierra Leone does not have particularly porous borders. Located next to American-oriented (and perhaps even more fragmented and conflict-prone) Liberia and French speaking and military dominated Guinea, the writers I spoke to felt themselves to be inextricably bound with their mother country rather than the local region and offered, in one way or another, to speak for, about or to the nation.

Although many successful contemporary authors (such as Nigerian born Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie) choose to physically move between two or more countries (and explore these new temporal locations within their texts) I wanted to explore writing inside the country. I felt that what was being written in Sierra Leone by authors whose geographical and social existence is located inside the country is potentially more socially relevant and engaged than that of diaspora and other international writers.

Inevitably migration of authors and growing trans-national identities affects and broadens what Sierra Leonean literature will constitute. People within the country and in the Sierra Leonean diaspora of, for example, the UK or USA continue to conceive of themselves as Sierra Leonean with varied notions of what this means. These myriad imagined Sierra Leones are translated through authorship into the literary imagination of a country contributing to the national imaginary and to concepts and symbols of national recovery and cohesion. The literature of a country may partly reflect (and partly seek to impact on) the ways that citizens make sense of their history, make and remake their present and dream of possible future scenarios. Now the collective experience of war (the personal losses and memories combined with a feeling of national shame) is something that Sierra Leoneans share or *bear* together. The idea of Sierra Leone as a living, breathing, wounded or crippled being or collective entity seems to exist amongst the population and perhaps even more so amongst authors (especially diaspora ones) who grieve for Sierra Leone and lament its history.

I believe that evocation of place is fundamental to writing and that, whether consciously or not, geographical location filters into the similes and metaphors that writers use. The concrete details and physical landmarks, the practices and cultural nuances, aspects of nature, climate and even the atmosphere or the mood of a place can act like a key in which a writer sets their work. A writer in Freetown (even one who travels out from time to time) cannot help but absorb the tastes, smells, language, geography and emotion of the location in which they are based and from which they view the world.

Literature is socially useful

An approach to literature as something useful –even essential – to society is at the heart of my enquiry. The idea that writing is an act of social and political agency (especially when so few citizens possess literacy tools) is a common assumption amongst commentators such as Hollist (1991) and amongst writers themselves. For example, by way of introduction at the aforementioned Poetry Encounters event in 2012, Syl Cheney-Coker explained that he accepts that, as a Sierra Leonean, his role as a writer has to be a social one. Informal discussions with British poet, John Haynes (who has lived in and written about his experiences living in Kano, Nigeria) also confirmed this view. Speaking after a poetry reading at University of Birmingham (December 14, 2010), Haynes explained how the experience of being a writer in Africa was inextricably bound with politics and assumed to be “not just a literary but also a social and political act”.

This does not mean that writers cannot write about personal topics or are unable to choose what to write about, instead it means that part of being a writer implies some element of social role in an African context. I think Achebe explains this well in his recent biography (2012, p.57) when he suggests that a writer’s role changes according to the healthiness of his society (see Concluding Chapter for full quotation).

The question of writing in English

I set out to analyse writer’s and reader’s viewpoints, textual meaning, and the literary and social context. According to Ashcroft et al (1989) any exploration of the “social situation of the written text” must consider that:

the three poles of any meaning exchange – the language, the utterer or writer and the hearer or reader – have been locked in a gladiatorial contest over the ownership of meaning... the message event occupies the apparent social fissure between the acts of writing and reading, the discursive space in which writers and readers as social actors never meet (Ashcroft, B. et al. (eds.) (1989), p. 183)

This fissure is of special interest in the context of Sierra Leone as readership is limited to fellow writers (and hence writers and readers do meet) yet there is obviously a huge gap in language and contextual understanding between readers who are visitors to the country and academic-writers like myself. I have chosen to focus more on context and less on language though I have engaged with language issues as they arise (in Chapter 4, for example I explore what writing poetry in English means in Sierra Leone). Interestingly, it has not been authors who have questioned their use of English but the problem of readership they face and my own reading of the texts that have warranted further investigation.

Obviously imaginative writing in English is a limited, elite activity inherited from colonial education but it has been appropriated by Sierra Leoneans writing in their own style and timbre of English drawing on their own environment, concepts of history and culture and context in which they live. The writing of poetry in a largely illiterate country becomes an even more elite activity but I would argue that the ideas within poetry and surrounding it (i.e. the discursive space that writers inhabit) are disseminated by communication across elites, via media and journalism into wider society – even if the poems are not literally translated into vernacular texts or recordings.

Some of the writers I interviewed also write occasionally in Krio but despite attempts to promote Krio writing and language (most notably by the former Principal of Fourah Bay

College in Freetown, Professor Eldred Jones, for example), English remains the predominant medium for creative writing.

I suggest that the use of English promotes equity and cohesion amongst writers and provides an important medium to integrate and consolidate national experience and ideas of identity across ethnic divides. It also acts as an international language enabling writers to function as cultural gatekeepers.

Creative writing in English appears, from my position, to be almost synonymous with writing about 'Sierra Leone' as 'Sierra Leoneans'. Writers are interrogating themselves in relation to their history, lamenting the losses of the civil conflict and questioning the state of their nation today. Writing in English, therefore, provides a unique location to do this. Most writers speak Krio in their everyday lives as it is the lingua franca but it is also the language of the Krio people and so, oddly, less neutral than English might be.

The challenge of lack of readership makes it all the more fascinating that writing in English endures in such circumstances (when even most literate people prefer watching Nigerian films and football or listening to music – which is extremely popular in Sierra Leone). Whether the texts I present offer new roots in the growth of literature or only the relics of a dying colonial habit will be open to debate but it is certain that issues of translation and lack of literary infrastructure will mar future survival if not addressed.

A focus on civil war

I recognise that I am at risk of taking an abnormality (i.e. war) as the thing that frames my thesis and that, by focusing on war, I am in effect privileging it as a kind of special event. I chose to focus on Sierra Leone's civil war simply because I wanted to explore the connection

between literature and peace and understand how writers response to conflict - and because this was a conflict I had previously studied and a country I hoped would progress peaceably in the future.

I am also aware of the dangers of creating an artificial boundary using the civil war as a starting point precluding the historical antecedents of Sierra Leone's gradual decline of which the civil war is a qualitatively different moment: war being the worst example of systemic breakdown. Even though historical continuities can be traced back to earlier periods, war offers a distinct (yet ever-modifying) phenomenon which perpetuates the breaking down and reassessment of structures, priorities and dominant views and practices about politics and society and it mobilises forces for social change.

My interest is in the response and social function of Sierra Leonean writers in the post war context. Note that I have focused mostly on writing that relates to conflict, social issues and national identity but that these themes dominate, by far, others such as nature and the environment, marriage and family relationships, hardship and aspects of culture and customs. My interviews, however, did focus on the social role of writing and the effect, impact and response to the civil war and I accept that this may lead to a slight distortion in emphasis in my results.

Definitions of peace

The very term 'peace' is a contested concept. An entire thesis could be dedicated to defining the concept of peace alone. Instead I will situate my work within the framework of certain peace debates and outline my interest in conflict transformation.

On occasion, I have used the term peace simply to relate to the period of non-violence that Sierra Leone now enjoys after the cessation of fighting in early 2002 i.e. as a term to describe the absence of war (and what Galtung would term negative peace²). Galtung suggests that such periods of so-called 'peace' may contain differing degrees of structural violence which can be endemic. Cultural practices may steer society towards toleration of brutal and exploitative actions such as wife beating, the beating of children and female genital mutilation – all of which are prevalent in Sierra Leone for example. Further still, the after-effects of exposure to, and use of, violence (e.g. the incidences of rape) alongside lingering mistrust and desire for vengeance infuse society creating a higher propensity for violence to occur in everyday life.

There are various processes involved in moving towards a more positive peace which require improved social justice mechanisms, cooperation, equity and stability through the functioning of social institutions and norms. Basic needs also need to be provided without which it is extremely difficult to build peaceful alternatives. At any particular time during or after violent conflict there are a number of different interventions that may contribute to the lasting cessation of violence and the embedding of more structurally positive practices. My work relates to conflict transformation which tends to form part of longer term efforts to change perceptions of violence especially in situations of intractability or intransigence. An openness to re-envisage and re-conceptualise restrictive concepts of conflict and peace can help long term peace consolidation. Lederach defines conflict transformation as:

Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase

² See Webel's discussion of peace definitions in the Introductory Chapter in Galtung and Webel (eds.) (2007) 'Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies'. p.5-6

justice in direct interaction and social structures and respond to real life problems in human relationships. (Lederach, J.P. (2003) *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. USA: Good Books).

Creative writers and their texts can help change the framing of conflict through the interpretations and narratives told and by constructing future social visions. The space that writers inhabit functions as an inter-ethnic and peaceful space for engaging in the imaginative construction of post-war Sierra Leone. Literature, as I argue in the Conclusion, represents an important and, previously overlooked, location that has remained remarkably unaffected by a culture of violence³. Writing can provide the imaginative and intellectual space for rethinking and reimagining Sierra Leone and for generating ideas for cultural and social renewal. Further still, the practice of writing promotes the desire for social engagement and a belief in conflict transformation. Poetry provides essential discursive space for the renegotiation of this movement towards positive peace. Although not the key focus of this study, literature about war can also serve a key peace education function.

Discourse for peace

The term discourse tends to be associated with that of Foucault⁴. Simply translated, Foucault shows that the way we talk about things and the way we present knowledge through discourse shapes our understanding, moulds our reality and influences our actions. I use the term discourse to refer to communication, discussion and dialogue within texts and amongst a body of writers: as a literary discourse. Such a literary discourse, particularly in countries in crisis

³ Poems such as Farouk Sesay's poem *At Tellu Bongor* reveal that writers do become, unwittingly perhaps, embroiled in the language of war but I would not suggest that this constitutes a culture of war. See discussion in Chapter 4.

⁴ See the work of Michel Foucault, for example, 'The Archaeology of Knowledge', (1972) published by Routledge.

where there are low levels of literacy, tends to operate as an important countering discourse to dominant political discourse. Writers assume a position of intellectual spokespersons (see Said, 2004) and as creative actors inhabit what Galtung calls the “borderland between the intellectual and the emotional” (Galtung, J. (2004) p. 160).

In this thesis, I am further suggesting that Sierra Leonean literary discourse functions as a discourse for peace. What I mean by this is that the discourse taking place contributes to conflict transformation and builds on ideas developed by Galtung in relation to positive peace through the promotion of a culture of peace and dialogue (see Galtung, 2007, p.31). Part of this discourse is textual: the poems I analyse contribute to our understanding of the process of recovery taking place amongst writer-intellectuals. Another part is the discourse taking place amongst the writers themselves which provides an alternative and potentially transformative thinking space. The mapping of trajectories for this kind of literary discourse dissemination could form the subject of important further research but is outside the realms of this study.

Having analysed field work findings and texts, I return to consider the idea of poetry as a discourse for peace in the Conclusion.

Literature and writing

For the purposes of this study, literature refers to written material – books or otherwise – whereas writing refers to the process, or action, of creating this written material. Note that literature seems to imply recognition especially when referring to a national canon but I have included some unpublished or unacknowledged material in what I refer to be the literature of Sierra Leone.

It has become common to interchange the term ‘writing’ with ‘literature’ as if they were

synonymous and writing were also an object. I have chosen to adopt this convention on occasion as I find that writing encapsulates the texts *and* process of writing without the high-brow associations that term literature implies.

Ethnicity

Adopting a social lens and a writing focus but not an anthropological perspective, ethnicity is not foregrounded in this study nor has it emerged as a contemporary motivating force or issue for writers. Such an ethnographic study of writing would be extremely interesting but it is not my area of specialism nor is a study of indigenous language writing or orature.

Thesis appendices and conventions

Original questionnaires have been included in appendices by way of example but I have not chosen to include the original completed documents due to delicate personal information given and discussion of other writers. Instead I have summarised my field work findings in Chapter 3. Further quotations and notes from field work are supplied in Appendix 3. Unless other dates are given, this field work took place during autumn, 2008.

I found it helpful to break with convention to use italics for poem titles as I refer to individual poems so often in this thesis. What I have termed ‘key poems’ are gathered together in Appendix 4 and several further poems are provided in Appendix 5. Other poems mentioned are from one of the three poetry anthologies discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 1

The role of the writer and war in Africa

In this chapter, I first explore the role of the writer in Africa then survey research on writers and conflict to ascertain how these inform the writer's role in post-conflict Sierra Leone.

Because research on writing, war and Africa is limited, I have gone back to draw on earlier work relating to the social function of writers to pull out aspects that resonate with this topic. I have, therefore, had to select material I perceive as useful and provide condensed accounts of their contributions.

Through this enquiry, I have found that existing theory does not relate to the distinctive type of situation I am concerned with (i.e. Sierra Leone has not experienced either an independence movement or a secessionist war). Neither does existing theory explore the processes through which writing translates into social action. In the UK, bookshops tend to stock several well-meaning anthologies of poetry for peace in the widespread assumption that writers impart a common good and (by extension) contribute in a broad, non-specific way to the peace effort. I want to interrogate how creative writing and poetry (the writing, reading and discussion of it) actually contributes to social change and conflict transformation and hence start to build bridges between literary and social disciplines.

I have found Achebe's views to be most helpful here. His underlying argument that writers are educators and social reformers who adapt to changing political and social emergencies as necessary is the view echoed most closely by the writers I interviewed in Freetown. In later chapters, I extend these ideas and interrogate the ways in which writers and their writing represent a transformative discourse in a post-conflict context. I argue that the very practice of

writing represents a positive form of social engagement and that the experience of writing promotes the desire to work for social change through (and outside) literature. These ideas help form my overall argument that literature provides a location of peace.

Concerns and the context of theory

Within this chapter I have taken the liberty of extending certain quotations to apply to different contexts. This is because the key contributors to the debate have not directly addressed the specificities of the situation that I am examining i.e. that of writers (predominantly poets) in post-conflict Sierra Leone. At times, I have also extended comments that I suspect (and occasionally know) pertain to fiction to apply to the wider mix of creative writing including poetry, short stories, novels, plays and memoirs. By interchanging comments regarding fiction to refer to poetry, for example, we may lose specificity yet creative writers, as a whole, share a set of conditions and practices which are shared between genres. I suggest it is still helpful to think about creative writing as a whole whilst remaining wary of its limitations and the demands and distinct characteristics of each genre. The creative writers I met in Freetown were almost exclusively poets with some short story writers and novelists-in-the-making the majority of whom were (or had) at some point written for newspapers. Many of these writers were also amateur and unpublished yet chose to name themselves as both Sierra Leonean writers and as Sierra Leonean poets.

Most of the comments and studies explored in this chapter must also be placed in geographical, social and historical contexts. Whether conscious or not, writers form part of a wider historical thread and heritage running through ethnic groups and communities, nations and the continent as a whole. This chapter should be read against the backdrop of the colonial

and independence experiences of African writers in general. Many such writers experienced mild to extreme intimidation as a direct result of their work and felt compelled to take a political stance and even to take action (most famously, during the secessionist war in Nigeria the poet Christopher Okigbo fought on behalf of the Biafran movement and was killed). Sometimes termed the ‘Nigerian civil war’, the Biafran conflict was a secessionist war against the Nigerian state fought by the Igbo ethnic group which took place from July 1967 to January 1970 resulting in huge casualties, starvation and ultimately the collapse of the Biafran project. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe also took part, indirectly, in the Biafran struggle and survived to become, perhaps, Africa’s best known author. His ideas and comments concerning the role of the African writer and poetry and war are featured widely in this chapter. I had originally planned to explore more conflict-affected regions but the bulk of research relating to civil war, peace and creative writing in Africa is focused on the Biafran conflict.

The way in which literacy is acquired and utilised and the changing social practices of writing and reading helps determine the social function of writing in a particular context. Inevitably, the impact of the internet and new technologies on traditional pen and paper (and later screen and keyboard) writing will impact on the role of the writer in Africa. Conventional paper books (now commonly referred to by western media as ‘tree books’) will potentially be replaced by new e book storage devices such as Amazon’s Kindle. Access to internet publishing sites such as e-zine and blogs and on line writers networks enable African writers to extend their literary horizons. Spurred on by the absence of local publishing opportunities, the Sierra Leonean writers I met were using the internet to share and publish writing and to network with other writers. The pace of technological change will inevitably affect the roles that writers play and open up new publishing and audience opportunities and bring about new

styles of presentation, mixed media formats and reader-interactive texts. Diarists, bloggers and Twitter commentators perform social functions as ‘citizen-writers’ and cultural gatekeepers especially in times of heightened political activity or crisis. Whilst remaining aware of these trends, this thesis does not explore the ramifications of technological change.

The role of the writer in Africa

Although many African writers engage with social issues few reflect on the role that their writing plays in society and Ngugi and Achebe tend to dominate debate while Negritude and Biafra preoccupy West African scholars. Similarly, although literary critics identify themes of social criticism in a writer’s work, limited research is undertaken on the social motivations of writers and the impact of their work as it translates into actual social and political change. This ability to filter into cross-disciplinary debate has helped me to select what to include in this chapter. I have also chosen to incorporate a brief section on the contemporary writer Binyavanga Wainaina from Kenya who is emerging as an important, if unconventional, voice for modern African writers who has engaged with the question of the writer in a time of crisis (Wainaina: 2008).

In a full thesis on the topic of the role of the African writer I would like to include author-intellectuals such as Osundare (2000) who has commented reflectively and thoughtfully on the practice of writing, Okot p’Bitek (1984) who considered the role of the writer in recreating society after independence and the Senegalese poet and politician Leopold Senghor, to name only a few. I would also collate social interpretations of West African writers such as Lenrie Peters from the Gambia and consider writing and contemporary conflict in South Africa and Kenya. In the limited space of this theoretical overview, however, I am focusing on the most relevant approaches I have found to the role of the African writer in war.

The writer as cultural nationalist and freedom fighter

In this section I explore the theoretical contribution of African cultural nationalists for whom literature represented a key tool (or weapon) in the drive for radical social change and liberation from oppression.

Before the African independence era of the late 1950s and 60s, African nationalist movements across the continent grew out of rising agitation for African cultural expression and values in the face of colonial oppression and racism. Writer-intellectuals, benefiting from colonial educational opportunities in Paris, Lisbon and London were able to experience and critique the coloniser's own society and recognise the constraints and impact of imposed colonial languages on their own societies. What was distinctive about the Anglophonic response was the focus on the functional and social role of the writer in direct contrast with the individualistic aesthetic of the European writer (see Ashcroft et al. (eds.) (1989), p.126 for further discussion).

Writers of the Negritude movement in Francophone countries such as Senghor (who went on to become Senegal's first President in 1960) began to re-assert and reinvent black African identity and call for respect for ancestral cultures. Similarly, activists and writers from Lusophone countries met and developed their ideas in Lisbon in the late 40s and 50s. Amongst these were writers who believed that literature formed a central part of the liberation struggle such as Amilcar Cabral (who led Guinea Bissau's Independence movement) and Agostinho Neto, (a poet-activist and doctor who became the first President of Angola in 1975). Both were writer-intellectuals who became actively involved in political struggles and recognised the central and revolutionary role that literature performed and were strongly influenced by the work of Frantz Fanon.

Amilcar Cabral

Cabral believed that literature was inextricably linked to the liberation movement. Hamilton explains that:

Lusophone African poetry, from the 1940s to the 1960s, follows a general course of development consistent with the rising political and cultural consciousness of members of the indigenous bourgeoisie. Roughly speaking, there are three phases in this poetry: a rediscovery and celebration of Africa, protest and combativeness. (Hamilton, 1979, p. 50)

Though Cabral wrote only a small number of poems in the 1930s and 40s, these became part of the cultural renaissance of Cape Verde. By the early 1950s, Cabral became aware of the difficulties of “members of the socially aware indigenous bourgeoisie” writing to serve a social function. Elite writers who merely lament or attempt to extend a hopeful hand to their suffering brothers have limited appeal or impact. Cabral preferred, what Hamilton terms, ‘telluric’ poetry (coming from the very soil, the earth of the land which combine in being both intimist and militant) although Cabral had to disguise and tone down his militancy as he was writing under censorship (Hamilton, 1979, p. 51).

For Cabral, the success of independence struggles depended on how effectively the nationalist movements could harness and bring together what he terms a “confluence” (Cabral, 1973, p.53) of indigenous national cultures. The expression and re-invigoration of culture is thus asserted as a way to oppose colonial powers and literature forms a key part of this process. What is required, he argues, is a kind of cultural combat to challenge the negative aspects of various cultures and power structures within different ethnic groups in order to unify the independence movement.

According to Cabral, the liberation struggle was both a “struggle for the preservation and survival of the cultural values of the people and for the harmonization and development of these values within a national framework” (Cabral, 1973, p.48). The ultimate goal was to liberate the productive forces and construct “economic and social and cultural progress of the people” beyond independence, he claimed (Cabral, 1973, p.52). Culture will be:

an inexhaustible source of courage for the people, of material and moral support, of material and psychic energy which enables them to accept sacrifices – even to accomplish ‘miracles’” (Cabral, 1973, p.53).

Although he does not directly address the role of imaginative literature, it is evident that his own writing was an attempt to awaken cultural nationalism and to provide a source of inspiration and shared rootedness which could unite and sustain the people during the struggle for freedom.

My main critique of Cabral is that he relies on the term ‘culture’ so frequently it becomes overstretched and his work loses poignancy. His Marxist analysis, which relies on liberating the productive forces (Cabral, 1973, p.52), feels artificially tagged onto his work and not something which has organically emerged out of his experiences and analysis. However, like Fanon, Cabral acknowledges that culture is always expanding and developing and writer-intellectuals are important cultural arbiters and literature is both a product and a determinant of national history.

Cabral situates writers in the role of cultural awakener, of helping to foster a populace united through a shared nationalist vision and he was extremely aware of the limitations of elite writers in bringing about popular change. The fact that he placed writers in a key role as heralds of political and social change is relevant to this study. Further, many Sierra Leonean

authors stated that they wanted to promote Sierra Leonean culture (see Additional Field Notes, Appendix 3) and their ability to collectively constitute a Sierra Leonean voice provides a space where social and ethnic cleavages are not foregrounded.

Agostinho Neto

Arriving in Lisbon in 1947, Agostino Neto became involved with political activism on meeting with other writers from the Francophone Negritude movement. He was arrested in 1951 (and again in 1960) for short periods and released as a result of international pressure from other writers such as Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing. On his release in 1962, he returned to his Angolan homeland and was made President of the MPLA. Burness, in his analysis of Lusophone writers (1977), explains that Neto was a political figure:

who used poetry as a weapon in the struggle of the African peoples to assert the originality, dignity and beauty of African culture (Burness, 1977, p. 19-34).

Neto, like Senghor, abandoned his literary career once he became a political leader. His complete poems (titled, in the English translation, 'Sacred Hope' and spanning the period 1945-1960) won the Poetry of Combat prize in 1975 in the University of Ibadan (Burness, 1977, p.20). Whilst some of his poems, and the short story *Nausea*, depicts the suffering and anguish of Angolan people others reveal a sense of hope for the future. In *Bamako*, for example, Neto writes (having been to the Pan-African Conference in Mali in 1954):

Bamako!

There life is born

Bamako!

future fruit of Africa

of a future germinating in the live arteries of Africa

There hope was transformed into a tree
and river and heart and land
there hope applauds friendship
in the elegance of the palm tree and in the black skin of men...
(Burness, 1973, p. 28)

From 1960, Neto writes “poems of combat” speaking of “impending battle”. He imagines an independence of dignity and pride “rooted in the ancestral humus of Africa” (Burness, 1973, p.30). According to Burness, he wrote “primarily for his people” about “his love of his people, his land and of liberty” (1977, p.33). Though Neto’s poetry was seen as combative, it could be conceived of as propaganda for the independence movement (just as Achebe’s has been accused of being propaganda for the Biafra war – see Ogungbesan, 1974, p. 50). Neto’s poems were not so much about cataloguing the struggle or building a shared national culture, rather they were created to provide a reason to fight by cataloguing the suffering of the Angolan people under colonial power. In this sense his role could be seen as providing the moral imperative to join the movement for independence.

This rallying element of the poet’s role does not translate to the Sierra Leonean post-war context except if poetry were seen as rallying for social change in general and to promote positive action through the arts. Poets have taken on the role of chronicling the war years and the general hardship experienced by Sierra Leoneans. In this writers are providing a moral imperative to recover from conflict and desist from further fighting.

Frantz Fanon

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Fanon wrote in response to experiences of racism having assimilated (and then rejected) French colonial culture yet he criticised Negritude for neglecting to encompass the diversity of what blackness represents⁵. Fanon believed that only decolonisation could eradicate the dehumanisation of being a colonial subject and that this may necessitate violent revolution. As a psychiatrist, Fanon's specific contribution to the field of pre and post colonial African literature was his emphasis on "psychological marginalisation" and "alienation":

In essence, Fanon's analysis denied the racist stereotyping at the heart of colonial practice and asserted the need to recognise the economic and political realities which underlay these assertions of racial 'difference' and which were the material base for the common psychological and cultural features of colonized peoples. (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.124)

Fanon exposed the way colonial discourses function to create opposition and privilege the colonial centre via favouring white over black, good over evil and coloniser over colonised. Nonetheless, Fanon asserts that such a discourse offers the:

potential as a demystifying force and as a launching pad for a new oppositional stance which would aim at the freeing of the colonised from this disabling position through the construction of new liberating narratives. (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 125)

Ideally, for Fanon, the assertion of African national cultures would not delineate racial division but would encompass a more enlightened internationalism that recognised certain shared experiences and histories between African nations and beyond.

⁵ See Mc Ewan, C. (2009) 'Postcolonialism and Development'. London: Routledge. p.46

Fanon depicts the transition of the African writer-intellectual and the development of a national culture into three stages: Firstly, 'assimilation' when writers seek to equate with their European counterparts followed by a phase when writers question the colonial relationship and return to past memories, old legends and re-establish connections with local people. This period is marked by distress, difficulty and self-disgust and creates what Fanon terms a "just-before-the-battle" literature (See Fanon, 1967). Sierra Leonean author, Syl Cheney-Coker's 1973 poetry collection 'Concerto for an Exile' wrestles with his identity and slave heritage as a Krio⁶ and could be seen to fit this description.

For Fanon, the middle phase of self doubt and disgust precipitates a 'fighting phase' when the native intellectual is ultimately drawn into combat with the coloniser. He turns himself into an:

awakener of the people, hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. During this phase a great many men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now... feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action. (Fanon, 1967, p. 179)

Such a fighting literature, Fanon argues, should not seek only to look backwards to counter colonialism but to create a new future and "use the past with the intension of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (Fanon, 1967, p.187). This last phase called for mass participation in violent decolonisation by an organised revolutionary force combining all classes of society.

⁶ Coker's work does not otherwise follow Fanon's model though much creative writing in the immediate pre and post independence era in Sierra Leone was characterised by self-criticism and mockery of the English mannerisms and foibles of the new African elite.

Fanon's ideas are still influential for black African writers for example, when exploring historical identity, but they have lost poignancy for writers facing very different social challenges, failed states and widespread post-independence political disillusionment. The lack of a revolutionary ideological framework in which to situate contemporary writers in the aftermath of civil-war creates a kind of free for all. In Sierra Leone, writers are attempting to make up their rules and *raison d'être* as they go along whilst simultaneously finding they have to make a justification for literature in a country emerging from the rupture of conflict facing acute poverty and spiralling illiteracy.

Sierra Leonean writers neither represented violent groups nor espouse violence as a possible route forward and they are not particularly opposed to the political leaders as many of them are ensconced in the social and business machinery of the political elite. The collapse associated with war, instead animated creativity and provided a unity of purpose.

Cultural nationalism and writers in Sierra Leone

A brief enquiry into the ideas of Cabral and Neto (both influenced by Fanon's theory of culture and nationalism) leaves the post-independence, post civil war poets and writers of Sierra Leone appearing rudderless, without a clear agenda or ideology, unclear as to exactly what they are doing, who they speaking to and why. There is no homogenous 'enemy' or revolution in the making, they are not combat poets or writers who espouse violent revolution and none were active participants in the civil conflict. Instead, the writers I interviewed work in the face of widening wealth gaps, chronic lack of infrastructure, extreme levels of poverty, illiteracy and corruption. They are uniquely placed in history as writers who have witnessed

civil conflict, and its aftermath, in the shadow of decades of political neglect and national mismanagement exacted so spectacularly by Siaka Stevens' rule in the 1960s and 1970s.

For Cabral's liberation writer, the challenge was to preserve culture and harmonise and develop these values in a national framework (Cabral, 1973, p48). Freetown's post war writers are aware, and take advantage of, their unique position in being conversant between indigenous cultures and languages and the English speaking world with its access to global western culture. Many are aware that their writing is deemed to be enriched by including aspects of indigenous ethnic traditions and folklore and yet they, for the most part, gaze outwards in terms of the audiences they seek. Indeed, Ashcroft et al (1989, pp. 8-9) discuss the inevitable marginality of writing from the colonised perspective within the coloniser's language yet point out that, ironically, this marginality itself becomes a source of inspiration which captures the attentions of international reading audiences. Such marginality, for example 'civil war literature', has become a key characteristic as well as a unique selling point of the emerging literature from Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, rather than being a conscious attempt to forge a national identity through the assertion of indigenous culture this instead reveals a recognition amongst Sierra Leonean writers of the value assigned to cultural hybridity in international literature.

The majority of writers, nonetheless, claim to play a role (or aspire to play a role) in fostering a shared sense of Sierra Leonean culture which unites yet celebrates the particularities of individual ethnic group customs and beliefs. The experience of violent conflict has united writers as advocates of peace yet the distrust associated with the war (and fierce competition for resources) has made writers concerned with individual acquisition, developing business opportunities and seeking politically supported positions as representatives of arts and culture bodies.

Though not articulated by the writers in this way, the bringing together of indigenous cultures within English literature could be understood as a way to promote a cohesive national culture after the civil conflict. Fanon argues that the ‘native intellectual’ can return value to the past and this is a role that could be adapted to contemporary Sierra Leonean writers who seek to build a sense of pride in their history beyond the experience of war which has so negatively affected the national psyche. Such a reclaiming of the past and “reconstruction of historical memory” is a fundamental aspect of the social reconstruction process after violent conflict (see Fisher et al, 2000, p.137).

Cabral stated that liberation movements needed to build a shared sense of national culture out of the negative and positive aspects of indigenous cultures within the nation and insisted that such a movement had to be popular. Sierra Leone’s writers are, however, held back by the lack of popular readership and they cannot be said to represent the mass populace. Access to creative writing is extremely limited and there is a lack of dissemination of written formats into oral forms⁷.

Sierra Leone digresses from cultural nationalist approaches as it did not experience a significant struggle for independence. Literary commentators such as Palmer and Porter (2008) and Hollist (1991) cite this as the reason why a committed national literature did not emerge in Sierra Leone (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). In the immediate war and post war context in Sierra Leone any combative role amongst writers is not evident. The wave of writers I focus on, though energetic and ambitious, are often constrained by their membership of the elite.

⁷ The People’s Education Association (PEA) went some way towards closing this gap with the publication of the ‘Songs and Stories’ Series (folk stories collected from across Sierra Leone in local languages with translations) but their work halted during the war due to lack of funds.

The writer as spokesperson, educator and critic

In this section I explore the contributions of the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Achebe tends to view the writer more as reformer while Ngugi assigns the writer a more radical role especially in relation to language (see Okolo, 2007). In Anglophone Africa, the development of the writer's role has been closely tied to its social and educational function. Ashcroft et al (1989) cite Achebe's essays 'The Novelist and Teacher' and 'Africa and Her Writers' as examples of the approach to writing in Anglophone Africa. In countries colonised by the English, African writers:

privileged the social function of writing over its function as a tool of individual expression.

They created their myths and legends, and told their stories for 'a human purpose including no doubt the excitement of wonder and pure delight' (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p.126. Note the quotation marks indicate a citation from Achebe's 'Africa and Her Writers' published in 1963).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

The belief that imaginative writing in Africa is a social and political act is one that has been echoed by Kenyan writer and commentator, Ngugi wa Thiong'o: "The very act of writing implies a social relationship: one is writing about somebody for somebody" (1981b, p. 5).

In exile in the United States since 1982, Ngugi's writing led him to make enemies of the Kenyan state and he was imprisoned in 1977. His work has continued to criticise the Kenyan regime and on his first return to Kenya in 2004 he was attacked by armed men. Writing in the late 1970s, Ngugi claimed that writers need to choose sides and accept that they are never neutral:

Whether or not he is aware of it, his works reflect one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he can choose is one or the other side in a battlefield: the side of the people, or the side of those social forces and classes that try to keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is keep the people down. What he or she cannot do is remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics? (Ngugi, 1981b, p.5).

Ngugi emphasised the fundamental influence of literature on culture and on the individual within society.

At the collective level, literature, as a product of men's intellectual and imaginative activity embodies, in words and images, the tensions, conflicts, contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming. It is a reflection on the aesthetic and imaginative planes, of a community's wrestling with its total environment to produce the basic means of life, food, clothing, shelter, and in the process creating and recreating itself in history. (Ngugi, 1981b, p.5).

A Russian child (by example) grows under the influence of his native imaginative literature... that the central taproot of his cultural nourishment should lie deep in his native soil is taken for granted (Ngugi, 1981b, p.1).

Recognising that education in English literature was part of the neo-colonial structure still shaping and producing Africa's young men and women, Ngugi wanted to gain back control of literature by making it authentic and extending its reach to local populations through writing (and performing) in local languages. For Ngugi, literature is formative, it "is part of man's self-realisation" and "a symbol of man's historical process of being and becoming" (Ngugi, 1981b, p.6). It persuades us through appeal and influences the imagination and cannot "stand above" prevalent social and political issues. Literature shapes:

Our attitudes to life, to the daily struggles with nature, the daily struggles with a community and the daily struggle within our individual souls and selves. (Ngugi, 1981b, p6).

Ngugi's views can be situated in early 1980s Kenya and in an African continent in which writers were intimidated and imprisoned by volatile regimes for highlighting government abuse and corruption in their writing. In this sense writing was charged with a sense of urgency and was critical to highlighting social ills and underpinning the need for social change.

Both Ngugi and Achebe successfully wrote creatively and wrote essays and criticism in relation to the action, meaning and effect of creative writing in post colonial Africa. Indeed, the 1970s and early 1980s appear to have been a period when authors entered into literary criticism and political debate. Ngugi and Achebe famously disagreed over issues of language and colonialism in the 1970s. This disagreement (in which Ngugi argues that the English language is a tool of colonial subjugation and Achebe defends English as a medium of communication among different ethnicities and as a language which can be appropriated and stamped with a unique Africanness) has come to dominate the field⁸.

Interviewed in 1991, Achebe defended his position claiming that "the literature we have created during the last forty years in Africa had enormous influence which would have been much less if we had all retreated into our own little languages" (Morrow, 1991). Nonetheless, as Ashcroft points out, Ngugi's belief that language is the bearer of culture offers "a powerful reminder of the unsolved problems for the African writer in English who desires to speak to and for the people and not just to an educated elite and a foreign leadership." (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.131). In the case of Sierra Leone, the decision to write in English as opposed to the

⁸ See, for instance, Achebe. C. (1975b) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981a).

lingua franca, Krio, although elitist is, oddly, less ethnically biased as Krio is the language of the distinct Krio ethnic group in Freetown who tended to dominate political and literary affairs in the post colonial period.

Putting the language debate aside, what Ngugi offers this study is an emphasis on the cultural and political role of literature. He views the national literary arena as fundamental to the functioning of society -and as an indicator of its well-being. In contrast, Achebe contributes a focus on the educational role of the writer and the writer's function as social critic and activist. Although Achebe appears to focus more on the individual writer (as opposed to Ngugi's macro focus on literature and politics) his aspirations remain high. Rather than arguing that writers are, by their very nature, actors *in* politics, Achebe accentuates the writer's social responsibility which, depending on prevailing national conditions and crisis, may require the writer to act. Indeed, his experience in the Biafran civil war moved him to consider that all African writers must be committed protest writers, see Ogunbesan, 1974, p.47.

Chinua Achebe

In 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1975), Achebe explains that African writers should not shy away from the educational and social role they can play in their societies. Writing against the recent history of colonialism and slavery he states "What we need to do is to look back and try to find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us." (Achebe, 1975, p.68). For Achebe, literature helps people to learn, reflect on and better their society and the writer plays a crucial role:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact he should march right in front . . . Perhaps what I write is applied art as

distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive. (Achebe, 1975, p.73).

In this same essay Achebe quotes from Mphahlele's 'African Image' in describing the writer as "the sensitive point of his community" (Achebe, 1975, p.72). In a television interview with the South Bank Show, Achebe said "you have a responsibility to make your story known...not only to tell lovely stories but to tell ugly stories when they happen... it is the story that outlives the war drums" (South Bank Show, May 17 2008).

For Achebe, writing performs a social and didactic function. Fiction "is something we know does not exist but which helps us to make sense of, and move, in the world." Commentating on 'The writer in the Community' and the 'Truth of Fiction' essays in Achebe's 'Hopes and Impediments' (1989), Wise describes how Achebe assigns the novelist with the political and social responsibility of 'imaginatively bring[ing] into being' an alternative reality which (it is implied) may help us to learn and create better scenarios in the future (Wise, 1999, p. 1057).

Asked why many American novelists 'have eschewed or at least marginalised, the political in their work', Achebe explains:

I think they've been conned into apoliticism by those who have a vested interest in keeping us out. The emperor would prefer the poet to keep away from politics, the emperor's domain, so that he can manage things the way he likes. When the poet is pleased to do that, the emperor is happy and will pay him money to stay within his aesthetic domain. But you and I don't have to agree with the emperor. We have to say no. Our business involves the peace, happiness and harmony of not just people but the planet itself. (See Morrow, 1991)

Later in the same interview Achebe defends the necessity for art in society:

Art is like a second handle on reality, on our life and the world. That is an alternative that is provided by art. It does not cancel life, it does not eliminate life. It gives us this possibility for contrast, even for escape. So if a life is going to be meaningful... it is our destiny that we must wrestle with difficult problems. The very nature of life is struggle. That's why this need for an alternative -something that can be used as a foil- will always be a necessity to a life well-lived. (Morrow, 1999, Part two)

Achebe's use of the term 'foil' is interesting here. I take it to imply that literature provides a contrast and reveals differences and insight when compared to our own understanding and experiences. Ogunbesan, in his seminal article 'Politics and the African Writer' (1974) summarises Achebe's view that the African writer should be, what he terms, a cultural nationalist "explaining the traditions of his people to a largely hostile world" and a teacher "instilling dignity into his own people (Ogunbesan, 1974, p.44). He then adds a further role as social critic explaining that Achebe believed that writers should be free to criticise their own societies. By the late 1960s Achebe's stance changed somewhat with his involvement in the Biafran Civil war. Ogunbesan reveals how during a "period of conflict, priorities change, and people tend to reinterpret their lives and roles in new lights" (1974, p. 47). He quotes from an interview in 1974 when Achebe states:

I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest... In fact I should say all our writers, whether they are aware of it or not, are committed writers. The whole pattern of life demands that you should protest, that you should put in a word for your history, your traditions, your religion, and so on. (Interview with Achebe, University of Texas, Austin, USA, November 1969. See Ogunbesan, 1974, p.47.)

Ogungbesan, drawing closely from Lindfors, explains that “Achebe has moved from criticising his society to directly taking a hand in remoulding it” (1974, p.47) and suggests that:

in addition to recording the past and the current revolutions and changes that are going on, the African writer has a great influence in determining Africa’s future, for by recording what had gone on before, he is in a way helping to set the tone of what is going to happen. (Ogungbesan, 1974, p.47)

Lindfors summarises this new role as more involved in “determining than merely reporting” and in acting than reacting (cited by Ogungbesan, 1974, p.47). Emenyonu, also cited, explains that Achebe came to understand his war experiences as confirmation of the revolutionary role of the African writer in post war Nigeria and in post independence Africa:

The most meaningful work that African writers can do today will take into account our whole history: how we got here, and what it is today; and this will help us to map out our plans for the future. (See Ogungbesan, 1974, p.48).

Interestingly, the writer’s role as teacher, for Achebe “could only be a temporary measure, something dictated by the political logics of the day. Once the lesson had been learned, the teacher’s duty falls into abeyance” (Ogungbesan, 1974, p.49). The writer’s role as social critic follows on logically from the role as teacher:

Having repaired the foundations of his society by establishing the validity of African traditions, the writer can now afford to take an unflinching look at his society and its shortcomings. However, the writer’s role as social critic is higher than his role as teacher, since it can go beyond the requirements of the moment. Writers all over the world have always been called upon to play this role. But it demands more of the writer than the role of the teacher. It demands more than objectivity; it demands considerable detachment when

writing about the past, but this quality becomes doubly necessary when writing about the present. (Ogunbesan, 1974, pp. 49-50).

Achebe highlights the evolving role of African writers beginning as cultural nationalists (in relation to representing the nation and indigenous culture to outside audiences), then as teachers, social critics and, if necessary, activists within post-colonial societies. These roles were heightened and combined for him during the Biafran conflict when he considered activism and protest a necessary duty emanating from his role as a writer. In fact, Achebe's views on the social and didactic role of writers were, most likely, informed by his early career in broadcast journalism and then honed under the extreme circumstance presented by the Biafran conflict. This connection between journalism, creative writing and war is also very prevalent in contemporary Sierra Leone. Ogunbesan's chief criticism of Achebe, however, is that he too readily assumes that creative literature is useful and that what Achebe wrote for Radio Biafra and the lectures he gave were closer to "propaganda" (Ogunbesan, 1974, p. 50). I explore Achebe's reflections on poetry and the war in Biafra in some detail next.

Biafra and Achebe's poetry

In 1969, Achebe explains that the experience of war accentuates the involvement and social commitment of the writer:

The involvement of the Biafran writer today in the cause for which his people are fighting and dying is not different from the involvement of many African writers—past and present—in the big issues of Africa. The fact of war merely puts the matter in sharper focus. (See Obiechina, 2002, p.530).

In a television interview for the South Bank Show, Achebe explained that “poetry is more accessible to the writer in distress” (2008) and, earlier, in conversation with Lindsfor, he said:

I think that there is some connection between the particular distress of war, the particular tension of war, and the kind of literary response. (See Obiechina, 2002, p.528).

Similarly Ogungbesan quotes Achebe saying that he could:

understand why South Africans could not afford to write novels – only poetry and short stories. During the war, he had found, like them, that there was no time, everything was too pressing, novel writing was a luxury, and poetry seemed to meet the demands of time. (See Ogungbesan, 1974, p.48).

This conforms to my findings as it was mainly poems (as opposed to short stories, novels and plays) that were written in Sierra Leone during the war and post war period. Poetry, of course, lends itself to writing in relatively short time periods and can be an avenue for emotional outpouring and lamentation as well as a rallying cry. In relation to the growing body of Biafran literature, in which writers are now identified in terms of first, second or third generation regarding their proximity to war experience (see Krishnan, 2010), the writers I met constitute the first generation of Sierra Leonean civil war writers. Like first generation Nigerian war writers Achebe and Okigbo, their chief output is also poetry.

More contemporary Nigerian novelists, such as Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, would be considered to be third generation. Krishnan typifies these texts as more distanced from the specificities of the war. As such, they tend to re-imagine and represent the conflict as “still-open reflecting the fragmentation of personal and communal identity” whereas first generation writers tend to promote a view of conflict which is “both

comprehensible and complete” presenting “a vision of the nation as a viable and shared imagined community” (Krishnan, 2010).

Obiechina, in an article about the therapeutic aspect of Achebe’s war poetry in the ‘Christmas in Biafra’ collection, reflects on Achebe’s transition into poetry during the Biafran conflict having previously written other forms:

How and why Achebe crossed the generic boundary between fiction and poetry in the period of the Nigerian civil war and after should be of interest not only to critics of African literature but also to anyone concerned with the relationship of literature to social history, especially during periods of great social and psychological disturbances. It is obvious, of course, that poetry was there all the time in the lyrical texture of Achebe's fictional writings, but poetry as a distinctive creative form and a consciously structured genre was not part of Achebe's creative agenda until the civil war. (Obiechina, 2002, Preview).

Indeed, when asked, during the civil war (in 1969) if he was currently writing creatively, Achebe responded:

Yes, but not novels. I do articles and some poetry, but I can't do more than that. I started a novel just before the war which seemed to me at the time terribly important—I had already had the idea for it as far back as '66—but I finally gave it up because it later seemed to me completely unimportant. . . . I can create, but of course not the kind of thing I created when I was at ease. I can't write a novel now; I wouldn't want to. And even if I wanted to, I couldn't. . . . I can write poetry—something short, intense, more in keeping with my mood. . . . (See Obiechina, 2002, p.528).

Drawing on the ideas of Brecht and the use of poetry in ‘dark times’, Obiechina suggests that Achebe ascribed poetry a “distinct potency” and considered his role that of a “healer of the

self, the people, and the wounded soul of society in the harsh, bad times” (Obiechina, 2002, p.529). He suggests that Achebe:

recognized the multi-faceted uses of poetry for making a statement, for bearing witness, for instigating a humane social and moral order, and for conscientizing the reader to a better understanding of the corruptions of power and the patent, often brazen, nature of evil. Through poetry, Achebe hoped to provide an antidote to the sort of cynical calculus of death and deep corruption... Only poetry could adequately address the horrors of the death by starvation of millions of children and non-combatant men and women, while politicians across the world looked away or indulged in interminable hair-splitting palavers (Obiechina, 2002, pp. 529-30).

Again, drawing this time on the work of Burness, Obiechina assigns a socially therapeutic role to Achebe’s poetry:

the artist would, by bearing witness and thus sharpening the resource of memory, help the people and the society to heal themselves through the poetic reconstruction of tragically painful experiences. Such poetry, of necessity, would—by mood, emotion, and texture—be adequate to its therapeutic function; it would be poetry that reproduces the "hurt" as well as the potentiality of healing. In Achebe's own words, "It can find a way to point, however tentatively, at prospects and possibilities of healing" (Obiechina, 2002, p.530).

How this healing role is actualised is, however, not described by Obiechina. He fails to interrogate how Achebe’s poetry was disseminated and read within the Biafran elite, by the wider Igbo and Nigerian people and outside audiences at the time of writing and into the future. Neither does he determine the role that Achebe’s poetry played in rallying combatants, supporting or promoting the Biafran cause or promoting social action (including agitation for

peace). However, Obiechina offers a unique exploration of the therapeutic aspect of poetry in the Biafran civil war context.

Unlike Okigbo, who died in the fighting, Achebe did not personally participate in violent combat during the war. He did, however, travel widely to inform and educate the world about background and consequences of war from a Biafran perspective. In this way, he moved across the spectrum from social engagement through writing into political activism.

In Sierra Leone, most authors had limited experience of the war (it encroached into Freetown on two occasions) and none, except for the ex-soldier and now American-based biographer, Ismail Beah, actually fought or supported the rebels⁹. Writers, instead, became united through wanting an end to the conflict. Unlike Biafra, the war in Sierra Leone was a civil war in which a small group of disenfranchised and forcibly recruited rural youth waged war on the country: it was not a secessionist conflict. In fact, many people in Sierra Leone today remain unclear about the causes. Writers were not rallying towards one side or another or supporting an educative campaign about the causes and consequences of war; rather they were witnesses of a horrific turn of events reacting with complex emotions to the events unfolding around them (see discussions in Chapter 4, for example, in relation to Oumar Farouk Sesay's poem *At Tellu Bongor*).

Contemporary Sierra Leonean writers: spokespersons, educators and critics

Since the 1960s and 1970s, discussion about social commitment amongst African writers has lessened amidst the fragmented politics of many contemporary post colonial African nation

⁹ There was however criticism and divided views on the government response and the handling of the vigilante Kamajor group.

states in which an easily identifiable ideological role for writers is less available. In the Sierra Leonean context, the complex phenomenon of war has inadvertently brought local writers into a cultural brokerage role. They have also become arbiters of the recent past as their experience and reflections about the conflict are sifted through mechanisms of creative expression and discussion. Their growing self-awareness and sense of agency about this role is discussed further in Chapter 3.

As an Igbo, involved in the Biafran cause, Achebe saw himself as part of a revolutionary vanguard with identifiable adversaries and a meaningful cause. Despite different contexts, Achebe recognised that the writer's role is politically expedient and one can extrapolate that in a post-war context the writer's role may be to teach peace and act as a critic on both the state (or leadership) and society (or what President Koroma termed "followership" in a recent Network Africa interview, 2011). Like Achebe, the poets I met were united in trying to "find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat" (Achebe, 1975, p.68). Achebe demonstrates how crisis necessitates that writers become involved but the actual nature of involvement is not deeply probed. In Sierra Leone, I consider the act of writing as a form of social engagement and as a tool to catalyse and reinvigorate renewal and recovery. This role might be closer to Achebe's idea of "conscientizing" (see earlier quotation from Obiechina, 2002, pp. 529-30). Interestingly, many of the writers I met in Freetown said they had been influenced by Achebe's work but were referring to his literature rather than his essays.

In arguing that literature is political and that the writer must take sides, Ngugi is assuming that clear sides exist (1981b, p.5). In Sierra Leone, such clear divisions are less visible. Sierra Leone's writers face hybrid demands, experience multi-layered identities and cross-cutting allegiances. Here, the *blame* for the state of the nation and for the severely constrained personal trajectories of a sizeable proportion of the population is dispersed across structures

and individuals within the past and present inside (and outside) the national boundaries. Meanwhile, traits of laziness, idleness and ignorance are frequently cited by journalists, politicians and educators as reasons for the country's backwardness¹⁰. Although there are high levels of illiteracy there is not a general assumption that the writer is writing *for* the (illiterate) people. In fact, with the emergence of sensitisation programmes (which often use scripted plays to instil messages such as human rights or HIV prevention) the role of the writer has switched. In this case, rather than reflecting the thoughts, feelings and wishes of the people, they are persuading them to change instead. Ideally, such a message would resonate with the beliefs of the writer and they would be free to choose or reject contracts. In reality everyone has pressing financial demands and sensitisation work has become a way to make money from creative writing whilst enabling the writer to feel that they are promoting social change. Freetown dramatists Charlie Haffner and Mohammed Sheriff both run theatre companies that derive the bulk of their contracts from sensitisation programmes.

Despite the duality in today's party politics (between the SLPP, representing Mende ethnic groups and Southerners, and the ruling APC, representing Temnes and Northerners), taking sides is more complicated than when Ngugi was writing. Sierra Leone's rebel RUF were not widely supported at all and only when the RUF merged with members of the Army to take over as the AFRC in 1997 might some of the writers have supported them. Writers were not drawn in through ethnic affiliation as was the case in Biafra. Writers are, instead, free floating, able to take up causes and driven to confront social issues yet without a guiding ideology which places them in a clearly demarcated relationship with the state and society. What I am trying to emphasise here is that the African literary landscape has shifted significantly and

¹⁰ For example, see Joseph Kpanda's contribution to the National Vision for Sierra Leone: Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission [on line] Available from <http://www.sierraleonetrc.org/index.php/nvsl-written-submissions/30-nvsl-joseph-kpanda> [Accessed 4 June 2013]

that the landscape in contemporary Sierra Leone is different to the situation that Ngugi was writing about in the late 1970s yet it is still possible to extrapolate from his views.

The conditions Ngugi assumes (that literature is available and disseminated) appear idealistic in the Sierra Leonean context and highlight how far reading is in decline. For Ngugi, literature shapes and reflects society and embodies the way a society looks at itself and places itself in the world (see earlier quotations). Literature contributes to a functioning society and is a key arena for driving social change. In Sierra Leone's case, the poor condition of literature is indicative of ill function in other spheres such as literacy, education, publishing and journalism and governance. The conditions of literature (as well as the content) reveal the health and thematic preoccupations of the nation.

When interviewed in 2006, Ngugi explained how his literary style had adapted to what he saw happening in African politics: "How do we describe a regime without using a satirical mask?" he commented (Front Row, BBC Radio 4, 2006). His 700 page novel 'Wizard of the Crow', published in the same year, caricatures the ruthless, corrupt figures and absurd behaviour he sees in contemporary Kenya and other African nations in a mad cap, often grotesque, tragicomedy. The seeming inexplicableness of the text and multiple, ever-changing narratives convey, perhaps better than rational political analysis, the state of decay of certain African governments. Here Ngugi demonstrates the writer's role as critic. In Sierra Leone similar texts do not (as yet) exist although Syl Cheney-Coker's 'The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar' uses a similar style.

Ngugi's concern with language as the bearer of culture and hence his choice of writing in his native Kikuyu although pertinent to my research is not emphasised in this study as none of the authors I interviewed in Freetown considered language to be a contentious issue. Neither did

they consider that writing in Krio, or other languages, might be a way to increase readership. Instead writers tended to hope for improvements in schooling and the inculcation of a renewed reading culture (in English) and did not problematise their disassociation with the Sierra Leonean populace. Nonetheless, Sierra Leonean authors face the challenge of maintaining authenticity whilst writing in colonial English when the immediate post colonial conditions of education have grossly deteriorated for the majority and improved dramatically for others (with increased international travel and specialised educational opportunities, internet access, publishing platforms and social networking opportunities coupled with a growing appetite in the west for hybrid literature).

Whether post-war Sierra Leonean writing is understood to be the last bastion of a colonial era clinging on in unfavourable circumstances or whether we see literature in English as a small but thriving component of a new, progressive stage in Sierra Leone's development and recovery is a question I will return to in the Conclusion having considered the texts and author responses in more detail. Suffice it to say at this point that English is likely to continue as the main language of international trade, education and publishing in the foreseeable future for Freetown's inhabitants (although commercially there are growing links with China and India). Meanwhile in the provinces literacy in English is likely to decline further leaving authors in the capital in a quandary as to their aims and intended readership. Simultaneously as literacy in English falls, Krio is strengthened as the lingua franca creating new challenges and opportunities for local writers.

A new African perspective: the writer as a concerned free agent

I would like to, briefly, include another emerging contemporary African perspective originating from present-day Kenya and personified in the ideas of the writer and journalist, Binyavanga Wainaina.

Eschewing academia yet speaking at academic conferences (he gave the Keynote address at the 2012 Africa Studies Association Conference in Leeds, for example), Wainaina represents something of an enigma yet his idea and actions can be said to represent a new trend regarding the role and position of African writers. Now in his early 40s, Wainaina epitomises what he calls the:

new generation of hip-hop, cyber cafés, and open TV is a generation of networking. I consider myself part of the in-between generation, neither that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o nor that of hip-hop generation (see interview by Journo, 2008).

Along with other internationally-minded, locally-aware Kenyan writers, Wainaina founded the inspirational Kwani magazine. These writers have left behind preoccupations with English language and colonialism (their fellow Kenyan Ngugi's concerns) and are equally at ease with the portability of African English as well as new language forms (e.g. Kenyan Sheng). This 'in-between' generation are empowered, self-aware and upwardly mobile Afropolitians leading the way in East African, African and international publishing practices at the forefront of internet writing. They constitute a new writer-led movement towards popular engagement and global connectivity which assigns writers an alternative platform for social commentary and ideas generation which is close to, but not the same as, journalism. Although Wainaina is aware of the negative trajectories of nativism, he embraces his ethnicity and cultural influences whilst existing in a multiplicity of global identities and sourcing much inspiration

and identity from Nairobi's urban culture. Wainaina's broad melange of views see writers inhabiting a new expressive space free from the concerns of earlier post-colonial writers and also free in terms of the ability to tap in and out of global, African, Kenyan or ethnic perspectives. This shifting, expressive literary space responded to recent ethnic conflict in Kenya with the creating of the Concerned Kenyan Writers Forum (see Journo, 2008). At the 2008 Kwani Litfest in Kenya, a symposium was included for "Revisioning Kenya" designed for non-literary speakers to discuss solutions for Kenya and to promote pollination of ideas. Wainaina explains:

in a post-violence situation it is a great service to provide such a platform... it serves to remind people that a territory of better ideas exist that is beyond politicians and their mediocre ideas. This new territory can be a source of inspiration for writers (see Journo, 2008).

The Kenyan writers are technologically (and perhaps educationally) more advanced than that of their Sierra Leonean counterparts and benefit from a more sophisticated literary infrastructure. Their ideas represent a kind of counter, or free, ideology and a vision for writing which breaks with past concerns. The creation of space for pollination of ideas outside mainstream politics connects with ideas I develop later that literature in Sierra Leone provides a space for the re-imagination of new social ideas. The links between journalism and writing are also shared by Sierra Leone's writers yet their motivations tend to relate more to Achebe's.

In summary, I have found that there are elements of the writer as cultural nationalist, as spokesperson, educator and critic and as concerned, free agent that speak to, and can inform, this thesis. The Negritude and independence movement writers were harbingers of large-scale and revolutionary change which, though different, is echoed in the fractural change and social

challenges facing post conflict Sierra Leone. This has meant that writers (wittingly and unwittingly) have come to occupy a role of peace ambassadors as writing reflects a heightened social conscience in the wake of war. The social situation has required that writers become more involved (as Achebe recognised) yet the nature of that involvement diverges. The peculiar (and elevated) status of writers in Sierra Leone also resonates with the idea of a territory of ideas that can exist and inform politics in crisis (as is happening in present day Kenya).

The role of the writer and conflict in Africa

Having explored existing research on the general role of the writer in Africa, I will now consider contributions relating specifically to role of the writer in Africa during and after conflict.

Despite the recent history of conflict and civil wars in English-speaking Nigeria, Uganda, Liberia, Somalia, Kenya and Sierra Leone (and in Angola, Congo DRC, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, Guinea-Bissau, Chad, Senegal and the Comoros) research on the impact of civil war on creative writers, on their writing, roles and motivations is limited. Despite numerous poetry anthologies on themes of war and peace, there is little analysis of the actual role that writers play in post-war recovery. The most similar context to Sierra Leone is neighbouring Liberia, a nation also created for the liberation of slaves (by America) which has similarly experienced civil conflict and chronic underdevelopment. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Liberia appears to be facing similar literary problems. In reviewing 'Iron Lady of Liberia' (a film about the Liberian President Ellen J Sirleaf), Tewroh-Wehtoe Sungbeh writes:

I too have been pondering over the years about the literary emptiness in our society – that Liberian writers and filmmakers haven't stepped up to the plate to mass produce books and documentaries about the wealth of talents in the Liberian society, but are content reading books and watching Nigerian films and materials from other countries. (Tewroh-Wehtoe Sungbeh: 2008).

Nonetheless, on investigation Liberia conveys the impression of a buoyant literary scene boasting a Liberian Writers Association, the Liberian Studies Journal, and the Sea Breeze Journal of Contemporary Liberian Writing (see <http://www.liberiaseabreeze.com/currentissue.htm>). Liberian Elma Shaw's recent novel 'Redemption Road' (published by Cotton Tree Press in 2008) is based around the civil war and the writer and academic Robert H Brown's latest novel 'Remembrance of Things Past', published via AuthorHouse in 2009, depicts the privations of wartime and is described by online booksellers Alibris as 'doomsday fiction'. Except for the work of commentators such as Eva Acqui (below) there does not seem to be any detailed study of the function of writing in contemporary Liberia:

Liberian culture as a whole, literature especially, has several culturally vital tasks to attend to, within exercising its role of struggling for a better future, for speaking to the spiritual and cultural needs of a nation it has culturally attempted to keep up. It has to preserve its rich foundation of folk culture, consisting of customs, rites, and the related literary products, such as tales, legends, etc. The danger of myths and motifs vanishing into oblivion does exist, unless people themselves hand over this rich cultural heritage to the present and future generations, and teach them the pride of holding such an inheritance. (Acqui, 2007)

No analysis of the actual role that writers play in peacebuilding in countries such as Liberia or Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Rwanda appears to exist. Instead there are several books,

journals and conference materials which explore a range of African experiences as well as more detailed analysis on the Biafran conflict. The Sierra Leonean literary commentator, Eustace Palmer, who co-edited the first book on Sierra Leonean literature (2008), does not investigate the social function of writing. Hollist, too, in his PhD thesis (1981) though concerned with the committed nature of writing with particular reference to the Krio imagination, does not focus on the actual social contribution of writing in Sierra Leone.

Books, journals and conferences

Despite the popularity of war poetry, there is little material available in the field of writing and social change or the role of literature in conflict affected countries neither are these subjects studied commonly in university or in other courses. Several American universities are developing interests in creative writing and social justice and I found some related degree level modules, such as War and Creative Writing at New York University. These courses tend to use literature as a way to access and learn about war (such as the First and Second World Wars and the Jewish Holocaust) and the experiences and perspectives of those involved rather than explore the role that writing plays within the society in which the conflict took place. I had expected to find therapeutic courses which focused on writing about conflict but I found only courses in Art Therapy and Creative Arts Therapy (which does not include creative writing). Bibliotherapy (drawing on the therapeutic effect of reading and discussing responses to the text in groups) is by contrast, gaining popularity in the UK (for example with hospital patients, the elderly or mental health groups) and there is even a service offering bespoke reading prescriptions for whatever personal issues are affecting you (see individual bibliotherapy at www.theschooloflife.com).

Two publications appeared to cover my topic but, on examination, did not deal with the subject matter adequately. These were Larson's 'The Ordeal of the African Writer' (2001) which documents the challenges facing African writers who have suffered "more indignities, threats, humiliations and genuine terror than their counterparts in the rest of the non-western world" (Ushie in Larson, 2008, p.144). Although Larson's book exposes the extent of censorship and imprisonment, the economic and financial crises and lack of publishing and literary infrastructure (and its concentration in the Western metropolises), he does not explore the effect this has on the writer's self perception or motivations or the specific contribution that writers and their writing can make to society. The much earlier book, 'Protest and Conflict in African Literature' (1969), edited by Pierterse and Munro, is not actually about the experience and impact of conflict on African writers but about the social commitment of writers which, for the editors, involves inevitable protest and conflict stemming from a reaction to colonialism. Critics such as Holland (1972) claim that protest already existed in pre-colonial African art forms such as praise singing.

Other research exploring writing, conflict and peacebuilding in Africa is found in a number of journals which I summarise below:

The African Journal of New Poetry: Rhythms of Conflicts (2008)

Dedicated to Malawian poet, Jack Mapanje, this edition "hopes to challenge readers of African poetry with the truth of the aliveness of African art to the political and social concerns of the century" (see Emezue: 2008: Introduction). Claiming to "throw further light on the poetry of national and ethnic conflicts in the African continent" it includes articles exploring Zimbabwean national identity and the use of satirical song to manage conflict in Yorubaland

and a study of Igbo war songs. There is also an interview by Nkemdirim and K H Brown with guest Irene Marques (a Canadian scholar and poetess). In this, she states:

Poetry (and by extension allegorical and metaphorical writing) can be more political than something written in a realist journalistic-like manner because the power of the poetic can enter a deeper core in ourselves and touch the spirit – that site that sees like no other, that is blind to divisions or dichotomies, not tolerating oppressions because it sees humans as equal in value despite their differences... I think that writings that are profound and meaningful do mix different modes of expression where the perceived real becomes enmeshed with the imagination, the poetic, the allegorical, the spiritual, the bodily and the emotional [*she has earlier cited the work of Uruguayan journalist, essayist and poet Eduardo Galeano by way of example*] This enmeshed way of writing can be much more provocative and politically engaging because it opens up ways for us, ways of seeing beyond that which is in front of us. (Brown and Nkemdirim, *The African Journal of New Poetry*, 2008, p.205).

Other than this comment concerning the powerful effect of mixing genres (which in some way relates to the Sierra Leonean situation where there is much overlap between writers of journalism and poetry and similar aspirations are assigned to both genres), this journal does not provide a broad survey of the topic. Neither does it question the effect of war on the social ambitions of writers and the function of their work (or problematise this functionality).

The Journal of African Literature: War and Conflict (2008)

The sister Journal of African Literature (2008) was devoted to a similar theme of ‘War and Conflict’. In this, Joe Ushie (whose comment and writing appears in both journals) writes the premier article ‘Two Africas in One: Neo-Colonialism and the African Writer’ (pp. 17-33).

In this ambitious essay, Ushie (a Nigerian poet, based at Uyo university and author of several poetry collections including 1998 *Eclipse in Rwanda*) appears to be highlighting the conflict between Africa's neo-colonial leaders (the 'jackals' and 'vultures': 2008, p.29) and the post-colonial African writer. He traces the role of writers to the traditional African setting in which "the song was a major medium of social engineering and criticism" (Ushie, 2008, p.18). It was the role as social critic that explains the combative stance of writers in during independence struggles, Ushie claims. Whilst Anglophone writers sought to glorify their cultural heritage, their Francophone counterparts responded with a "corrosive" Negritude, suggests Ushie. The writer "effectively complemented the political flank in the struggle for independence" (2008, p. 19). In today's Africa, Ushie maintains writers are considered a threat and "killed, incarcerated, forced into exile, or their works banned" (2008, p. 28). Ken Sara Wiwa, killed under Nigeria's Abacha regime, is cited to claim:

literature must serve society by steeping itself in politics, by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or take a bemused, critical look at society. They must play an interventionist role" (See Ushie, 2008, p.23).

Ushie relates this to the rise of the prison note sub-genre yet suggests the threat of imprisonment and intimidation leads some writers instead to surrender "to the predator African world by either self-censorship or giving up writing altogether (especially in Sierra Leone..." (Ushie, 2008, p.29).

Apart from Ushie's article the actual experience of conflict and its impact on literature and the writer's role is not covered by the journal. Corrado's 'Writers of Angola Crying in the Desert' (pp. 109-130), however, makes the interesting claim that the isolated elite nature of the literature written by early poets if anything delayed the mobilisation of the nationalist

movement. This comment could be extrapolated to the wider debate about the social function of literature to highlight the difficulty of elite literature making an impact on wider society.

War in African Literature Today: (2008)

In the editorial article, Emenyonu describes this edition of *African Literature Today* as devoted to how writers have “handled the recreation of war as a cataclysmic phenomenon”. He then cites Nwahunanya’s ‘A Harvest of Tragedy’ (1997) who, writing about the contribution of Nigerian civil war literature to historical African fiction, states:

Writers have made literature continue to function as the mirror of society. In this process of mirroring and criticizing its pitfalls, the war literature also serves as a compass for redirection... the suggested mistakes of the war initiators and administrators portrayed in these writings thus become invaluable guides to meaningful national growth and a stable and progressive society (Emenyonu, 2008, p.xi).

Emenyonu goes on to consider whether imaginative war literature (which is a by-product of war) can still meet aesthetic standards while balancing a didacticism and authenticity of war writing:

It is easy for a creative writer to stray away or be derailed from objective artistic visions because of partisan or passionate involvement in a cause. When this happens, the work could degenerate into running commentaries and propaganda... Artists do not create in a vacuum. They can, and do, take positions on the serious social and political issues of their times, but this should be done in a manner that does not compromise the integrity of either the artist or the created piece. (Emenyonu, 2008, p. xii).

He ends his editorial by concluding that his own research on Nigerian war literature has revealed that:

writers on the war must allow a reasonable period of time to lapse before they can objectively write about the war, no longer as active combatants in the conflicts, but as writers who bring their imaginative vision to bear on the important events in the history of their people.

(Emenyonu, p.2008, p. xiv).

Nwankwo, in 'The Muted Index of War' considers the lack of serious attention given to the rising toll of Africa's wars. He suggests that imaginative writing can offer a kind of 'index' to understanding this rising trajectory. Indeed he names Sierra Leonean Syl Cheney-Coker's "epic sweep" of a novel, 'The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar', as representative of "the kind of ethos needed to capture this undesirable index... through the magical and marvellous ambience" that "muffle and transform that ethos into fatalistic and nihilistic messages" (see Emenyonu, 2008, p.2). Interestingly, he also suggests that Coker predicts some of the anarchy to come in his poems *Analysis* and *When the Revolution is Near at Hand* from 'The Graveyard also has Teeth' collection (1980).

In rather defeated tone, Nwankwo asks "how does one begin to make sense out of the recent eruptions in Ivory Coast, or the perplexing limb hacking horrors of Sierra Leone?... In Africa the only fixed thing is its desert of pain and despair" (see Emenyonu, 2008, p.10-11). Yet Nwankwo reads in the texts he analyses that those at blame are the multifarious interconnected elites and multinational companies, colonialism and the persistent "identity crisis" amongst educated Africans (see Emenyonu, 2008, p.1). Nwankwo shows how the reading of literature from war-affected parts of Africa can alert people to the harsh realities of certain histories and to the tendency for identities and connections within society to easily unravel (often with violent consequences) when manipulated and under strain. He suggests

that it is via a combination of poetry and fiction that we can learn most about conflict in Africa:

While novelists have the advantage of fuller representations of Africa's wars because of the spatial advantages of fiction, poets capture in precision the feelings and moods of the people. Between these two genres we find a reliable index for reading the impact of war in numerous societies, and how all those wars affect both the human condition and destiny in the continent. (See Emenyonu, 2008, p.13).

Whilst I agree with Nwankwo that African writers provide an index to the state of nation in terms of their role in chronicling the lived experience and social histories of conflicts, I would have liked his analysis to explore the full range of roles that writers play, and seek to play, as well as the impact of war literature on readers, other writers and on political and economic elites. Beyond demonstrating how literature can raise awareness and teach about war, it would have been useful for Nwankwo to question, for example, if and how literature contributes to new post-war narratives, how war shapes emergent literature in a post war context and how literary discourses contribute to building a constituency for peace via nonviolent counter discourse.

Creative Writing on War and Peace in Africa conference: (2006)

In 1-2 December 2006 a conference was held at the Nordic African Institute in Uppsala, Sweden aiming to promote dialogue between writers, critics, scholars and policy people and:

promote a literary perspective to the gaps in the dominant approaches to peace-building and post-war reconstruction in Africa... Some emphasis was placed on the role of the writer in

dissecting the causes of war, creatively confronting tyranny, and using the imagination to envision a transformed socially just, peaceful and free Africa. (Workshop Report, 2006)

Organiser and co-editor of the subsequent 2009 publication, 'Writers, Writing on Conflicts and Wars in Africa', Okey Ndibe gave a paper titled 'Writing Between the Spaces of Conflict'. In this he discussed the necessary dehumanisation of the other in war and how the writer has "a responsibility to resist the labelling of others as less than human, and to name and expose the evils haunting society". He concluded that "war gives us eyes to see the humanity of others" and puts writers in the position of revealing this sight (see Obi, 2006, p.1). Anna Chitando, in exploring the works of Ayi Kwei Armah urged writers to "sharpen their conversations around violence, conflict and peace in Africa" and suggested "other disciplines need to tap into the social vision of African writers" (see Obi, 2006, p.2).

Participants agreed that "the writer has the power of naming and re-naming things that in turn could guide how people act". It was also noted that:

situations of conflict change the person and the language of the writer. The issue of how far the writer can go and what s/he can do in such a situation is recognized as a contested terrain and debated. It is noted that writers as the custodians and moulders of words and images, with the ability to name and question things can reach deep into, or even subvert the human mind. Therefore, they have some power to show that there is an alternative, as well as new ways of thinking. (Obi, 2006, p.3).

Chenjerai Hove contributed his own story of being a writer and his encounter with war in Zimbabwe in a paper titled 'Small People, Big Wars, A Personal Memoir'. He asks: "what can we do as writers – who are so fragile?" and then suggests that:

writers' fragility was indeed a source of power, that threatened tyranny everywhere. This power lay in the capacity of the writer to reach into the innermost parts of the mind, to draw the human soul, capture the deep feelings of anguish, trauma and joy. (See Obi, 2006, p.3).

However, Hove also recognised that:

the writer had only words and the ability to name things as his tools. In dealing with the 'fragile' word, the writer using the imagination and knowledge of the geography of the mind has a serious responsibility of dissecting the causes of war, and is a witness, naming and telling the things that have happened. (See Obi, 2006, p.3).

David Bell, writing about South African fiction in 'Literature on Demand? Violence and the literary imagination in Contemporary Southern Africa' argues that imaginative literature is best employed to "bring new perspectives and insights to social life, rather than propaganda". Bell is critical that literature becomes appropriated by dominant discourses and argued "for the use of the imaginative space to move society forward or evoke images of what that ideal would look like". He suggests that literature can provide a "gaze" to look beyond violence and build relationships and that "writing is an important aspect of conflict transformation and dialogue" and a necessary part "of breaking away from the horrors of the past" (See Obi, 2006, p.4).

Sierra Leone was not explored specifically except for a pictorial presentation about marginalised youth in Freetown by Mat Utas. Again, the actual impact of literature, and potential impact, in post war situations does not appear to have been rigorously discussed or analysed though Bell touches on key aspects of the relationship between literature and conflict.

The report concludes that while some participants were of the view that “the writer had to interrogate her/him-self, to provide words to map experience, to dissect society, and provide alternatives, others recognised that there were limits to what the writer could do in a conflict context” (Obi, 2006, p.3). The role of the writer in narrating the experience of violence and killing was discussed and concerns raised that, whether consciously or not, “writers could be complicit to narratives that promote a particular political position” (Obi, 2006, p.4). It was also agreed that a literary perspective to peace-building and post-war reconstruction in Africa should be the subject of further research.

These conference proceedings overlap with some of the same questions I raise. My attention is drawn, for instance, to the fragility of writers embedded in Sierra Leone. They face challenges of balancing accurate and unbiased accounts of war with poetic interpretations leading to ethical questions of what and where to fictionalise and for what end. However, I was disappointed that there was no attempt to consolidate ideas and identify the key roles writers in conflict play or explore how civil war exposure affects their propensity to write.

I had also expected to find debate about the limited readership that African writers confront within their countries and the effect this has on their capacity. Certain writers in Sierra Leone are aware that they are writing into a vacuum because of the decline in readership yet they are motivated to promote social change in their work. This dilemma was discussed by Mohammed Sheriff during interviews in 2010, for example. In such a context, I suggest, literary ideas are disseminated via elite discourses and via western readership. The challenge this poses for writers does not appear to have been sufficiently highlighted.

African Writing Online: War and Peace

African Writing Online produced a special issue dedicated to War and Peace. In the editorial, publisher, Chuma Nwokolo, writes that “Peace is a project, and the burden of literature, of community, must be to increase the weight of peace”. He writes an impassioned plea for continued effort and planning for peace stating that “after every war, the incidence of casual cruelty among the population rockets” (Nwokolo, Issue 6, Editorial – no date given). Nwokolo’s approach focuses on the awareness raising nature and critical value of literature which can help us to inhabit and better understand other social and personal realities. This, I suggest, can be interpreted as the peace education function of literature:

A good writer on war takes us to the frontiers of the worst tragedy man is capable of – in our armchairs, so that we don’t have to flee there through gunfire and shells, through mined countryside. That is the true province of literature. (Nwokolo, 6, Editorial – no date given)

Relevance of research on African writers and war

In the immediate pre and post-colonial context, many African writers were extremely conscious of their political role in rewriting national history and revising aspirations and values for the majority of Africans who had had to endure colonial rule. As the new African intellectual elite, they felt a sense of duty to represent and educate the illiterate populace and create a body of more authentic literature than that imported by the colonisers: they were part of a political project. By contrast, today’s Sierra Leonean writers find themselves rudderless. They want to speak of the near past and of the future but there are few to listen. Inheriting the colonial English language and education system, writers now need to justify this position in a vastly underdeveloped environment in which cultural preferences have shifted away from literature.

These post-colonial, post-war writers are, nonetheless, seeking to re-enchant the national project through literature. They are animated by this task, at a time when the government cannot provide for the basic needs of its citizens and when education standards (including English and reading) are in severe decline. The need to defend literature, the sense of capacity experienced by 'being a writer' and the ongoing project of peace consolidation to some extent provides that missing rudder. The political affiliations of writers (which mirror a nation divided between two dominant parties) do not appear to charge their writing ideologically, though their allegiances may help or hinder certain opportunities available to them. In such a small country, writers share schooling, ethnic and familial ties with members of the political and business elite and this might also account for the lack of radicalism amongst writers none of whom are calling for a substantial change in the status quo.

The studies surveyed here are concerned, predominantly, with war literature rather than with post-war literature. Research on the relationship between writing and social change, citizenship and literature as a discourse for social reconstruction and peace in post war African contexts is extremely limited if it exists at all. This thesis serves to begin to fill this gap.

The lack of rigour surrounding the study of war and post war African literature and the role writers can play in social renewal and conflict transformation may be the result of privileging such literature, automatically assuming that it represents a social good, performs the role of chronicling history and warning future generations from returning to violence. Thus the context in which the author writes from and the historical placing of this writing is, in effect, weighted more heavily than the interrogation of author intension, audience impact or, even, quality.

By way of responding to the literature surveyed in this chapter, I have outlined below some different roles that writers perform in war and post war periods. These are roles that I have recognised in my field work, discussed with authors and would like to see interrogated in future interdisciplinary research. For the most part, the overall functions are the same in war and post war contexts but how these roles manifest themselves depends on social conditions. I create a much smaller, more specific list in the Conclusion based on an analysis of Sierra Leonean texts.

Varied roles of writers in war context:

- Morale: to rally troops and people to withstand rebel advances (propaganda)
- Critic: to make complaints, demand an end to fighting, search for reasons and solutions, build a constituency for peace
- Lament: emotional conscience of nation
- Escape: provide entertainment
- Social and civic activism: writing about social issues, helping in peace effort, helping victims, political involvement, journalism, encouraging literacy and reading
- Chronicle: document social reality through journalism, poems, prose notes, journals
- Therapeutic: writing as individual therapy and coping strategy during extreme national and personal conditions
- Narrativise: explain past and present through story-making and metaphor, may explore reasons for war and ways of understanding
- Edutainment: personal, communal and social guidance through story, poems and drama (drawing on earlier folk traditions, moral plays). May be self-generated or commissioned e.g. writing radio plays re HIV awareness or peace education. Rise of 'sensitisation'.
- Gatekeeper: writing used as way to introduce/access nation, cultural traditions and way of emotionally 'reading' nation through literary elite discourse. Writer inhabits position between state, society and international discourses. (Western elites use African elites as gatekeepers and translators and texts are read as ways to 'enter', understand and evaluate social conditions).

Varied roles of writers in post-war context:

- Morale: nation building and cohesion: promote healing, forgiveness and a new era
- Critic: provides check on society/state, question levels of violence, causes and warns of possible repetition/recidivism, reveals need for structural change e.g. poverty, rape etc.
- Lament: *same as war context though circumstances changed and distance changes the response*
- Escape: provide entertainment (divert gaze from dominant social and political challenges of recovery)
- Social and civic activism: promote rights, literacy/community and schools awareness, political involvement, catalyse social participation through arts, journalism
- Chronicle: *same as in war yet more distance from which to chronicle war or make creative work from raw experience and distance leads to more variation in interpretation.*
- Therapeutic: writing as cathartic personal expression in general. Transition from personal therapeutic to socially therapeutic writing.
- Edutainment: personal, communal and social guidance through story, poems and drama (drawing on earlier folk traditions of moral plays). Maybe self-generated or commissioned e.g. UNICEF commission of community drama re Child Rights. In the post-war context Sensitisation work is the mainstay for some creative writers and practitioners.
- Narrativise: explain past & present: re-tell story of war from distance (e.g. now emergence of novels), fictionalise and recreate ideas of nation. Renewal of social and national imagination after war. Offers alternative discourse on recent past and future.
- Gatekeeper: *similar role to war-time.*

Note that it is not just these writer roles that are important in a conflict situation. I have found that the participatory practice of writing, the sense of agency experienced by writers on the ground and their discourses perform key socially-transformative functions.

Conclusion

To summarise, I have demonstrated that while there are helpful approaches to examining the role of the writer and conflict transformation in Africa (and there is nascent interest in the field as evidenced by the 2006 conference on Creative Writing and War and Peace), there is no one approach I can adopt for this study. Perhaps the best fit is Achebe's understanding of the writer as a social actor whose role adapts according to the health of the society and polity in which they are located. When a society (such as Sierra Leone) is unhealthy, I extrapolate; the writer has a responsibility to act for change. The Sierra Leonean writers writing today within the country, whom I have met and interviewed, and whose poems I have analysed, assume a similar span of educative, critical and entertainment roles for writing (see Chapters 3 and 4).

The lack of a clear guiding ideology (such as that provided by the cultural nationalists) means that writers are left to consider and assign their own roles to some degree. Though they do not so much inhabit the in-between and experimental space actively explored by Kenya's writers, they do represent an alternative space or counter discourse to the dominant political rhetoric. The ten year civil war and subsequent recovery efforts have animated and focused writers making them peace ambassadors as well as catalysts for social change amidst the apathy and mistrust remaining after the years of violence.

In this thesis I build on the ideas gained here to create a new understanding of the writer's role which may help inform generic approaches to the role of writing and of literary discourses in the conflict transformation process. Writing provides a space to engage, retell, rethink and re-imagine society and the process of participation as a writer, I suggest, should be considered a

form of social engagement or active citizenship in the extreme circumstances pertaining in Sierra Leone.

Throughout this thesis, I build on ideas in this chapter (notably Achebe's view of the writer as pivotal social reformer) through field work and textual analysis. By adapting research from peace and conflict studies disciplines (for example, see Jabri, 1996) I intend to demonstrate that writing is a location of peace and a counter discourse (see Said, 2004). It is also a democratic model which allows for contestation of norms and political critique as an ongoing counter dialogue against the structural forces that tilt society towards conflict (whether systemic or actualised). Via literature, the narrative frameworks which keep communities returning to conflict can be re-imagined. My own work and previous studies of peace education reveal the transformative potential of imagining the lives of others, of considering alternatives to our personal and social histories and finding commonality and empathy with others. This, I would argue, is one of the primary functions of imaginative literature and an essential function in a post conflict society.

Before considering these ideas further, I will first provide a literary and social context in which to situate post-war Sierra Leonean writers (Chapter 2) then consider the lived experiences and responses of these writers (Chapter 3) and finally examine their texts (Chapter 4).

CHAPTER 2

Sierra Leonean literature: setting the context

Having considered the role of the writer in an African context and, specifically, in a post-war context, I now bring together what can be recognised as Sierra Leonean literature and situate the group of writers I study (and their output) firmly within their nation's literary canon.

This chapter charts the history of Sierra Leonean literature in order to provide a context with which to consider the field work findings and poems gathered in Chapters 3 and 4. In doing this, I suggest that the contemporary period, delineated by the civil war, marks a new departure in literature from within the country characterised by a renaissance in socially oriented poetry. This period is also distinctive in that it is the first time writers from different ethnic groups are at the forefront of new writing and share a strong sense of social mission as Sierra Leonean writers. Certain trends persist over time such as close links between authors and journalists and the privileged, elite position of writers. However, contemporary poets (see more information in Chapter 3) represent a more diverse cross section of society and are more at ease with their africanity than their pre-independence predecessors.

Before analysing writers' view and their poetry, it is important to recognise that a wider national canon, though little known, does exist. It is also important to consider perceptions of Sierra Leone in African literature. I suggest that Sierra Leone offers a test bed for literature in extremes. Due to social and economic neglect, the literary fabric is severely limited and writers' lives are compromised by the lack of supporting infrastructure coupled with an

almost non-existent local readership. Although this context acts as a constraint, it also appears to fuel their literary ambitions and heighten their sense of social duty as writers.

I begin this chapter by offering a definition of Sierra Leonean literature and discuss certain issues surrounding its lack of success as a national presence on the wider African and international literary platform. Next, working back from the post-war period (in which my field work took place), I sketch a brief history of Sierra Leonean literature having explained why such background information is valuable for this enquiry. Please note that further contextual information regarding educational and literary opportunities for contemporary writers in Freetown is included in Chapter 3. Additional field notes (see Appendix 3) also detail what interviewees defined as Sierra Leonean literature. The main primary texts mentioned in this chapter are gathered chronologically in the first section of the Thesis Bibliography to help provide an overview for quick reference.

Towards a definition of Sierra Leonean literature

For the purposes of this study, I offer the following definition of Sierra Leonean literature:

creative writing in which a Sierra Leonean setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Sierra Leone are integral. It is literature written in Sierra Leone by authors of Sierra Leonean heritage or by non-Sierra Leoneans resident within, or closely linked, to Sierra Leone. It is also the literature of Sierra Leoneans living in the diaspora which relates to the country. (Adapted from the definition of African literature agreed at the 1963 Freetown Conference on African Literature and University Curricula at Fourah Bay College. See overview in Kanneh, K. (1998) 'African Identities'. London, Routledge. p.41)

From the outset, I was determined to focus on a specific part of this definition that I felt was absent in the books I had initially come across i.e. I wanted to focus on literature written *inside* the country, as a product of living, making and remaking daily life in the context of post 1991 Sierra Leone itself. The better known writers associated with Sierra Leone including Aminatta Forna, Delia Jarret-Macauley, Ismail Beah and, to some extent, Syl Cheney-Coker (who is based in the United States) benefit from the educational and literary opportunities afforded in the west. I am not suggesting that these writers cannot be classed as Sierra Leonean or they do not share cultural values, consciousness or ethnicity but that because of their geographical position, they are not the prime focus of this study. Several of the writers I interviewed are able to travel outside the country and one in particular, Gbanabom Elvis Hallowell, studied in the United States. Nonetheless, the fact that the majority of their time is spent in the geographical, social, economic (and emotional) setting of Sierra Leone remains pertinent to their writing, to their self-definition as authors and poets and to their literary potential in influencing the national imagination and creating a distinct literary discourse within the country. Note that my convictions about the significance of place were discussed earlier under the National Literature section of the Introduction.

For my study, I am less concerned with literary quality and more concerned with the motivation for writing, the images and ideas portrayed and the effects of writing in a grossly underdeveloped, post-conflict landscape. I want to discover the nation's writing and claim it as part of a Sierra Leonean canon which is largely unknown internationally (and, perversely, even less so within the country). I then want to consider what role this writing plays, and could potentially play, in post-conflict transformation.

Although the idea of assigning nationality to a literature is problematised within post-colonial literary studies (see *African Literature Today*, Sept 2001, No 17 which focuses on the

question of language), the idea of and existence of Sierra Leonean literature was rarely questioned during my research. It was only the somewhat provocative dramatist, Pat Maddy, in a brief interview who said “there is no Sierra Leonean literature”, claiming that it had yet to been written (field work conducted in 2008). However, Maddy later conceded that there had been new literary developments such as the poetry collections by the Falui group (referring to the ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’ 2004 collection) and his own theatre work. Instead writers defined themselves (in fact appointed themselves) as Sierra Leonean writers because national preoccupations are at the foreground of their output. Being a Sierra Leonean writer (in such a small country with limited literacy) may also lead to interviews, inclusion in national anthologies and, through this, an entrance into the wider, global community of African and international writers and further publishing opportunities.

During my research, the first guide to Sierra Leonean literature was published (see Palmer and Porter, 2008). Prior to this only short articles were available and Onipede Hollist’s PhD thesis (1991) which focused specifically on the Krio imagination in Sierra Leonean literature.

Neither Palmer nor Hollist sought to dispute the categorisation of a national ‘Sierra Leonean’ literature neither have they set out distinct delineations of entry into that category either. In fact, both Hollist and Palmer are Sierra Leoneans themselves residing in the United States and include much diaspora material in their analyses.

Literary commentators such as Johnson (2001) writing on Southern African literature warn against the ‘limitations of corralling writers into national literatures’ (2001, p. 51). Such a national category cannot take account of “relations and connections that exceed the nation state” he argues quoting the firebrand author Marechera:

I would question anyone calling me an African writer. Either you are a writer or you are not. If you are a writer for a specific nation, or a specific race, then f*** you. (Dambudzo Marechera, 1986 (see Johnson, 2001, p.38)

Marachera's desire to go beyond the boundaries of Zimbabwe may have been influenced by his experience of censorship and by travelling between Britain and Zimbabwe and seeking to "escape the reflex condescension directed at all writers inhabiting what he sees as the literary ghetto of African Literature" (Johnson, p. 51). Marachera seems to be recoiling from the labelling of literature as 'Zimbabwean' or 'African' by the west with all the power implications that labelling carries. Such terms may be laden with historical associations of coloniser and colonised and western prejudices implying a literature that is third world (even third rate) ensuring that African literature stays in a subordinate position compared with the 'great' literature emanating from the west. Marechera (in 1992) claimed:

all nationalism always frightens me, because it means that the products of your own mind are now being segregated into official and unofficial categories, and that only the officially admired works must be seen (Johnson, 2001, p.51).

The Sierra Leonean authors I spoke to do not echo Marechera's concerns. This might be because they are still struggling with recognition and believe a national categorisation may help them or because Sierra Leone is a distinct nation in West Africa whose nation character and history is not shared across borders to the same degree as in southern Africa. There is no doubt that the nation of Sierra Leone is a major preoccupation and subject matter for the writers I met. Indeed, when asked 'What is your role as a writer?' various responses included:

To etch some kind of identity

To tell the world about things here

To trumpet the existence of Sierra Leone

So we don't forget what happens to us

To record and capture emotion as no historian can do

To help people know culture and what happens

To inform, entertain and educate in such a way to establish the culture of a nation. It should give people a vision for themselves and a root.

(Excerpts from author questionnaires gathered during field work in Freetown, autumn 2008)

These quotations reveal the extent that writers see themselves as Sierra Leonean and consider writing as a way to document the past, to speak on behalf of Sierra Leone and promote national identity. The idea of a national literature is not, therefore, challenged in this thesis and such a category actually appears useful and meaningful in this context. I am aware, however, that in other situations writers might equally have defined themselves as Freetown writers, African writers, black writers or war writers etc. but I suggest that these definitions would not abrogate their identity as Sierra Leonean writers. To critics who claim that national literatures are defunct in an age of increasing globalisation, I would argue that though this is a factor, it in no way threatens the existence of a Sierra Leonean literature at the time of this research. In fact, the internet has connected people across the country (and overseas) by virtue of nationality and, at the same time, may reinforce that identity.

Due to the economic and educational environment, it would be extremely difficult, if not futile, to attempt to pin-point Sierra Leonean literature through geographical publication. Due to the lack of publishing options, bookshops (and customers) within the country, most creative writing is published outside in America, UK, Canada or closer to home in Nigeria, for instance. This includes self-published books which are the main route to publishing and often the only option for new authors to see their work in print. From 2005-2006 onwards there has been a steady increase in books published by diaspora writers based in the US often under the imprint of Lekon New Dimensions Publishing. This is a small, dedicated Sierra

Leonean publishing house founded by Clifford Fyle and based in New York after the civil war (see <http://lekonpublishing.com/>). In 2010-11 a publishing venture, in Sierra Leone, Karantha, was initiated by one of the authors discussed here, Oumar Farouk Sesay.

In 2008, the Language and Literature department at Fourah Bay College introduced the first ever undergraduate course on Sierra Leonean literature (see Additional Field Notes, Appendix 3). This, along with Palmer and Porter's book, again confirms that there is a growing body of national literature which may now be studied and placed together as a canon. For Ashcroft:

a canon is not a body of texts per se but rather a set of reading practices (the enactment of innumerable individual and community assumptions, for example about genre, about literature, and even about writing. (Ashcroft, 1989, p.189)

These reading practices are "resident in institutional structures, such as educational curricula and publishing networks" (Ashcroft, 1989, p.189). African literature textbooks tend to subdivide material into regional and national literatures. Sierra Leonean Literature has tended to be subsumed under West African literature where, typically, the poems or novel by Syl Cheney-Coker will be discussed along with earlier poems by Adelaide Casely-Hayford, for example.

The older generation of Sierra Leoneans tend to associate Sierra Leonean literature with Wellesley Cole's 'Kossoh Town Boy', Sarif Easmon's stories and plays, Pat Maddy's novel and plays and the plays of Dele Charlie. Those Sierra Leoneans in their late 30s and 40s tend to know Syl Cheney-Coker and remember reading Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' (published first in 1958 then followed by sequels in the 1960s). Amongst British readers and viewers, the blockbusting film Blood Diamonds is widely known while committed readers may have read Beah's war autobiography or Aminatta Forna's novels for example. Older British readers may

remember Graham Greene's depiction of Sierra Leone as a white man's grave in the 'The Heart of the Matter' (1948).

Palmer and Porter's book on Sierra Leonean Literature (2008) breaks new ground by focusing solely on Sierra Leonean literature. Palmer, himself a Sierra Leonean and one time lecturer at Fourah Bay College, is an American resident and Professor of English in Georgia and a fiction writer (Palmer published three novels in 2010-11). The introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature is now available to critics and academics internationally though it is not stocked (or was not stocked in Autumn 2008 at either Fourah Bay College or the central library in Freetown). Florida-based, Onipede Hollist's lesser known PhD thesis (1991) entitled 'An Analytic Survey of the Postcolonial Fiction in English of Sierra Leone' focuses mainly on short stories and novels and identifies the peculiar situation of literature in Freetown society, the dominance of Krio writers and the tendency of writers "to look inward, to probe and question rather than to seek explanations for the country's malaise" (see Hollist, p.73). For Hollist, Sierra Leonean writing appeared "calm". He suggests that "Sierra Leone avoided the large scale social upheavals that make interesting material for creative writing" (Hollist, p.143). Now, however, writers are working in the aftermath of civil war. Such a social and political emergency has kick-started the creation of new writing and prompted the emergence of new voices who are writing with an intensity of feeling and sense of social agenda.

The marginal nature of Sierra Leonean literature

Along with possessing the first university in Africa (Fourah Bay College was founded in 1827), Freetown was known as a diverse centre of learning and heralded the Athens of Africa but, despite what Palmer suggests was a 'literary head start' (2008, p.14), literature did not

flourish. Today this may be a reflection of Sierra Leone's underdevelopment and the effects of the recent war yet there are a number of other factors contributing to the marginalisation of Sierra Leonean literature.

The non-literary emphasis of education

The focus of learning in post-colonial Sierra Leone became to acquire positions in the colonial administration or the legal professions and thus the pursuit of writing creatively was subsumed to the role of part time hobby for those with proficiency in English. Indeed, Hollist explains that most "writing was part-time and displayed a strong autobiographical and journalistic nature" (Hollist, 1991, p8). Later, the teaching of English at university tended to focus on criticism as opposed to writing. Palmer suggests that although Sierra Leone has produced writers, they have tended to be journalists, critics and anthropologists and it is only recently that writers of literature have emerged. (Palmer, 2008, p.16).

Lack of independence struggle and Krio dominance

The emergent national literature in Sierra Leone was overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) written by members of the Krio elite from the capital city or from its western satellites. This writing often lacked rigour and sat awkwardly against the work of acclaimed African writers like Achebe, Ngugi and Beti (Palmer, 2008, p.16). Sierra Leonean literature was not particularly concerned with critiquing the colonial authorities when many African writers were engaged with African nationalism from the 1940s onwards. In this way, Sierra Leone stands apart from the cultural nationalist writers discussed in Chapter 1. Authors, such as Sarif Easmon and Abioseh Nicol, for example, lampooned the affectations of Krios and depicted

elite characters in the midst of moral quandaries and corruption torn between the best and worst of English and African cultures. Such literature held limited appeal to readers outside the peculiarities of Freetown society. Palmer suggests that the lack of strident African nationalism and absence of independence struggle combined with the dominance of Krio writers ensconced in English culture (and hence alienated from rich African traditions) meant that a national literature was not effectively forged as in other African countries (Palmer, 2008, p.15).

Although Palmer recognises that Sierra Leone produced nationalist figures such as Wallace Johnson (1894-1965) and Bankole Bright (1883-1958), he claims:

its own brand of nationalism was never as strident as those in countries like Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria or Kenya. There was no sign of the force of nationalism, therefore, which could have helped fuel literary creativity... (the Creoles) never felt that alienation or crisis of identity.. that sparked the production of some of the greatest works of African literature.' (Palmer, 2008, p.16)

Similarly Hollist echoes Palmer arguing that writers didn't feel the trauma of contact with the west felt by other African writers (1991, p.28). Hollist appears to claim there was a lack of engaged literature because the relationship with the west wasn't particularly problematised nor were writers seeking to assert themselves through an independence movement fought on a racial and cultural basis. "The literature of Sierra Leone", Hollist writes, "lacks an African flavour and a commitment to the political and cultural emancipation of the continent" (Hollist, 1991, p. 20). Hollist finds that Sierra Leonean short stories published in *Black Orpheus*, *Transition* and *The Journal of New African Literature and the Arts* (US) in the 50s and 60s lacked the protest and commitment of their African counterparts. Whilst recognising that Sierra Leonean literature lacks an African feel and liberation focus, Hollist explains that the

distinct Sierra Leonean culture context needs to be considered. Focusing on fiction, which he considers the most productive medium (1991, p.2), Hollist claims:

its treatment of commitment is interrogative rather than imperative. Due to their cultural heritage, Sierra Leonean writers tend to present social and political issues in a manner which promotes discussion and encourages readers to engage and probe, and to question. (Hollist, 1991, p.1)

Writers tend to focus more on the “interplay of character and society” and the “impact of ideology on individuals and interpersonal relations” rather than the struggle between “traditional and colonialism” (Hollist, 1991, p.11). Commenting on the journalistic focus of Sierra Leonean writing, Hollist explains that “though displaying early currents of creative literature” initially writers “tended to report rather than tell a story” (1991, p.8).

Leading on from Hollist’s study, one could argue that contemporary writing, though still extremely Freetown focused, is more ethnically diverse now (in fact most interviewees, though not all¹¹, agreed with this). Rather than dictating to or commanding the reader (what Hollist refers to as imperative in the quotation above), contemporary writing continues to question and prompt the reader to reflect (what Hollist would refer to as interrogative in function). In fact, this type of interrogative writing has been spurred on further by attempts to redress the errors of war and by the failures of post-independence Sierra Leone’s political leaders. Sierra Leonean literature does not appear to have played an overtly critical function in the past (except for Krio theatre in the 1970s) though it has been a vehicle for comment, for lampooning the ruling classes and an outlet for post-colonial disenchantment.

¹¹ Several Krio writers, for example, complained of prejudice against Krios and a growing preference for writing from other ethnic groups. Lecturer and author, Arthur Smith, agreed tribe was less of an issue now. Some of the key poetry voices, he said, are coming from the Temne tribe (e.g. Elvis Hallowell and Oumar Farouk Sesay).

A latecomer to the African literary scene, Palmer suggests, Sierra Leone has only recently reached a significant stage in its literary development due to people from the interior finally starting “to write and to utilize their rich traditional heritage... as other African writers have done” (Palmer, 2006, p.22). This view is again echoed in 2008 (p.40) when Palmer cites the novels of Conteh and Mansaray to demonstrate that “at last Sierra Leonean fiction has come into its own” arguing that what is emerging is a “preoccupation with the presentation of traditional society” (Palmer, 2006, p.22). In expressing such views, Palmer wanders into problematic territory as he opens the debate on tradition and authenticity in African literature (see Mazrui, 1992).

Here, I suggest that Palmer is overreacting to the domination of anglicised Krio literature in post-colonial Sierra Leone and privileging texts from writers of other ethnicities which he deems represent a more traditional and authentic point of view. In my view, although the heterogeneity of texts (in terms of ethnicity and location) was limited, early Krio texts constitute legitimate Sierra Leonean writing and are, by their very nature, fascinating in terms of the hybrid nature of Krio identity and heritage. They combine, in varying degrees, European language forms and codes with the vernacular and elements of oral forms (which tend to be considered more traditional and authentic, see Mazrui, 1992). The poems I discuss in Chapter 4, for example, operate between and across language, cultural and national boundaries and shift in response to the context, conditions and perceptions of both writer and reader and the arena in which these two meet. For the purposes of my study, all the texts are authentic. My views here echo that of Chabal and Daloz who emphasise that “being both traditional and modern is at once justifiable and instrumentally profitable” (cited in Prins, 2002, p.190).

For Palmer and Hollist (both members of the Sierra Leonean diaspora resident in the United States), it is this lack of authenticity that has marred the development of Sierra Leonean literature combined, of course, with the deficiency of the arts infrastructure. Palmer explains that:

To excel in literary activity more is required than education, or literacy, or mere facility with language. It takes imagination, cultural and well as national self-confidence, and awareness of and pride in one's roots and traditions. (Palmer, 2008, p.15)

In his 2008 'Knowledge is More Than Words: A Critical Introduction to Sierra Leonean literature', Palmer is concerned to ascertain whether or not a writer displays an authentic "African consciousness" in order to assign recognition as a valid Sierra Leonean writer (Palmer, 2008, p.16). Many of the early Sierra Leonean authors writing in the mid-1900s, for example, were educated in England and wrote from a predominantly English cultural perspective. Writers such as A Nicol, S. Easmon, Conton and Wellesley Cole travelled to England to be educated. Largely coming from wealthy backgrounds and content with the status quo, they were not committed to challenging the colonial presence though some did write in celebration of their black identity (for example, Gladys Casely-Hayford's *Rejoice* and Gaston Bart Williams *Piano Keys* poem, see Palmer, 2008, p.20). Hollist stresses the privileged background of these early post-colonial writers in Sierra Leone.

Whilst Sierra Leone made a peaceful transition to independence it undoubtedly went through periods of resistance to colonialisation for example during the Hut Tax war of 1898. Figures who resisted imperialism, such as Bai Bureh, are increasingly celebrated as symbols of resistance in a process of rehistoricization which empowers a distinctly Sierra Leonean narrative. The Krios, who tended to inherit the colonial positions and dominate debate and

literature in the initial post war period, however, were not all at peace with themselves, or with the prevailing conditions. Some experienced alienation feeling neither part of the west nor part of Africa. We find evidence of this in the torment of Syl Cheney-Coker's early poems (Coker, 1973 and 1980). Pat Maddy's work was also very concerned with ethnicity and the dominance of the Krio elite and its effect on Sierra Leonean society (see his main fictional work 'No Past No Present No Future', 1973).

Although the lack of struggle for independence meant that writers were not radicalised into African nationalism, such a struggle is not necessary for the production of good 'African' literature. Whilst accepting that the work of Sierra Leoneans from the interior was lacking during this period, the peculiar history and placement of the Krio people and the formation history, offered tremendous opportunities for the creation of a distinct and rich national literature. It is perhaps surprising that literature in Krio has not become such a prominent form. After a Krio-English dictionary was published in 1980 (edited by Clifford Fyle and Eldred Jones), there were attempts to develop educational resources and a distinct orthography alongside the publishing of stories in Krio, most notably by the People's Educational Association (known as the PEA). The late Victor Fanshole-Luke, a Krio linguist, worked on the appropriation of Krio terms by rebels during the war and combined talents with dramatist Raymond De Souza George who produced a play and book of war poems based on this collaboration. An anthology of Krio poetry was also published recently by the Sierra Leone Writers Series.

During the period of my study most writing within the country took the form of poetry which was also popular in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period. Palmer and Hollist focus mainly on stories and novels although Palmer and Porter's Introduction (2008) includes analysis of poems published on the internet discussion forum Leonenet by resident and

diaspora writers. The focus of this research, in contrast, is on poetry generated, distributed and read within the country.

Literature in historical context

By considering the literary historical context within which the poets and writers I study are placed, their views and texts can be understood to belong to a wider national tradition though their own work may deviate from earlier practice. Even if writers are not aware of the history of their national literature, nonetheless it impacts and shapes their work to some extent as does the changing social context. Most interviewees knew of some previous Sierra Leonean writers (see Appendix 3: Additional Field Notes and Chapter 3) but only Arthur Smith, author and lecturer in Literature at Fourah Bay College, could be said to have a wide knowledge of the national literary heritage. This also true in the case of library staff and teacher training staff where knowledge is piecemeal and often dependent on which books have been donated by local authors. Writers such as Elvis Hallowell, Farouk Sesay and the new-to-creative writing journalist Alpha Kamara, felt that they were part of a new group putting Sierra Leone on the literary map - a new vanguard, if you like, of national writers helping to forge or create a new canon.

During my field work, I noted a sense amongst writers, especially new writers, that they were poised on the cusp of establishing a new genre in terms of Sierra Leonean literature. The experience of being Sierra Leonean and writing in the country enabled them to stake a claim as a national writer and potentially be included in literary publications where their work would be preserved. There was a discernible feeling of liberation amongst writers as if they were breaking into a tradition which had felt removed from them previously. Though not fully aware of literary history, writers were starting to connect and take interest in earlier Sierra

Leonean writers as much from a recognition of shared geography and heritage as from similarities of craft and content.

Key social transitions will have inevitably left a mark on the writers and writing of Sierra Leoneans especially the recent period of civil war. The poems I examine in Chapter 4 and the interviews with writers in Chapter 3 are both anchored in the immediate post war setting and much of the creative impetus appears to have heralded from this period.

I summarise the main literary phases in Sierra Leonean history in a social context below. I also include an overview section on the civil war, its causation and implications for writers.

Post-war Sierra Leonean literature

This is the period in which the poetry collections I analyse in Chapter 4 were gathered and my field work interviews took place. In 2002, the country as a whole emerged from a civil war in which young rebels and soldiers committed horrendous acts. Politicians, intellectuals and, to some extent, writers have been grappling to understand what could have led to such violence alongside responding to the pressing social and economic issues of the day. Many writers want to document the war and think this process is just beginning to happen. Inevitably, the war loomed large over local writers and featured extensively in their work. It is interesting that, conversely, the readers I interviewed expressed strong disinclinations to read about the war.

Towards the end of the war, much commercial life ground to a halt and many writers explained to me that they took refuge in writing. Poetry became by far the most common form of creative writing with many poets also working (paid or unpaid) as journalists or writing

occasionally for newspapers. Some playwrights started working for NGOs, international organisations and government bodies producing theatre for development shows – so called ‘sensitisations’ – and radio dramas and this work continues in the post war period.

Gradually, after 2002, writers started focusing on business and paid work again. Novelist and story writers were still few¹² though several poets were planning and writing novels during the period of my field work. Following the war, writers had better access to the internet and for a short period (in approximately 2007-8) Elvis Hallowell set up an internet magazine for Sierra Leonean writing called the Mabayla Review which published poems, articles and stories. Earlier, in 2005, Mike Butscher published an international collection of stories (‘Book of Voices’, 2005) in aid of the organization Sierra Leone Pen. In 2007, Journalist Penny Boreham visited Freetown and met with some of Freetown’s writers. Her documentary, broadcast on BBC World Service, included interviews with authors and readings of their work (see Boreham, 2007 and Chapter 3 for further discussion). Author and academic Caryll Phillips wrote several articles about writers in Freetown and its slavery heritage (see Phillips, 2003 and 2007). This heritage continues to fascinate historians and writers from outside the country and Schama’s ‘Rough Crossings’ (2005) was adapted by Caryl Phillips for theatre. Two collections of Sierra Leonean poems were published in this period. The first, ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’ (2004) was a Sierra Leonean enterprise while the second, ‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’ (2009) was collated and edited by visiting American poet Kirsten Rian. I discuss both of these collections in Chapter 4.

¹² The novel I saw most frequently in Freetown was Rachel Massaquoi’s ‘The Wind Within’ published via, iUniverse in 2004. I also found a novel by poet, artist and engineer, Kosonike Koso-Thomas, called ‘Swimming against the Tide: Without Fear or Favor’ published by Lekon New Dimensions Publishing in 2004.

In the aftermath of the civil war, there was widespread relief and optimism about the promise of a new era. The Truth and Reconciliation Committee held hearings (followed by the UN Special War Crimes Court trials) while communities were supported to reintegrate ex combatants and efforts were made to promote decentralisation. The election in August 2007 was non-violent and succeeded in switching the Presidency to the rival political party, the All People's Congress or APC, under the premiership of Ernest Koroma (who has since won a second term). Friends and contacts reported a palpable sense of optimism and empowerment in the capital as voters watched the leadership changeover in response to the elections but this appears to have been replaced by frustration and widespread defeatism after limited improvements in daily life and ongoing corruption. Charles Taylor, largely held responsible for funding the initial RUF attack from the Liberian border was taken to the Hague in 2006 to be put on trial for war crimes.

Outside Sierra Leone, in the UK, Aminatta Forna published a memoir, 'The Devil That Danced on the Water' (2003), tracing the period leading up to her father's death under Siaka Stevens' rule. This was followed by 'Ancestor Stones' (2007), a novel in which the stories of four women interplay against the backdrop of a country resembling Sierra Leone. In 2011, Forna won the Commonwealth writers Prize for her second novel 'The Memory of Love'. Set in Freetown, this depicts the unravelling relationship and stories of a dying man and a surgeon. Also in the UK, a novel by Delia Jarrett-McCauley 'Moses, Citizen and Me' was published in 2005. At times dreamlike and surreal, this novel explores the difficulty of one family coming to terms with a child who had killed his own grandmother during the conflict in Sierra Leone. Few recent novels are available in Freetown except for those placed in several shops or restaurants by visiting or local writers. These publications (if known about) are generally praised and local writers aspire to replicate what has been published overseas because such

works are what succeed internationally. American publications include former government child soldier Ismael Beah's account of the war in the memoir 'A Long way Gone' (2007) followed by a lesser known young woman's memoir, 'The Bite of the Mango' by Kamara, M & McClelland (2008). Both of these depict experiences of war, the first as perpetrator and the second as victim. 'The Bite of the Mango' was co-written with an American journalist and did not receive the attention or praise that Beah's book did. As far as I am aware, Beah's book is now included in the syllabus at Fourah Bay College for the Sierra Leonean literature course.

More popular than writing, local music (fusing hip hop with local styles) has become a tool for young people's political participation and expression. Through rap, young people have become increasingly bravado using lyrics which challenge corruption and urge people to seek change and peace. Shepler (2010) cites lyrics from Innocent's Ejectment Notice in the run up to the 2007 Presidential election:

The ones [the SLPP], we're
giving them notice
If we don't give them notice,
We won't get peace...

Translated from the Krio in Shepler, 2010, p. 634. (Also see Flemming's 2004 article re Sierra Leonean rapper Daddy Saj).

The extent to which music lyrics help to narrativise past experience, play an educational role and build social consciousness amongst Sierra Leoneans is questionable, however, if we consider the kind of simplified analysis, impossible demands and combative style adopted (especially between APC and SLPP youth). Nonetheless, local hip hop enjoys huge audiences in Sierra Leone and its popularity and impact cannot be ignored in terms of influence on popular dialogue. Commentators suggest "It has become the vehicle for a decibel-busting national debate" (see Kraft, 2010). The literature I examine is, by contrast, an elite discourse

expressed in written form demonstrating a matured version of the rebellious nature of Sierra Leonean youth. As such it demonstrates the rift between youth and the older adult population (see Boersch-Supan's work on intergenerational conflict, 2012). At present, the study of hip hop in Sierra Leone appears to be gaining interest (see Shepler, 2010 and Prestholdt, 2009¹³).

A nation at war with itself: 1991-2001

Although the war started in 1991, it was not until 1997 that many Freetonians experienced the fighting first-hand. Before that, Freetown residents were quoted as saying "Did rebels have tails?" (quoted in Alan Little's 2006 BBC World Service documentary 'Faultlines'). This shows how distant the war was at first. The rebels were considered almost fictional characters by those based in Freetown whose family and friends remained unaffected. Indeed, when I first visited in 1997, just before the AFRC coup on 25 May, the capital functioned as its own mini state with heavily guarded borders, roadblocks and restrictions on travel outside. Inside Freetown, life went on in relative normality with traders, scholars and NGO staff flying in and out of Lungi alongside mercenaries (used by the, then, President Kabbah). Perhaps owing to the sea frontage and access to the airport and ferry, Freetown residents felt fairly safe during this early period.

The war started in the east and spread into most parts of the country during the course of the 10-11 year period. It was orchestrated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) who used and recruited many young (child) soldiers who often acted in small unregulated groups

¹³ See Prestholdt's 2009 article 'The Afterlives of 2pac: Imagery and Alienation in Sierra Leone and Beyond' in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. 12/2009, 21(2), pp. 197-218.

orchestrating acts of violence and looting village communities. By unregulated, I refer to the fact that there were no clear rules of engagement or moral boundaries that fighters had to abide by and death and destruction in its most gruesome expression appeared to be encouraged thereby serving to instil further terror on those who survived. Groups were regulated in so much as unit leaders would exact arbitrary violent punishment on those deemed to disobey and the best loot would move up the chain of command for fear of retribution from those in higher positions (see Humphreys and Weinstein, 2004, p.27). This gave the appearance of a senseless conflict as there was little understanding of why innocent Sierra Leoneans were being slaughtered and maimed.

As in other civil wars, such as Liberia and Congo, attackers appeared to delight in the exercise of violence creating more horrific methods and playing competitive games in the acting out of them. Such acts have left a terrible scar on the national psyche which inevitably filters into other aspects of society including poetry and writing. The playwrights Mohammed Sheriff and De Souza George talked about how specific instances had wounded the national character almost beyond repair (such as rebels gambling on the sex of babies as a game before cutting them out of pregnant women and other equally monstrous acts).

Kabbah's government employed mercenaries against the RUF for several years from 1995 but the conflict continued until 2002 and drew in both West African troops (known as ECOMOG) and British intervention in 2000. In 1997 the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) – combining government soldiers with RUF ousted President Kabbah and temporarily took over government until 1998. One of the features of the conflict was that government soldiers ended up attacking local communities and became known as “sobels” soldier by day, rebel by night. In such a context, the Kamajors, traditionally hunters (also known as the CDF or Civil Defence Force) emerged as an important vigilante protection force.

There are various explanations for the civil conflict as well as recognition that the years of decline under Siaka Stevens' regime contributed greatly to creating the conditions under which such a conflict could emerge. Under Stevens there was growing corruption, exploitation and mismanagement of resources. State employees (such as teachers and police) were not being paid for record periods and there were growing extremes in wealth. The decade before the war saw the chances of escaping rural (and urban) poverty almost vanish. Severe economic hardship without social safety nets, the dominance of visibly corrupt 'big' men coupled with the dominance of an elder system (and international media-fed expectations of youth and adult life-styles) all led to a society near collapse. Perhaps most disturbingly, this also led to a breakdown of social trust and extension of care beyond the individual's immediate family members and a wider breakdown in the functioning of patrimonial systems (see Prins, 2002, p.193). Much earlier, in 1973, Pat Maddy's novel 'No, Past, No Present No Future' powerfully evoked this foreboding sense of familial and social crisis particularly in relation to Sierra Leone's youth. Multi-layered associations, cross cutting allegiances (which switch around) and fierce resource competition are characteristic of a patrimonial power vacuum. Rather than representing barbarity and chaos, Chabral and Daloz suggest, what we have seen in Sierra Leone is an "instrumental political manipulation of disorder". Although volatile and violent, disorder is a creative and productive condition, they argue (see Prin, 2005, p.190).

Amongst conflict theories are that it was pure anarchic barbarity (Kaplan, 1994) or fuelled by greed and the desire for personal betterment rather than identity issue or other grievance (an argument made by Collier and Hoeffler in 2000¹⁴. Ibrahim Abdullah, like many analysts,

¹⁴ The original article is by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler and titled 'Greed and Grievance in Civil War'. It is a World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No 2355, published in May 2000.

problematizes issues surrounding youth and rural/urban identity. For Abdullah, it was the lumpen proletarian (the ‘underclass, poor and often criminal’) nature of the RUF base which prevented it forging a strong ideological orientation and appeal to other groupings (see Gberie, 2005, p. viii). Mkandawire emphasised that it was the urban base of the majority of the rebels and, thus, their disassociation from the rural peasantry which caused them to roam as predators rather than live amongst them (see Ellis, 2003). Others, such as Hashim (2007) emphasise the multifarious causes from internal dissonance and widespread disillusion and the inability of the state to deliver coupled with destabilising involvement by external actors. Diamonds may not have caused the war but delayed its cessation. He quotes from Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton:

The point of the war may not actually have been to win it, but to engage in profitable crime under the cover of it (Hashim: 2007: 180).

My interpretation of Richards’ seminal study ‘Fighting for the Rainforest’ (1996) was that the civil war was a crisis of frustrated youth, including the frustrated *creativity* of youth. Indeed the view that conflict is caused by frustration aggression – literally the inability to achieve one’s goals and desires due to some form of prevention, interference or due to the adoption of socially inappropriate or unrealistic goals – was originally proposed in psycho social theory in 1939 by Millard and Dollard and later by Berkowitz in 1969. The majority of Sierra Leonean rural and urban youth do not have access to education (or to quality education), they lack employment opportunities and routes to betterment and are exposed (via pervasive media) to unobtainable western lifestyles, consumer goods, assertive youth cultures and liberal sexual relationships all of which inevitably foster frustration.

Fanthrope (2001) points to “long term exclusionary processes” acting on an increasingly frustrated youth unable to exercise agency. By exclusion, he refers to rights, control of resources and access to women and marriage partners by elders and systems of local rule rooted in the pre-colonial era. In such an environment, Fanthrope suggests “the loss of identity implicit in this process no longer finds a compensating movement in modern education and employment”. Lacking inclusion and opportunity, “youth, itinerant workers and other low status individuals” the ‘lumpen’ group (Fanthrope, 2001, p. 363), pinpointed previously, are finally able to exercise agency through participating in a brutal and chaotic civil war in which previous systems are overturned and mocked¹⁵. Such a view echoes my own research on ‘Rethinking Peace Education’ (Skelt: 1997) when I found that many young RUF fighters had purposefully attacked their schools and teachers as education was no longer providing a bridge out of poverty or realisable route to self-improvement. Specialist peace education inputs were not required but a fundamental rethink of the provision of adult basic education.

Elements in each of these differing interpretations ring true. War is not a homogenous entity but its very character changes in response to events and personalities. During the years of fighting in Sierra Leone, the nature of the war changed. There were also, what conflict analysts term ‘enclaves of relative normality’ within this 10-11 year period. The city of Freetown (as mentioned previously) was a safe haven for most of the war period. Other enclaves, I argue in the concluding chapter, include literature itself which remained a location

¹⁵ By this I refer to the deliberate violation and killing of elders by rebels (who were often forcibly recruited to join the RUF or government forces afterwards). During raids, villagers were mutilated, raped, burned and ridiculed often by adolescents who were high on narcotics and alcohol. Such actions flagrantly breached all social norms and codes of behaviour.

of peace and counter discourse to that of violence. Part of my approach echoes that of Vivienne Jabri's (1996) in seeing violence as an alternative discourse – a way to give expression or vent when other means are not available). Note that Prin similarly likens conflict to a text:

The military campaigns waged by the rebels during the 1990s formed an extended dramatic text of a war between these two contrasts [...between the forest and the single dominant city of Freetown on the coast] (Prin, 2005, p.193)

If Sierra Leonean fighters experienced a chronic lack of individual agency prior to the war and harboured a generalised resentment at society for colluding in their marginalisation, violence then operates as an extreme discourse. The fact that acts of violence were committed on innocent people could be understood (or 'read' if violence can be read as a discourse) as an ultimate anomie and frustration resulting in an attempt to break and 'violate' its societal foundations. Humphreys and Weinstein, in 'What the Fighters Say' explain that the RUF promised recruits "jobs, money and women" and "sometimes more valuable goods" but the "lucrative gains" (including, of course, diamonds) went straight to those in higher positions (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2004, p.2). Ex combatants claimed they fought to "express dissatisfaction, to root out corruption" and to "bring down the existing regime" but the authors suggest that it was more likely a question of satisfying basic needs and surviving. Fighters were also given "license to engage in sexual exploitation and violence" Humphreys and Weinstein, 2004, p.2-3).

Evidently, there is no single, agreed perspective but various explanations of causation some of which such as extreme impoverishment, grossly inadequate schooling and lack of opportunities for participation and inclusion still exist today. During trips to Freetown, I heard

people blame themselves, corrupt government, greed, restive youth, diamonds, evil and, mostly, God and fate. Prin quotes a local saying that ‘The leopard comes to town’ explaining that the leopard is “long-established figure of malign and illegitimate power in Sierra Leone” (Prin, 2002, p.193). This hails back to the human leopard societies who were responsible for the abduction, killing, cannibalism and fetishisation of body parts first recorded in the late 1880s and the subject of infamous trials in 1915. Although I have not come across people using leopard analogies for the civil war, it may be a term which is used. Certainly, further research into contemporary oral and folk literature may find stories use the leopard figure to signify the coming of violence and war.

Sierra Leone’s writers are now cataloguing and seeking to come to terms with this violent period of Sierra Leone’s recent history which even if they wanted it to, cannot be removed from the national consciousness. From writing testimonials to grappling with the causes, I found authors engaging with the ongoing task of recovery and social renewal through their poems and other writing. At present, the shock of violence is still present and unlikely to persuade many of the benefits of returning to war but the inability to provide basic services and satisfy basic needs, the lack of jobs or horizons for the majority of young people does little to guarantee a non-violent future.

For Sierra Leone’s writers, the civil war was not a heroic one which drew in romantic followers. The anti-elitist and anti-western ecological African populism enshrined, amongst other ideas, in the 1995 RUF manifesto did not validate or even appear to reflect what was happening on the ground. The extent that families and communities were slaughtered and maimed led to widespread condemnation and shock especially as many atrocities were committed by young people and even children. One of the roles that writers in war can play in

such a context is to humanise - to use their writing to depict the humanity of those taking part and, therefore, avoid seeing certain members of the population as 'others'. By not distancing non-combatants from combatants, cruelty can be seen not only to reside with the other but to be the outcome of extremely limited conditions, to be present in structures and the result of contributing factors and triggers. This kind of literature has not been a key feature of the writing I have gathered though the biography of Ismail Beah, for example, may offer a more humanised portrayal of young combatants.

Literature produced during the war

Citizens of weak but modern states in Africa need and deserve room for creative manoeuvre if they are to build islands of security and archipelagos of peace within the limited resources at their disposal (Paul Richards, cited by Prins, 2002, p.188)

During the civil war of 1991-2002, most literature appears to have emerged from outside the country by writers of Sierra Leonean heritage or those studying or seeking refuge in America or UK or sheltering in neighbouring Guinea and the Gambia. Many of these writers were also contributing articles to newspapers. Residing outside, many amateur and novice writers focused their poetic gaze back to Sierra Leone as they watched it disintegrate into war from the viewpoint of an emigrant (see, for instance, *Athens of Africa*) by Prince Hycy Bull listed under poems on the Sierra Leone Web: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/poetry.html>.

Within the country, poetry constituted the main literary output with some personalised fiction and plays commissioned for social purposes designed for radio and community settings.

Media scenes of carnage, amputation and atrocity served to portray Sierra Leone to the outside world as West Africa's Heart of Darkness, a label it still finds hard to free itself from. Inside Sierra Leone, during the war, new poets and writers met and formed a poetry group called the Falui Society (referring to the devil mask which allows the wearer to criticise and ridicule anyone and everyone). The Falui members wrote and exchanged poems about their direct experiences and concerns and there was an inevitable focus on themes of war. Emerging Falui writers include the aforementioned Elvis Hallowell and Farouk Sesay and writers Mohammed Gibril Sesay and Moses Kainwo among others. Many of these writers witnessed the fighting (and worse) first hand after the AFRC coup in May 1997 and then following the ECOMOG intervention in January 1999.

The International Pen group set up a tiny office to support writers during the war with little more than a typewriter and a commitment to freedom of expression. This received publicity via Caryl Phillips' article in the Guardian newspaper (2003) and the Pen President, Mike Butscher, collated a publication of short stories, the 'Book of Voices' in 2005 in aid of Pen. Although a few Pen members overlap with the Falui writers, Pen is a distinct group operating on a more formal basis with an emphasis on all genres of writing. They also run a schools programme to encourage young writers, hold competitions and publish newsletters.

Except for Beah (2007) and Kamara (2008), war journals and diaries have not featured strongly in the writing of this period and poet-combatants have not been discovered. The majority of participants in the war were illiterate (or, at best, semi-literate). Their imaginative realms were fed by western Rambo-style movies accessed at camps, by local radio (sometimes broadcasting soap opera dramas) and by the surreal drug and gunpowder-fed release and horror of their day to day violent realities. The extent to which young fighters 'acted out' as a way of expressing themselves requires further enquiry.

During the war period, a publication of poems by local writers entitled ‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ was published in Freetown in 1995 by the PEA with the help of a young visiting student, Hannah Hope Wells, and Professor Eldred Jones. This is one of the books I discuss in Chapter 4. During the latter part of the war period, theatre was used increasingly as a way to promote peace building and educate people about malaria and HIV prevention and to promote citizenship and participation in elections.

Unbeknownst to most Sierra Leoneans, several books were published by writers in America including Alansan Mansaray’s ‘A Haunting Heritage: An African Saga in America’ (1995) and ‘The Diamonds’ by J. Sorie Conteh (2001) both of which have caught the attention of Eustace Palmer (see Palmer, 2006). The former depicts the challenges of maintaining cultural traditions for the mobile and educated protagonist, Yaya, while Conteh’s book depicts the disintegration of character and traditional morality in response to participating in the diamond trade and echoes that of Prince Palmer’s 1982 novel, ‘The Mocking Stones’. Paul Conton’s novel, ‘The Price of Liberty’ (winner of the Best First Book, Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1993) was published in 1992 by Macmillan and portrays the unravelling of post-independence politics and rise of dictatorial politics in the run up to a major international conference. Note that the Organization of African Unity’s conference was hosted in Freetown at extraordinary expense by Siaka Stevens in 1980. The novel is set in the ‘fictional’ post independent nation of Sianga, closely resembling Sierra Leone and in the capital ‘Liberty’ (which resembles Freetown) and depicts the slide into “a nation of madmen laying siege to a continent. A future of misery stretching out forever” (Conton, 1992, p. 203). Lemuel Johnson’s trilogy of poetry books exploring Sierra Leone’s history and cultural genealogy was also published by African World Press.

A literature and nation in decline: 1970 to 1990

Siaka Stevens, prime minister from 1968 (and briefly in 1967 before a coup by Brigadier Lansana ousted him) declared Sierra Leone a Republic and himself President from 1971 to 1985. This period saw the gradual deterioration of Sierra Leone's social and physical infrastructure, widespread corruption, the erosion of educational infrastructure and the arrival of a money oriented culture spurred by the country's diamond riches. Hashim, writing on state failure and restoration in Sierra Leone, explains that:

During the period of APC hegemony (under Stevens) the unfolding politics of state disintegration included attempted military coups; electoral violence; consolidation of a one party state via enticements, intimidation and constitutional manipulation; political trials and executions; recurring public demonstrations of discontent regarding corruption, inflation, political favoritism, and general deprivation; external intervention; and border incursions and skirmishes involving the armies and irregular forces from neighbouring states. (Hashim, 2007, p.185)

As Stevens became more dictatorial, the gaps between rich and poor widened further and the economy headed towards collapse while government spending rocketed. The "passionate belief in education" fostered by the early Krio settlers (Wyse, 1989, p. 53) was largely eroded in this period and respect for academics and books began to dwindle while businessmen with get-rich-quick lavish lifestyles, often relating to the diamond industry, were admired and envied.

As such, it is this period of history which is often held responsible for creating the conditions which allowed for the emergence of civil war in 1991. It is also a period which offers rich material for writers and artists and will likely feature in future literary works. Aminatta

Forna's memoir (2003) *The Devil that Danced on the Water* documents her father's political career and demise under Stevens and brought this period to international literary attention. It is also rumoured that Syl Cheney-Coker's forthcoming second novel, *Sacred River* relates to this period.

Inside the country, at this time, Stevens started to clamp down on local theatre by imposing censorship checks on scripts in part responding to John Kolosa Kargbo's now notorious (but sadly unavailable) play *Poyo Ton Wahala* which satirised politics and society in the 70s. Popular in the late 60s to 80s, stage plays in Krio drew in large audiences using dance, comedy, song, local musicians and mime. Indeed, Muana points out that:

‘the Sierra Leone dramatists... relied on folklore genres not only as innovative markers of indigenization, but also to make social and political commentary in oblique ways and therefore avoid strict and often brutal government censorship’. (Muana in Palmer, 2008, p.304)

The popularity of theatre may be attributed to the work of Thomas Decker (1916-1978) in translating ‘*Julius Caesar*’ and ‘*As You Like It*’ into Krio and to the work of emerging playwrights including Pat Maddy. Maddy was unafraid of social confrontation and drew characters from the street (rather than the elite) and wrote in Krio using traditional African performance techniques and music in contrast to the work of elite, part-time writers such as Sarif Easmon (who was a medical doctor writing in English). Maddy was the first and only playwright to have a published collection of plays (*Obasai and Other Plays*, 1973) in Sierra Leone. Palmer explains:

The audience saw these plays as speaking directly to them in a language they could understand, voicing their concerns, and presenting situations with which they were familiar and to which they could relate. Inevitably, they became greatly involved and a tremendous

rapport was built up between the actors on the stage and the audience... They [the audience] discussed the characters as real persons and even, at times, shouted advice to them. ... Some members of the audience even threw objects at those characters they considered particularly repulsive. The audience also automatically joined in whenever familiar songs were sung (Palmer, 2008, p. 129)

There were a plethora of theatre groups, some of which were experimental including Songhai (founded by Clifford Garber and John Kolosa Kargbo in 1973), Pat Maddy's Gbakanda Tiata (1968) and Tabule Theatre (1968) whose chief playwright was Dele Charley along with other writers such as De Souza George to name but a few. This was a time when playwrights entered directly into social criticism possibly encapsulating the same vigour and 'fityai' (disrespectfulness / resistance) that Shepler describes in relation to later Sierra Leonean hip hop artists. Hip hop offers a "means to engage in the national political discourse, even if by the creation of an oppositional discourse" Shepler suggest (2010, p.629). After the war, when asked about the acutely critical nature of hip hop lyrics, the President Kabbah famously said he would rather the youth were making music than carry guns.

Siaka Stevens responded to the satire and mockery exhibited in plays by censorship and the arrest and detainment of playwrights including Dele Charley (1948-1993) who was later exiled, John Kolosa Kargbo who was forced to leave the government service and Pat Maddy. Sarif Easmon also became politically active under Stevens' regime and was arrested and detained in 1970. Over time, the combination of censorship, economic decline and the rise of video viewing left only a few theatre companies struggling to survive by the onset of the millennium. The criticality and daring of post independence theatre is perhaps echoed by contemporary Sierra Leonean musicians whereas poetry offers a seemingly more muted and

elite form of discourse and engagement. Meanwhile theatre has been appropriated (almost entirely) as an educative and ‘sensitisation’ tool.

Key fiction from this period includes Cheney-Coker’s ‘The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar’ (1990), a sweeping and fantastical weaving together of the stories of various credible and incredible characters as they negotiate Sierra Leone’s turbulent history and the establishment of Freetown as a colony for freed slaves. Reminiscent of surrealist and magical realistic literature, though pertaining more to the “dazzling spectacles of our rich pantomimes, dances and rituals” and the “marvellous” nature of everyday African life as Cheney-Coker rebuts (2009), ‘The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar’ won the Commonwealth Writers Prize (but is barely known or available in Freetown). This period also saw the publication of Cheney-Coker’s first three poetry collections in 1973, 1980 and 1990 (see Bibliography for details) and Cheney-Coker remains by far the best known Sierra Leonean poet and the first to secure a single authored and published collection of poetry.

Contemporary poets and writers such as Farouk Sesay and Elvis Hallowell started writing as Cheney-Coker’s protégés with his encouragement and support. Hallowell’s work, in particular, echoes Cheney-Coker’s style and Hallowell studied Cheney-Coker’s work for his Master’s thesis in America. Cheney-Coker’s early poetry (in ‘Concerto for an Exile’, 1973) is striking in its evocation of ancestral anguish and nearly impenetrable at times. By contrast, his later poems are somewhat less compressed, his thinking is more apparent and there are new motifs of exile combined with a yearning to improve conditions in Sierra Leone. ‘Stone Child and Other Poems’ (2008) reveals the development of a more rooted social conscience as well as a vivid personal identification with landscape. The ongoing agony of Sierra Leone’s predicament and Cheney-Coker’s own response is also present in this collection. Sadly, only a small group of writers and literary enthusiasts have read Cheney-Coker’s work in Sierra

Leone and I have never seen it for sale in market book stalls or heard of it being read in a school setting.

The main novels from this period include Hunter's 'Road to Freedom' and Prince Palmer's 'The Mocking Stones' (both published in 1982). Published in Ibadan, 'Road to Freedom' follows the narratives of several Nova Scotian ex slaves promised land and freedom by the British in return for fighting the Americans in the Civil war. Arriving in Freetown they experience all manner of difficulties and deprivations and this is the story of those attempting to survive and build new lives for themselves. 'The Mocking Stones' published by Longman in the UK is based around illicit diamond mining in Kono district, Sierra Leone. Hollist, suggests this novel "is the nearest many Sierra Leoneans will come to understanding the diamond business" and the "only example of a Sierra Leonean writer living and working in the country who has clearly implicated the government in the mismanagement of the nation's resources" (Hollist, 1991, pp. 209-210).

'Obasai and Other Plays' by Pat Maddy was published in 1971 and in 1973 his novel 'No past, No Present, No Future' was published by Heinemann, London. 'No Past, No Present, No Future' stands out as a seminal work capturing the growing anomie of youth and the dislocation and disappointment of Sierra Leoneans studying and experiencing life in the UK. I believe this novel offers an extremely powerful social critique (especially in the early sections based in Sierra Leone) and is portentous in highlighting growing youth disillusion and intergenerational dissonance. Whereas Maddy actively draws from the lower echelons and appears to enjoy revealing the stark and sometimes shocking realities of the underclass, Sarif Easmon is more at home with the elite of Krio society and their work offers a sharp and clashing contrast. Such contrasts in voice are less apparent amongst contemporary writers yet

some of the same tensions exist in relation to class focus, perceived privilege and favouritism and Pat Maddy is still very outspoken on these matters despite his advanced years.

Sarif Easmon, writing mainly in the 1960s, published 'The Feud and Other Stories' in 1981 which, according to Palmer (1993) constitutes his most accomplished work. These stories Palmer describes as covering "a wide variety of themes and they abound in the melodramatic, the fantastic, the supernatural and the macabre" (1993, p.64). Usually a critic of the failure to Africanise texts, here Palmer feels that Easmon is better able to evoke genuine African and local settings (see 1993, p. 64 and also Chapter 10 of Palmer and Porter's 2008 Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature which explores Easmon's stories). Indeed, Palmer claims that:

One of the most welcome trends in West African literature in the nineteen eighties was the consolidation of Sierra Leonean literature, particularly in the field of the novel. Sierra Leone had been lagging behind other West African countries as far as creative writing was concerned. However the eighties saw the production of three novels, Road to Freedom by Yema Lucilda Hunter, The Mocking Stones by Prince Palmer and The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar by Syl Cheney-Coker – and an impressive collection of short stories The Feud and Other Stories by Sarif Easmon. (Palmer, 1993, p.62).

In my opinion, these novels are less pre-occupied with social criticism and more concerned with the forging of national narratives through literature especially in the case of Hunter and Cheney-Coker who are exploring the establishment of Freetown (their focus is less on the neglected interior). During this period it was theatre in the vernacular which took on the role of social criticism. It is interesting, and worthy of more study, that much local theatre has now been appropriated as a form of social education or sensitisation used by state and international actors to influence community groups rather than to echo concerns and highlight the failures of politicians and regime malfeasance. Had these Krio plays been anthologised and translated

we would be able to learn more about this fascinating period of Sierra Leonean drama. Pat Maddy, Raymond De Souza George, Julius Spencer, Charlie Haffner and Mohammed Sheriff are all contemporary Freetown playwrights who recollect this era of popular theatre with nostalgia. They all agreed that theatre has now almost lost its conventional audience. A set of five plays in English ('Theater in Sierra Leone' edited by Osagie and published in 2009) may go some way towards reviving wider interest. This collection includes plays by Dele Charley, John Kolosa Kargbo, Julius Spencer, Tonie French and Mohammed Sheriff. In the Foreword, the indefatigable Eustace Palmer claims that the literary renaissance we are witnessing now was "led by the dramatists" (Palmer in Osagie, 2009, p.xi). Many of the poets I interviewed for this study grew up during this formative period of popular theatre in Sierra Leone.

The heyday: 1950 to 1970

Independence in Sierra Leone was not accompanied by radical new writing. This period is marked by writers born in the early 1900s including Delphine King, Sarif Easmon, Abioseh Nicol and Robert Wellesley Cole. It was Wellesley Cole who wrote the prominent portrayal of Krio childhood in Victorian Freetown, 'Kossoh Town Boy' published in 1960. This is a portrayal of Krio childhood which offers an, inevitably, elite perspective and an Anglicised one especially when compared with literature emerging from other newly independent African nations. Palmer nonetheless considers the authors of this period displayed a growing African consciousness compared to earlier writers as well as a growing "restlessness" (Palmer, 2008, p.21). Their work included themes of corruption and political instability yet most of the texts were still embedded in the prevailing colonial English culture. Largely educated in England, these writers were mostly successful professional people (the majority of men being

medical doctors). They wrote as an additional activity, “almost as a duty they were expected to perform for their community” Palmer suggests (2008, p. 21). Poets such as Delphine King and Crispin George were writing from a protestant background and faith was a key theme alongside, for example in King’s case, themes of love, despair and faith. Her poem, ‘Child’, explores race and, according to Palmer, also touches on the “futility and hypocrisy of African men trying to behave like white men” and “the corrupt and snobbish status-conscious social climbers” (Palmer, 1986, p. 847).

Easmon’s play ‘Dear Parent and Ogre’ though chosen to celebrate independence in 1961, was inauthentic according to Palmer as it displayed western affectations but Palmer acknowledges that Easmon’s work “was courageous in highlighting the country’s social and political evils” (Palmer, 1986, p.852). Abioseh Nicol was a doctor and writer of stories and poems. ‘The Truly Married Woman and other stories’ published by Oxford University Press in 1965, for example, centres upon life in the government service and the interaction of Africans with colonial administrators. In more recent times, the civil war, social deprivation and suffering, the diamond trade and formation have taken over as the dominant themes for fictional texts.

In this period the literary gaze was on Freetown society. Writers were tentatively beginning to explore issues of exploitation within that society and excluded from it. Race, religion, corruption and gender emerge as themes along with cultural, class and ethnic conflict (often depicting in family settings such as Easmon’s *The Burnt Out Marriage*, 1967). Writers are responding and probing the society they are witnessing in transition around them. These are more established writers, for the most part, than those that I discuss in the next chapter who appear much freer, less bound by religion and less focused on the interplay between colonialism, ethnicity, class and customs. The post war writers appear more socially relevant, more interrogative and wounded. Their work is looser in style, intense and highly

personalised. Incorporating a greater ethnic mix, they write from a radically altered Freetown compared to that of the early 1950s and 60s. These writers are also probing and responding to the society they are witnessing in transition around them but they are more aware, and driven, by the role they can play in Sierra Leone's recovery and renewal.

Palmer and Porter's coverage is extensive and laudable in the absence of other Sierra Leonean literary collections. However, it is also selective and, for my purposes, lacks an emphasis on locally generated literature as well as a concern for the social function of contemporary literary discourses and motifs.

Literature in the colonial era

Palmer coins the term 'pioneer writers' for the key pre-independence authors including the educationalist and feminist Adelaide Casely-Hayford and her daughter Gladys, Crispin George and Jacob Stanley Davies (see Palmer's Introduction, 2008). Though they were not African nationalists, Palmer claims they exhibited a nascent form of African consciousness (Palmer, 2006, p.17) combined with religious devotion. Poems such as Gladys Casely-Hayford's *Freetown* typify the kind of Christian-bias of the Krio writers of the period.

Freetown

Freetown when God made you.
He made your soil alone
Then threw the rich remainder in the sea.
Small inlets cradled He, in dull black stone,
Wee bays of transient blue. He lulled to sleep
Within jet rocks, filled from th' Atlantic deep
Then God let loose wee harbingers of song.

He scattered palms profusely o'er the ground
Then grew tall grasses, who in happy mirth,
Reached up to kiss each palm tree that they found.
"This is my gem" God whispered. "This shall be
To me a Jewel in blue turquoise set".
Thus spoke the mouth of Life's Eternity
There tranquilly lies Freetown even yet.
Then God couched lion-like, each mighty hill
Silent, they keep watch o'er Freetown still.
(Casely-Hayford, G. 1967, *West African Verse*, p.7)

This poem portrays a tremendous affection for the untainted geography of Freetown, including the Lion Mountains, which continue to enrapt contemporary authors. Interestingly, her poem does not connect this geography to the slave narrative yet, whether intentionally or not, the mention of gems for today's reader is instantly connected to diamonds.

According to Arthur Smith, early Freetown boasted literature-friendly newspapers such as the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* which published writers including the Casely-Hayfords and Thomas Decker. There was also a thriving bookshop called Sawyers which stocked a wide selection of titles and published occasional pamphlets (see Smith, 2007). Literary and dramatic clubs, such as the Greenfield Club and the City Literary Institute, both drawn from the higher ranks of Freetown society, though short lived, flourished. By 1900 over 30 newspapers and journals published poems, stories and skits – mostly on religious themes as well as some political subject matter. In fact, Hollist suggests that:

the country's long tradition in non-fiction writing (in particular journalistic writing) may also have affected the technique of those writers who grew up and wrote in the fifties and sixties.

Since the introduction of printing [in 1794] Sierra Leone has produced a significant number of high caliber pamphleteers and journalists (Hollist, 1991, p.7).

The cross-over between journalism and creative writing still exists today with many poets also writing for newspapers and even setting up newspapers themselves (Elvis Hallowell, for example, briefly started a newspaper called 'The Investigator' in 2009-2010). Similarly, there is an ongoing acceptance of a kind of journalism which lampoons and vilifies the political classes. Satirical sketches on social, political and family life are common in newspapers, radio plays and in arts performances today. For Smith the concentration of newspaper publishing and educational facilities in Freetown had:

a restrictive and constrictive effect on the even-handed development of Sierra Leonean poetry. For it helped to confine Sierra Leonean poetry to the Western Area. Parts of the country were thus left preoccupying themselves with oral poetry as there was no written literature available there then. (Smith, 2007)

Educational opportunities were initially restricted to the western area with the first secondary school opening in the provinces much later in 1906. The early Krio writers were, therefore, cut off from the experiences of the interior and out of touch with African lore and the cultural heritage of the country as characterised by the poetry of, for instance, Soyinka or J P Clark.

Writers such as Africanus Beale Horton came to prominence in the 1860s for writing on political economy and anthropology rather than for writing poetry or fiction (see Palmer, 2008, p.15 and Smith, 2007). The first creative writer, for Hollist, was journalist and nationalist Wallace Johnson (1895-1965) who used literature, and especially poetry, for the vilification of political affairs and for social comment. Johnson considered himself a "politician, journalist and commentator before he was a poet" (Hollist, 1991, p.8).

With a mix of English, Fanti, Maroon and liberated African roots, Adelaide Casely-Hayford (1868-1959) is best known for her short story 'Mista Courifer'. In this, Tomas resists the western imitations of his father (the black Englishman, Mista Courifer), marries a local girl and chooses to wear native dress. The character Tomas rejects polygamous family life and embraces the western idea of family (most like the one preferred by Adelaide herself). This 'cultural confusion', Hollist maintains, is a consistent thread in the Sierra Leonean psyche and its fiction and represents a kind of literature which does not seek to divide and radicalise the reader but rather to disturb and promote questioning and re-evaluation (see Hollist, 1991).

Born in 1904, Adelaide's daughter, Gladys, became a poet writing mainly in Krio. A collection of her poems entitled (in Krio) 'Take Um So' was published in 1948 before her untimely death in 1950. Highly anthologised (posthumously), less is known about Gladys than her mother except that led a bohemian life, was schooled in Wales, travelled to America, Berlin and Ghana, married without consulting her mother, had a son and joined a jazz troupe. Both Adelaide and Gladys could be held up to inspire emerging female writers in Sierra Leone as they were capable and independent writers and, hence, radical for that time.

What is interesting about this period is the flowering of poetry albeit restricted to a Freetown elite. Whereas activist and writer Wallace Johnson embedded a strong social consciousness in his work, the 1960s to 80s saw a greater reliance on drama for commentary and popular engagement. Just as in the colonial period, it is overwhelmingly the elite that are writing in Sierra Leone today and few writers are relying on writing to provide their living except perhaps Pat Maddy and theatre educators such as Mohammed Sheriff and Charlie Haffner.

Early literature: folk traditions and western encounters

Existing traditions of participative storytelling (incorporating music, song, dance, riddles and moral instruction) in Sierra Leone began to be recorded by the missionaries and colonial civil servants as early as 1861 with a collection of Temne Traditions by Reverend Schlenker (see Patrick Muana's informative chapter on Folklore Studies (Palmer and Porter, 2008 pp 297-314). Missionaries, motivated to translate the bible, studied local languages and became interested in the language forms of folk narratives and proverbs.

By the 1960s there was rapid growth in this field which continued into the 1980s. Growing interest in literary folklore also corresponded with new approaches to its study shifting away from texts being locked in time and horizontally transmitted through generations to being creative texts shifting with each performance and performer (see Muana in Palmer and Porter, 2008, p.300-1). Stories were increasingly seen as narratives teaching ethnic values and disseminating cultural beliefs. Several MA theses (supervised by Eustace Palmer during his time at Fourah Bay College) were also published by the Peoples Educational Association (PEA) including Arthur Smith's 'Folktales from Freetown' which is, unfortunately, no longer available.

The PEA was a prominent publisher of folk narratives before the war. It published a range of languages from small pamphlets to a large, seminal compendium of oral literature entitled 'Fishing in the Rivers of Sierra Leone' (1987). This collection of stories, songs, praise poems, proverbs and interviews provides a broad overview from different ethnic groups. Some of the stories highlight superstitions and ignorance; others tell stories of jealousy between wives and misdeeds taking their toll on the individual. Some are extremely peculiar and one potentially

offensive by today's western standard of political correctness yet it provides a hotch-potch glimpse into Sierra Leone's storytelling traditions.

The PEA has regional centres, staff or volunteers across the provinces. For their 'Stories and Songs from Sierra Leone' project, they asked people to share stories in each regional centre then recorded and translated them. In 1995, the PEA published a 125 page pamphlet entitled *Lice in the Lion's Mane* – a collection of Sierra Leonean poetry which forms one of the key texts in Chapter 4.

Early western encounters

It is important to also mention, by way of contrast, the existence and influence of early western writing in response to encounters with Sierra Leone and bear in mind that this inheritance will have inevitably shaped, to some degree, the reading of Sierra Leonean literature *and* the writing of it. Early visitors and residents (including missionaries, colonial administrators and their wives, sailors and other traders and travellers) wrote letters or travelogues which contributed to initial impressions of Sierra Leone beyond its borders. These early impressions inhabited the minds of generations of visitors and expatriates and potentially filtered into education (via the mission schools). The most obvious and lasting of such literary impressions has been the idea of Sierra Leone as 'the white man's grave'. This was the title of a book by F. Harrison Rankin. The inside cover page contains the following text which sets the tone of the book: "It is quite customary to ask in the morning, how many died last night"¹⁶.

¹⁶ A scanned copy of the 'The White Man's Grave: A Visit to Sierra Leone in 1834' is available [online] at <http://archive.org/stream/whitemansgravea02rankgoog#page/n10/mode/2up> [Accessed 20 June 2013]

Many early colonists died as a result of exposure to various tropical diseases, general ill health and the over consumption of alcohol. They suffered in the humidity and many contracted serious illnesses such as malaria and typhoid (as the first Freetown settlers had) before preventative drugs were available in the west. Even writing materials and books tended to disintegrate in the dampness as Graham Greene documents in his travelogue through eastern Sierra Leone and into Liberia in 1935 (Greene, 1992). Another early western traveller, Mary Kingsley (in whose memory the Africa Society was established) wrote about Freetown in her 'Travels in West Africa' (1899), her first port of call after setting off from Liverpool:

It is the general opinion, indeed, of those who ought to know that Sierra Leone appears at its best when seen from the sea, particularly when you are leaving the harbour homeward bound; and that here its charms, artistic, moral and residential, end (Kingsley, 1899, p.15)

On arrival ashore, Kingsley comments, the stores and houses are "in a state of acute dilapidation... Here and there, though, you will see a thatched house, its thatch covered with creeping plants, and inhabited by colonies of creeping insects" (Kingsley, 1899, p.15-16). The acute sense of deterioration of buildings inhabited by multiple families and wildlife still greet the visitor to Freetown and, combined with an awareness of civil war atrocities and child soldiers, western visitors can easily fall back on the kind of negative interpretations epitomised by the idea of the white man's grave and a heart of darkness.

While Kingsley also personifies Sierra Leone as a vibrant nation of lush forests, colourful street life and astonishing variations of ethnicity, (Kingsley, 1899, p. 16) there is no doubt that the climate and infrastructure continue to pose a daily challenge for most Sierra Leoneans today (and not only visitors). Those with money drive through the open-sewer streets with air

conditioning to their gated villas and live what could be construed as the high-life. This tension of extremes, the vivid spectacle and peculiar interplay of people, architecture and geography that constitutes Freetown continue to imbue the work of contemporary writers. Sierra Leone comes to represent a kind of roulette wheel offering gains and falls: diamonds or destitution, glamour and suffering, vigour and disease, excitement and danger. In addition, after the civil war a sense of Sierra Leone being somehow blighted has emerged again this time from Sierra Leone's writers who have perhaps unconsciously assimilated aspects of the early colonial narrative.

Another notable work, although coming later in 1948, is Graham Greene's 'Heart of the Matter'. Based in Freetown whilst working for M16 during World War Two, Greene's novel describes a similar setting where the overworked clerk, Scobie, enters into an affair, becomes corrupt and then, wrenched with Catholic guilt, commits suicide. Read as an introduction to Sierra Leone, it highlights the humid climate and ex-pat lifestyle of parties and drinking as well as the corruption to which western inhabitants were frequently exposed and sometimes entangled. In this sense, it mirrors elements of Heart of Darkness in that the lead character disintegrates and is defeated outside his culture and reference points within an African context. Almost certainly intended for western audiences, this depiction of a closed community of privileged westerners set against the backdrop of Freetown remains a key feature of the early and pioneer Sierra Leonean writers too who are writing through a western lens.

Summary and thesis links

This chapter serves to provide a literary background and social context from which to fully consider the views and texts of writers resident in Sierra Leone during and after the civil war

period. This literary overview helps to situate the war as a point of change: breaking the previous exclusivity of literature and opening up the possibility of ‘becoming a writer’. The contemporary period is also characterised by a new shift away from the Krio dominance of literature. Despite the huge limitations of context, there is a tremendous freeing up of writing styles and new opportunities, and space, to write in response to the crisis and for writers to act as cultural gatekeepers too.

The period of the late 60s and 70s reveals a popular theatrical tradition engaged in the issues of the day which is now in such decline that ‘theatre for pleasure’ barely exists (Julius Spencer: *Field Interviews* 2008). Writers who grew up during theatre’s heyday are now primarily engaged with literature as an elite discourse rather than a means to engage a popular audience (though this shifted somewhat during my research – see discussion in my next chapter). Whilst Sierra Leonean literature is now “out of doldrums” as Palmer proclaims (see his Foreword in Osagie, 2009, p. xi) at the same time writers and playwrights face dwindling audiences and the current period is likely to be one of transition. I argue that the civil war opened up a new entry point and interest in local writing and fostered a heightened social consciousness amongst writers.

The war provoked a creative response and writing became an outlet for outpouring and chronicling the difficult events unfolding around them. By participating in the act of writing and meeting with other writers and sharing and discussing their work, writers felt a sense of engagement and a burgeoning potential to catalyse and transform society. At the time of my main field work interviews in Autumn 2008, there was a palpable sense that this could be a new era for indigenous writers to carve a distinct place for themselves. Of course, this was aided by the global exposure of certain individual writers, by the ability to communicate and access literature on the internet and by a longstanding trend of writers coming from

journalistic backgrounds. The free verse nature of their poetry, I suggest, was also the result of Syl Cheney-Coker's success which led Sierra Leoneans to realise they could write about their country and experiment freely with stylistic forms.

These writers I discuss in the next chapter have been schooled in (and out of) Sierra Leone and are able to draw on Western culture and education and indigenous knowledge which, again, heightens their potential role as gatekeepers. The onset of conflict and the human casualties that ensued have armed contemporary Sierra Leonean writers with a sense of purpose and social mission that was not available previously (especially as the transition for independence did not involve the radicalisation of intellectuals and writers in Sierra Leone).

This chapter has considered what is encompassed by Sierra Leonean literature and I have argued that such a national category is valid and useful. I have brought together my knowledge of recent, local writing with the known and lesser-known literature of the canon. By considering aspects of social context (including the possible causation of conflict), I have laid the ground for a deeper analysis of post-war poetry and poets who will, most likely, be considered the first generation of war writers in Sierra Leone. Many of these authors grew up during the hey-day of popular and socially incisive theatre and are involved with journalism. They have absorbed imagined ideas of Sierra Leone from earlier resident (and non-resident) writers and their literature, as Hollist found in 1991, continues to promote debate.

I suggest that contemporary Sierra Leonean literature, in particular, can be seen as an arena of peaceful contestation in which key concerns and social conflicts are exposed to examination and reflection by socially conscious writers. Writers are not using literary pursuits to espouse a particular ideology rather it provides a space in which to address and negotiate social and personal concerns. It also provides an outlet for creative manoeuvre.

Having provided an overview of Sierra Leonean literature, I will now explore in greater depth the situation and views of the writers, and readers, I met and interviewed in Freetown and reflect on the experience of conducting field work. The literature I then examine in Chapter 4 can be seen as a departure in that it represents a form of crisis literature evolving in response to crisis and also addressing it. The quality of the work varies and few of the writers have had formal English or creative writing training. Instead, rather than wait around in the hope of being recognised internationally, writers have appointed themselves. Their own efforts have propelled their work forward (by planning publications, for example and running workshops and events) and maintaining links with media, education, NGO and literature researchers. Indeed this thesis, as well as other studies, may serve to put the internal literature of Sierra Leone back on the wider radar of African literature and international literary platforms and ensure its place in Sierra Leone's canon.

CHAPTER 3

Field work: Freetown's writers and readers

In this chapter I describe the process of undertaking field work and what I have learned about the environment in which post-war Sierra Leonean writers are located. I then provide a field work summary from interviews, a reading group and work in schools. Finally, I outline key findings from this data which contribute to my argument that poetry provides a discourse for peace in Sierra Leone.

Field work approach and considerations

I had initially planned to interview writers who had remained inside Sierra Leone during the war period between 1991 to early 2002 and had stayed in the country afterwards. Somewhat naively, in retrospect, I had imagined I would be able to discover a group of writers who were unable or unwilling to travel outside but who were motivated nonetheless to write creatively in English about the Sierra Leonean situation. In doing this, I had hoped to create a clear distinction between local and diaspora writers (who are physically distanced from Sierra Leone with access to an advanced literary infrastructure and better able to travel). However, when I began to visit Freetown and meet with writers, I realised I would have to broaden the parameters for my research as I discovered many authors had been outside the country for varying periods during the war years. Elvis Hallowell, for instance, studied in the US between 2000 and 2007, Farouk Sesay went to Gambia for a year in 1997 and the late Tom Caurray went to America towards the end of the war. Sydnella Shooter went to Guinea and Gambia in February after the January 1999 attack on Freetown. Writers such as Mohammed Sheriff

remained in Sierra Leone. Some writers managed to briefly shelter in neighbouring Guinea and those without sufficient funds were forced to stay. At least two of the writers, Farouk Sesay and Elvis Hallowell, have a family in the United States. Some travel for family, business or conferences to the America, England, Europe and China and yet they have chosen to base themselves in Freetown.

I maintain that it is useful and meaningful to distinguish Sierra Leonean writers resident in the country despite the fact that some of these authors are able to travel outside. International travel and access to global literary communities online does not override the lived experience and physical, emotional (and literary) infrastructure that writers resident in Freetown have to negotiate in their daily lives. I accept that in studying writing in English I am studying an extremely small and elite activity. Although not all the writers are privileged financially they have all been educated to secondary or teaching certificate/diploma level and this, in itself, elevates them to elite status in such a chronically under-resourced nation.

The more accomplished writers tended to be employed either in business, media or academic positions. Half or more have university degrees from Sierra Leone and several have studied in America at degree or masters level. Farouk Sesay, as a direct result of this research, became a Cadbury Fellow in 2009 at the Centre for West African Studies in Birmingham, UK and participated in a conference on literature in which I ran a panel on Sierra Leonean literature. As such, Farouk Sesay tends to be one of the writers I interviewed extensively. The conference panel comprised Farouk Sesay and UK based novelist Delia Jarrett-Macauley and poet and novelist Syl Cheney-Coker. Arthur Smith was invited but unable to attend although he later visited the department in autumn 2009. I have incorporated notes from this conference

in Chapter 3 and Appendix 3. During follow up interviews in Freetown in 2010, when asked what developments had taken place in Sierra Leonean literature, Arthur Smith listed the conference panel I organised in Birmingham. This attests to the fact that research can become part of the subject you are studying. I recognise that in naming a national literature, interviewing its authors, organising a conference and writing a PhD thesis, I am concretising the idea of a Sierra Leonean literature or, more particularly, post-war Sierra Leonean poetry. However, this is part of a wider process taking place by other commentators, writers and journalists who have visited the country or are members of the diaspora. For example, in 2007, the British Journalist Penny Boreham visited Freetown and made a radio documentary interviewing Sierra Leone's war poets (Boreham, 2007) and in 2008 Palmer and Porter's Introduction to Sierra Leonean literature was published. In 2009, the most recent anthology of Sierra Leonean poetry, 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' was collated and edited by visiting American writer, Kirsten Rian in 2009.

Unfortunately, the gender balance of my research is very strongly tilted to male writers with only one female writer interviewed. This is simply a reflection of the authors I met and was able to interview. One of the authors, Moses Kainwo, has a daughter, Jeelo, who was published alongside her father in 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' and in Hallowell's internet magazine, Mabayla (which is no longer available). I sent an email request for Jeelo to complete a questionnaire but did not receive a response. Another young female writer I met at a Falui Poetry meeting failed to show up for several interviews. Aiyisha Fofana, a female lecturer at FBC, completed a PhD exploring the life histories and testimonies of Sierra Leonean women. Aiming to develop an anthology of women's literature in Sierra Leone, she

explained that girls needed more confidence to write and to know that it was a possible to write and publish:

There must be lots of women that write but more workshops in colleges would help. There is no culture of writing. (Interview, May 2008)

Other female poets I knew of, such as Bridgette Olamide James and Daphne Kaikai had both moved away. The most recent 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' collection, however, includes a much greater proportion of women writers which I applaud. The editor, American poet and activist, Kirsten Rian, worked with women and girls who had been kidnapped and made into 'wives' during the war. Though not writers, with Kirsten's help they produced poems. Ideally, those working in literature will pool their resources and contacts better in the future to avoid absences and missed opportunities. This is a problem across disciplines and projects in Sierra Leone as people tend to guard their own activities and networks. My focus is on the written word and literature in print form though I have, on occasion, consulted internet sites such as Leonenet, The Sierra Leone Web and the Sierra Leone Writers Series (www.sl-writers-series.org which is based in Accra but claims to be in the process of opening a bookshop in Freetown.

Methodology and timing

I undertook my field work interviews during the period 2006 to 2010 (and into early 2011 including questionnaires sent by email). The main body of work was undertaken in autumn 2008 when I stayed in Freetown solely for the purpose of interviewing authors and running reading groups. The visits prior to this were working trips for Macmillan Education when, during my free time, I would found out about writers, meet with them when possible and build up contacts. I attended several poetry readings and Sierra Leonean Pen meetings.

Gradually I built up a picture of the literary scene in Freetown and collected poems from authors. I sought out books, visited schools and undertook preliminary interviews with authors, artists and others interested in literature and publishing. In 2008, I arranged to meet writers to complete questionnaires at face to face interviews. I ran a reading group at the Library Board in Central Freetown and intended to run a similar one at Fourah Bay College with literature students but communications proved difficult and only the library group went ahead. Instead, I met with literature students twice for discussion sessions arranged by Arthur Smith regarding my research. In 2009 and 2010 I visited Freetown to work in schools for a literature and citizenship project. I have incorporated my insights and reflections from this work into the Field Notes Summary and all these experiences have informed my thesis. During my last trip to Freetown in 2010, I met Farouk Sesay, Mohammed Sheriff and Arthur Smith to complete follow up questionnaires. My field work can, therefore, be divided into the following time periods:

1. Short visits in 2006, 2007 and 2008: these were working trips during which I started to locate and contact writers as well as visit schools.
2. Autumn 2008: three months field work interviewing writers and running a reading group.
3. Short visits in 2009 and 2010: working on a literature project work in two state schools plus follow up interviews with authors and staff at the teacher education college, Milton Margai.
4. (UK) Centre of West African Studies Conference, May 2009: panel on 'Post-war Sierra Leonean literature: what role for writers?' This included panel interviews with authors.
5. (UK) Desk based questionnaires sent via email (2010 into early 2011)

I have included a table entitled Field Work Completed by Date (see Appendix 1) providing more detail. I have also included five example questionnaires (as Appendix 2):

- General questionnaire used during 2006/7
- Writer questionnaire used in 2008
- Reader questionnaire used in 2008
- Follow up questionnaires for writers used in 2010
- Follow up questionnaires for teachers used in 2010

Ethical considerations

In consultation with supervisors and other academics I have chosen not to provide my full interview records and questionnaire responses as an appendix. Instead I provide extensive summarised notes from these as an appendix (Summary Field Notes) and copies of the questionnaires used. None of the respondents disclosed any overtly damaging material yet there were extremely personal disclosures about experiences during the rebel attacks on Freetown, for example, and some authors commentated on other writers. I was, therefore, advised that publishing these interviews as part of this thesis was not advisable in case of any possible repercussions even though this seems a remote possibility.

Qualitative research methods

I conducted semi structured interviews with authors using questionnaires and making notes as I went along. Sometimes discussions digressed from my questions. In these cases, I had to miss out some of the questions in order to complete the interview in the time available. Most of the main interviews undertaken in autumn 2008 took between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. I also made notes from informal discussions. Combining the questionnaire form with interviews

enabled me to learn more about the respondents' experiences and get a sense of how they feel about their writing and its wider contribution. It also offered the structure of previously planned questions combined with the flexibility to follow topics conversationally. The disadvantages of such an approach are that interview notes are hard to analyse and compare retrospectively and the process of field work is time consuming. The interviewer can also bias the informant's responses. In my case, the authors knew that I was interested in the social role that writing can play in Sierra Leone after the war and this may have influenced responses. I have tried to remain aware of this when analysing results. Similarly, it is important to recognise that the responses given cannot be taken in stone as authors' ideas are not fully formed. They are still trying to make sense of these questions today.

The reading group sessions used focus group methodology. During each session we discussed reactions to specific works of literature – mostly, poems. The first session was a general discussion about reading and writing in Sierra Leone and participants also completed questionnaires.

Personal reflections

Within my field work notes I have included some personal reflections after having attended schools, meetings with authors, journalists, colleagues and friends. These constitute a form of participant observation as I have been able to witness certain literary events and classroom teaching as a participant. Again, such an approach means that my presence might have influenced events and processes to a very limited degree. My working involvement in a literature schools project in Freetown nonetheless has given me a unique insight into cultural and social processes – into how people think about reading and literature in Freetown's poorer classrooms for example. Such a method relies on the difference between observer and the

observed and therefore this method loses poignancy over a longer period of time. The loss of fresh perspective and novelty potentially adds more realism (and, hence, less romanticism) to one's research. At the same time, the relationship that develops between observer and observed diminishes the gap and distance that provide clarity to a research topic.

Indeed, over the years Freetown has lost the initial sense of novelty and newness that it once held and I experience Freetown as more disparate and less functional but recognise that this may be more to do with losing the freshness of first experience. My felt geographical experience is of increasing deterioration of social conditions, basic services and sanitation. Each time I travel, I grow more aware of the complex web of patrimonial relationships inhibiting or assisting life trajectories. Projects are exclusive as people want to hold on to the opportunities and connections they have and this includes literature and education projects.

The way our lives develop shapes the way we interpret and narrate the past. This is not only pertinent to me as researcher but also to authors' accounts of the war (and their historical interpretations of their writing) which will change over time in relation to the unfolding of their lives. What emerges as a result of the decisions I made here and the topics explored is a particular slice of reality, particular to specific times and inevitably influenced by the contacts I made along with my own bias and position. Bearing all this in mind, I believe my contribution offers a unique and specialised insight into selected poets and their writing in the immediate post war period in Sierra Leone.

As my research progressed I found that the contextual knowledge gained from field work observation has been especially useful – perhaps as much as individual interview responses.

For example, I have gained an awareness of how people feel to ‘be a writer’ and to be interviewed ‘as a writer’. I also have an understanding of the social imperative and the personal meaning and identity ascribed to being a writer which motivates literary practice. The section on General conditions, reading culture and writing places (describing the context in which writers are situated in Sierra Leone) is therefore of particular interest.

How I found writers and readers and the context to my field work

At the very beginning of my research interest, I contacted the Sierra Leonean Pen President, Mike Butscher, having read an article in the Guardian by Caryl Phillips (2003) in which he met writers struggling to work and record events. I met Mike Butscher at the London launch of a book of short stories called ‘Distant Voices’ which was published by Pen and from there learned about the work and aspirations of the Pen group. I gained several initial contacts and further developed my research ideas into a more detailed PhD plan and proposal.

I then travelled to Freetown in 2006 and started to locate writers through work colleagues and friends and I visited the university and met with Pen members. In 2008 I attended a Pen event at the British Council in Freetown and gave out flyers about my research and asked for writers to contribute their work. At this time, with funding from the Roberts Fund at the University of Birmingham, I had planned to print a small anthology of the creative writing I gathered and also select a writer to become the Cadbury Fellow at my department (CWAS) in Spring 2009. However, as the individual work I gathered was piecemeal and of varying quality it was not appropriate or sufficient for the publication of an anthology. I later discovered that a new poetry anthology was being prepared at the same time (see ‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’ discussed in the next chapter).

During autumn 2008, I was interviewed in Premier News in relation to my research. We discussed whether reading was dying in Sierra Leone which was a phrase I frequently heard. This subsequent article, for some reason, placed me rather controversially making this claim but it also advertised the reading group I was setting up and asked for writers to come forward to share their work. I spoke on Culture Radio and UN radio announcing the reading group and asking for samples of creative writing. Interviews took place in the city centre at workplaces, internet shops, bars and at authors' homes as well as at my lodgings or hotel. I planned to run the reading group at a new café and bookshop called Diaspora but later moved it to avoid appealing to an ex-pat group who had started to congregate there. In choosing the Library Board as the meeting place for the reading group I felt I had widened potential access yet, in fact, nearly all the participants were library staff and thus had pre-existing relationships and, to some extent, shared institutional attitudes towards literature. Attendance at the reading group was sporadic (I ran weekly sessions there). Most participants travelled into Freetown from the eastern Kissy area with journeys of up to two hours each way and so they were frequently tired and worried about getting home. Indeed, our initial sessions started at 5pm and then changed to 3.30pm with the agreement of the Director. At any one time there were between three to eight participants. This experience gave me a closer, personal insight into the everyday challenges of working people's lives and the commitment and resources (mental, financial as well as physical space) required in order to do what seems a simple task to a western person – to read books.

General conditions, reading culture and writing places

Freetown is a packed and, largely, dilapidated capital city clustered along the winding coastline of the Atlantic. Traffic is notoriously bad and at night the streets are extremely dark

and light is in short supply. It is hot and humid and the rainy season brings much of the city to a halt adding to the city's already horrendous sanitation and health problems. If people have enough money they rely on generators for lights and for their TVs, DVDs and computers. Corruption is an integral part of life as is the system of patronage whereby everyone is expected to support their own family and ethnic group regardless of merit. The writers interviewed are members of the elite. Even those relying on teaching or meagre journalism salaries and living in poorer accommodation would be classified as elite by virtue of their educational levels and ability to write in English.

President Kabbah was in power at the beginning of my field work in 2006. His Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), widely supported by Southern and Western Mende tribes people, lost the 2007 elections and power was transferred to the opposition All People's Congress (APC). The APC, traditionally supported by the Northern Temne people, had been out of power since the early 1990s. Participation in the August 2007 election appeared to create a widespread sense of empowerment amongst Freetown residents who felt that they had ousted Kabbah and his cronies and brought a change to their nation by peaceful means. In fact, though peaceful, the elections further embedded the politicisation of SLPP and APC youth groups who have clashed on occasion during local elections in 2008 and 2009.

During my research period the Sierra Leone Special War Crimes Court tried militia and RUF leaders and Charles Taylor, widely believed to have instigated war crimes in the Sierra Leone conflict, went on trial in the Hague. The Sierra Leone Special Court attracted international attention, international staff, journalists and human rights based NGO activity. A poem by Sydnella Shooter, one of the writers interviewed, titled *My Root in Flames* was read at the

opening ceremony of the Special Court in 2004. The Special Court completed its work in 2009. The striking modern architecture of the building became a Freetown landmark and its floodlit fencing was apparently used by locals to read by at night.

The sense of public empowerment following the election switchover seemed to be fading by 2009 and into 2010. Colleagues had initially told me “we are waiting”, “we are giving Koroma (the APC President) time”. By late 2010, this hopefulness appeared to have dissipated and public narratives divided more clearly along party lines. Many SLPP supporters quoted the lyrics from local music star Emerson’s “Yesterday Betteh Pass Tiday” released in 2009 and literally translated as ‘yesterday was better than today’. APC loyalists however said change is happening “small small” (slowly). They said roads from Freetown into the Provinces have improved, the electricity supply in Freetown is better and that problems such as rising oil and petrol prices are ‘global’ and must be endured. Indeed Arthur Smith said that “Darkness is fading out now we have light” and Randoulph coined the term “glaring hope” to describe Sierra Leone (2008 interviews).

Education facilities

Most children have the opportunity to attend primary schools (Unicef figures put primary school net enrolment for the period 2003-8 at 69%) with state schools providing free education in the mornings and secondary schools using the same buildings in the afternoons. Not surprisingly, male enrolment and attendance is higher than female. The true picture is much bleaker with many schools and even teachers are trying to extract additional money from children and parents while, in November 2010, most teachers had not been paid for 7-8 months. Transport, food and uniforms (worn nationally) require money and restrict attendance

for the poor. Many people working in office and professional jobs send their children to one of the many private schools which vary in price and quality of provision. Such parents make huge efforts to oversee homework and study, pay school fees as well as spend hours (often getting up extremely early) ferrying children to school and then getting to their place of work in Freetown's gridlocked traffic (the wealthier ones delegating the job to a driver or nanny using a jeep). These children can achieve a quality, formal and disciplined education in Sierra Leone.

In contrast, working at a state primary in the centre of Freetown and a state secondary school in the eastern Kissy area (the kind of schools the majority of less privileged Sierra Leoneans attend), it appeared very little relating to education was taking place. Children sat outside or played while teachers ate, read, snoozed or had a drink (delivered by one of the pupils).

Students were beaten for ill-discipline and often beaten at home. Many were expected to work in the afternoons for family members as well as performing tasks like fetching water, sweeping and washing dishes etc. School girls at Cathedral Primary School asked these revealing questions of children in the Birmingham schools where I was also working:

Do teachers use the stick (cane)?

Do they have free education?

Are children from good and poor homes?

When children go home do they help their parents?

Do children sell in streets and shops?

Do some children leave school because they cannot pay?

Can they play in the street on the way home?

Does their mother beat them?

Do they have clever and stupid pikin?

How does the teacher cope with stupid and clever children?

Do children get pregnant from teachers in school

Do children steal things from school?

Do children have fights when going home?

(Excerpt from questions for England from Cathedral School, Freetown, 2009)

Little teaching material is available, classes are overcrowded (amounting to perhaps 60 in a class for example in a secondary school English lesson) and assignments are often plagiarised from the most able pupils. Many children cannot read or speak English well.

Children think they read books for exams only and not to learn the lesson or heed the advice given in the texts. Most can't read well so they drop out or drop interest in literature. (Anne Konteh, Teacher, Cathedral Primary School, 2009).

At Milton Margai Teacher Training College in 2010, Literature trainer, Arnold Jones, explained that reading is seen as a function for understanding other school subjects and necessary for passing exams rather than being of benefit itself and a pastime. "The task of teaching large classes wears you down" he told me, explaining that it is difficult to deliver the basic rudiments of teaching in the circumstances teachers face let alone keep up with literary developments. He explained that a committee had been set up to investigate poor performance in English (due to the worst ever English examination results in 2008) and that he had been told to emphasise the teaching of basic reading skills. At school, drama texts, poetry and prose (African and non-African texts) are taught alongside Language Arts which includes reading comprehension, writing, listening, speaking and grammar. Class teaching is officially in English but most teachers, by necessity, switch into Krio.

An awareness of the social reality of education in Freetown reveals that creative writing is not a common pursuit (or aspiration) and that many children do not have the necessary skills to

write in English or other languages. Many of these future citizens have not engaged their literary imagination and not been exposed to the ideas and texts of writers from Sierra Leone.

My experience working as an editor on social studies teaching materials enabled me to meet curriculum and teaching experts. They were aware of the dire situation in schools whilst believing that education was an important way to inculcate basic life skills, build patriotism and lasting peace in the country. The Primary Education social studies curriculum was, therefore, interlaced with a series of 'emerging issues' including the environment, HIV awareness, respect for local traditions, human rights, reconciliation and forgiveness, nation building and citizenship. In contrast, there appears to be widespread disillusionment with education as a route to deliver a way out of present difficulties especially for those with limited resources attending state schools.

The principal university campus in Freetown, Fourah Bay College inhabits the high area of Mount Aureol in Freetown and forms part of Sierra Leone University along with IPAM (for administration and Management courses) and the College of Medicine and Health. Njala University was relocated to Freetown during the war and has split campuses in Freetown and Bo. The teacher training college nearest to Freetown is Milton Margai, 30 minutes along the coast via a notoriously pot-holed road. All the colleges survive with severely limited resources. The library at Fourah Bay College is poorly lit, very hot, inadequately stocked and often students are unable to obtain the material on reading lists. There was a new bookshop on campus when I visited in 2008/9 but it sold mainly foreign business and marketing texts at high prices and seemed ill-suited to student needs. Many students use the growing number of internet cafes to access material (and complain of cost) and a few rely on visiting western

teaching staff to provide photocopies. There is a strong tradition of students joining various social clubs (a cross between fraternities and secret societies) at FBC and in 2009 these clubs were called into question with the news of the tragic death of a student at one of the club initiations. Comments posted in response to an internet article about this from a former student suggested that these clubs had become a victim of the “post-war mentality and very deep rivalry that existed on campus” (see article by Sesay and Williams, 2009) This is indicative of the divisiveness pervading political discourses in Sierra Leone in general which I found was not, however, typical of literary discourse.

Literacy and the reading culture

Adult literacy is officially 38%, according to UNICEF statistics for 2003-8¹⁷, though it is widely accepted to be much lower. Indeed, Arthur Smith estimated literacy could be as low as 15% including those who are only semi-literate. Photocopied school texts and second hand books are sold in street stalls or ‘ground bookshops’. I found photocopied books on the English syllabus (often with pages missing) including Mariama Ba’s ‘So Long a Letter’ and Buchi Emecheta’s ‘The Joys of Motherhood’ and Achebe’s ‘Things Fall Apart’. I also found Shakespeare’s ‘Macbeth’, Camara Laye’s ‘The African Child’ and Rotimi’s ‘The Gods Are Not to Blame’. Some, mostly self-published, novels and books of local poetry are for sale at around 50,000 Leones (approximately £10) at cafes such as Balmaya and Diaspora both of which are frequented by expats and wealthier Sierra Leoneans). Macmillan Education sells school texts and readers in the city centre. Farouk Sesay claimed that the book seller on the ferry from the airport has the best book sales nationally. He has since (in 2009) started up a publishing company called Karantha (meaning *learning place* in Mandingo) and was in the

¹⁷ See http://unicef.org/infobycountry/sierraleone_statistics.html. These figures were accessed in Jan 2011.

process of publishing a primary reader for schools and negotiating with the Ministry of Education for this to be included on the curriculum when I last had contact. During my field work, there were no publishing houses. The last one, Mount Everest publishing, closed with the death of the owner 2005. One of the interviewees, AVS Komora, a Shakespeare enthusiast and ambassador for folk literature, claimed to listen to Shakespeare's plays on cassette but I have not seen CD or cassette versions of literature available for sale in Freetown.

The poets and writers I met were working in day jobs primarily as journalists, businessmen and teachers and meeting to share their writing via Pen or the Falui poetry society or informally with friends and fellow authors. Some writers are working in schools or academic settings or in community theatre or media production and several are pastors (SOJ Macauley and Moses Kainwo). Most, though not all, the writers I met had their own internet connection by 2009. The others visited internet cafes when necessary depending on disposable income.

Newspapers are available to buy from street vendors and cost 2-3000 Leones (when I last visited in 2010). There are approximately 12-16 titles. Working people often buy batches of five to ten papers and circulate them amongst colleagues. The printed newspapers are very slim (e.g. 12 pages including front and back covers) often carrying articles lifted from the internet or copied from other papers with up to half (or more) space given to adverts.

Organisations such as the Canadian NGO, Journalists for Human Rights, have been placing journalists with radio stations and newspapers to help develop journalism skills, limit bias and improve editing.

Typically articles will be in poor English and use Krio expressions for intended or (unintended) comic effect. Journalists will take a biased position and attack their opponents

using fiery language and mockery. Sierra Leoneans are lambasted for their chronic laziness, poor attitude and the 'Put him/her Down' culture (sometime abbreviated to 'PhD'). Articles highlight the shocking conditions in which Sierra Leoneans live, crimes and political issues of the day. Some newspapers carry occasional poems and papers. The Exclusive carries a story in a Women's World Section which was a favourite with the women I spoke to and some of the papers carry agony aunt sections offering all manner of advice. For De Souza George, the "sensationalism and vendetta spirit" of local print journalism turned him off reading newspapers and so he listens to the radio instead (Interviews, 2008).

Students and readers congregate at the Library Board and the British Council nearby (which offers an internet facility, snack bar and is located at the bottom of the hill from Fourah Bay College. When I visited the British Council in 2006 and 2007 they were in the process of closing and restocking the library with more business, employment and training related material. There were few literature books in their library (I found a copy of Pat Maddy's plays that had not been issued for decades). Staff complained that people had not been using the library books preferring instead to sit or sleep in a seat in a slightly cooler environment than the street outside.

Reading at home, for members of poor families after dark (usually between 6.30-7pm) means using a candle or kerosene lamp and risking mosquito bites. The frequent blackouts of the civil war years, the exhaustion of travelling long distances, heat, poverty, overcrowding and lack of adequate English have also discouraged the habit of reading at night time. It is interesting, however, that the habit of reading is also diminishing for those people with access to electricity and literacy skills.

Writing and writing places

With a national population of 5,696,471 (World Bank, 2009) and low literacy, the number of potential writers in Sierra Leone is much less than that of Nigeria, for example, whose population is 154,700,000 (World Bank, 2009). A city such as Lagos (home to many writers) has a population double the entire country of Sierra Leone.

The main writers groups in Freetown are Pen International Sierra Leone – which has a formal organisational structure. They were established to:

Reinvigorate the diminished writing community after the civil war and encourage those writers who remained to play an active role in society. It now has a large school clubs programme which focuses on encouraging reading and writing amongst young people. It also recently launched a short story competition. The Centre plays a national role in Sierra Leone and is invited to national conferences as one of the main organisations dealing with education and freedom of expression.

(Excerpt from the Sierra Leone page of the web site www.internationalpen.org.uk , accessed March 29 2011).

More informal is the Falui Poetry Society which was formed during the war period as a result of a creative writing workshop organised by the American Embassy and Elvis Hallowell (then, employee of the Embassy and recently returned from studying in the United States). This workshop took place in 1993 and helped to launch a new generation of poets as many writers mention this workshop as the beginning of their writing career (e.g. Moses Kainwo and Sydnella Shooter). It also forged a bond between the writers who attended and many of them have since emerged as ‘Sierra Leonean’ poets through their contributions to two post-war

poetry collections. According to Hallowell, the initiator and a prominent voice, Falui was set up in 1996 and referred to the “brilliantly masked devil who speaks in riddles” (May 08, informal interview). The idea of Falui gives secrecy to the mask’s wearer whose words are meant to reform society, Farouk Sesay explained. “The Falui mask offers immunity. It mediates between the spirit world and the people and enables the wearer to speak on issues and no one is sacred therefore giving poetic license” (Interview, 2008).

Many of the writers interviewed belonged to this group. Unfortunately, some members declined interviews, did not return questionnaires (when sent) or, for various reasons, I was unable to interview them. Mohammed Gibril Sesay, for instance, a government speech writer, poet and recent novelist (having published a novel in 2009 entitled ‘This Side of Nothingness’ through Mohammed Sheriff’s company Pampana Communications) falls into this category. I was also unable to formally interview Elvis Hallowell though I had many informal conversations with him in 2008. Moses Kainwo was not available for interview and none of the writers with the exception of Mohammed Sheriff returned questionnaires via e-mail. At the time of my field work interviews in 2008 the Falui group was not meeting regularly. The members I interviewed said they had less time to write and attend meetings since the end of the war. Indeed in 2008, Hallowell said the “Falui society has not been very active recently but it is living on in spirit and may be revived” and he explained that they hoped to establish a publishing house. At the time they were in the process of vetting poems for a new collection. They used ‘workshopped’ material (i.e the poems they had shared and critiqued in a form of peer review or editing). Since then, the Falui Society appears to have re-emerged as an active body under the organisation of Kainwo and Farouk Sesay.

Throughout my field work visits, I attended several poetry evenings at prestigious hotels in the Western area. These had been organised by an expatriate from the United Nations and attended by many embassy, NGO and UN staff as well as local writers. Note that only those writers with transport back from the western area at night, and able to afford drinks at such a venue, were likely to attend.

The Pen and Falui writers, though predominantly poets, also included story writers, playwrights, poets and novelists-in-the-making. Between 2006 and 2010, the playwrights I met were, for the most part, working in theatre for development. Julius Spencer (ex culture minister, lecturer, playwright and film maker who set up the Premier Media group and published a local newspaper, Premier News) explained “theatre is a lot of hassle for no benefit, you barely break even. It is better to use radio for drama and documentaries and make films” (Interview at Premier Media, Autumn 08).

Literature and daily life

Finally, in setting the background to my field work, it is important to discuss the significance of radio, film and music – all of which are popular in Sierra Leone. Everyone seems to listen to radio and there are many stations in existence some of which are religious in ethos such as BBN (Believers Broadcasting Network) for example. Freetonians listen to radio in English via UN radio (which I believe was shut down and merged with the SLBS Radio station in early 2010), Voice of America, BBC World Service and SLBS. Local stations (e.g. Kalleone, Radio Democracy and Capital) broadcast mostly in Krio playing local music and discussing political issues of the day, local music (including events often sponsored by mobile phone companies) and Premier League football. Radio has been used as a medium for educational drama via locally made soap operas and plays produced to facilitate awareness and social

change. The most famous of these being ‘Atunda Ayenda’ recorded at Talking Drum Studio and broadcast on 21 stations throughout Sierra Leone. The film industry is nascent and largely the result of work by Mohammed Sheriff’s company, Pampana Communications and Julius Spencer’s film company, Spence Productions. It was Julius Spencer who produced the early Sierra Leonean film called Blood Diamonds little known about after the release of a Hollywood film of the same name. The work of Ian Noah has also contributed to raising the skills of local film makers in the face of the flooding of Nigerian films onto the market. In the richest households and in the makeshift cinemas in the slums, the favourite entertainment is watching Nigerian films and Premier League Football matches. Local music is listened to with equal enthusiasm by the younger generation and poda podas (mini buses) and street side vendors blare out distorted, cheaply produced tracks of artists such as Emerson, Dry Eye Crew and Daddy Saj. The expression and impact of this music is already the subject of several studies including Shepler, 2010. Arthur Smith explained:

music has taken a completely new dimension in becoming a social as well as political barometer of the feelings and frustrations of the people (often exploiting the satirical modes more familiar in literature) to laugh at if not ridicule the follies and greed of politicians, government officials and institutions and the hypocrisy and double standards of other artists and the public at large as one way of ridding them of corrupt and odd practices.

When probed, most writers admitted there was little linkage at present between writers, musicians and other artists. Farouk Sesay, however, participated in a short film with journalist Lansana Fofana re memory and conflict called ‘Driving with Fanon’. In this, quotes from Fanon’s ‘Wretched of the Earth’ (1967) are mixed with poems, music and glimpses of atrocities. Farouk Sesay, in a follow up interview in November 2010, expressed frustration that people responded so strongly to Emerson’s song ‘Yesterday Betteh Pass Today’ when in

fact Farouk Sesay had written a poem with the same sentiments only a little earlier which he published on Leonenet and in the newspaper PEEP. He said:

the political elite don't understand literature and only read newspapers if it's about their opponent. They don't read long critical writing or poems. Maybe the problems of Sierra Leone are so overwhelming they just seek their interests and get out. (Interview, 2010)

The poem in question is called *Change*, the second stanza of which is reproduced below:

CHANGE

Again and again

We voted for a change

And we return again;

To scooping the seas

Scraping the land

Scratching lottery cards

Hawking our wares

Selling our souls

Ploughing our soil

Toting our toil

Waiting for God

Peeling our essence

Tilling our torment

Living our lives

Lying our lies

Dying our deaths

Buying justice

Living injustice

Extending our extinction

Waiting in hate

Hating to wait

Again we voted for a change

(This poem was given to me by the author).

In the second part of Boreham's World Service programme on Sierra Leonean poets we hear how writers met in Freetown during the earlier stages of the war when the capital city had not been affected. They tried to find a "poetic response to the horrific events affecting their country and also, of course, enjoyed the "therapeutic effects of companionship and discussion" (Boreham, 2007). Towards the end of the war, however, the rebels arrived and ransacked the capital and violence arrived at their doorsteps. Some of the writers explain what happened to them at this point and others reflect on their experiences from a safe distance afterwards. They describe their writing as a personal therapeutic tool. For example, Sydnella Shooter explains that she wrote *Lamentations* (see Key Poems in Appendix 4) "as an outlet, expressing grief about what was going on in my country". Gibril Sesay discusses how poetry enables a "disciplining" and "controlling of emotions on the page" after the war. He explains that by writing he does not allow what has happened to take over but controls it instead. Farouk Sesay focuses more on the wider social compulsion of writers saying that most writers are "evaluating the state of the nation" and are "the voice of the people". Writers "don't write for writings sake" because "most of the writing is geared to correct the anomalies of society" (see Boreham, 2007).

I contend that the writers, and writing, of post-war Sierra Leone are intertwined with the context in which they are located. The fact that they are producing creative work in this context is, itself, remarkable bearing in mind the effort required to complete education, to study and to read and write. Meanwhile journalism encourages divisive party politics and

poor standards of writing are tolerated as the norm. Extremes of wealth exist alongside a majority who experience hardship in many areas of their lives and, for whom, basic needs are not met. This social and economic reality reveals a society which is, ostensibly, too run down for literature to be valued and, certainly, for it to flourish. In such a context, literature has had to adapt and it is undergoing a process of adaptation. It has become very socially engaged thematically. Being a writer offers a new space for Sierra Leone's nascent intellectual class to reflect and discuss responses to the national predicament and recent past, often by drawing universal insights from personalised responses. The combined acts of creating new texts and belonging to a group of engaged national writers appears to promote further social engagement and activism hence, the role of writer equates to an elevated citizenship role in this particularised setting. The war acted as a stimulus and motivation for these emergent writers who, by virtue of their education and resources, chose to write in English. The later realisation that a local readership was so severely lacking, I suggest, has added to the social motivation of writers to promote social change and to validate and defend their role as writers. In the following sections of this chapter, I describe the writers I interviewed and summarise field work. Then, in highlighting key findings, I return to some of the issues raised here.

Participants

I met with the following writers during field work trips and interviewed many of them:

ALPHA BEDOH KAMARA

A journalist who has written stories for newspapers on human rights and folklore. He also writes poetry and his poems have been published in newspapers and in *Mabayla Review*.

ARTHUR SMITH

A lecturer in the English Department at Fourah Bay College since 2000. He taught English 1977-1989 and then taught English to teachers of English/Indigenous Languages and Krio. The author of many articles on literature and related topics published on ezinearticles.com and a creative writer.

AIYISHA FOFANA

Lecturer in English Department at Fourah Bay.

AVS KOROMA

Employed by the People's Education Association in Freetown where he was involved in the Stories and Songs project. Also involved in literacy work.

CHARLIE HAFFNER

Director of Freetown Players and prolific playwright.

EMMANUEL BARTHOLEMEW

Part-time Lecturer in Communications at FBC and Masters Student in English Literature.

FRED AWUTA-COKER

A writer and administration secretary and formerly a French and English teacher.

GBANABOM ELVIS HALLOWELL [ELVIS HALLOWELL]

The originator of the Falui Society, Elvis moved to the United States from 2000 and 2007 where he completed an MA (writing his thesis on the poetry of Syl Cheney-Coker). He was the Director of Journalists for Human Rights in Freetown at the time of my field work. His poetry collection titled 'My Immigrant Blood' was published in America in 2006. Further collections of poems and short stories have since been published.

JOYCE WILSON

Author of 'Land That We Love' Joyce attended a talk I gave about my research at the British Council in 2006. She wrote 'Land That We Love' "to give children an idea of the past, to start looking at Sierra Leone in a positive light and to correct attitudes

MOHAMMED SHERIFF

Writer (playwright, short story writer and poet) and development communication practitioner. Sheriff manages Pampana Communications, a theatre for development company working in community drama, producing documents and jingles and soap-operas for TV and radio. Sheriff has written two plays for the BBC and is current President of the Writer's Association Pen in Freetown. An active writer with a prolific output during the war and post-war period, he writes for youth and adult audiences and studied Rural Development for his MA at Njala in 2002. His thesis was Theatre as a Strategy for Rural Development. One of his plays has recently been published in the first anthology of Sierra Leonean Theatre (Osagie, 2009).

MOSES KAINWO

Pastor, poet and member of Falui, Moses also works for World Vision International.

OUMAR FAROUK SESAY (FAROUK SESAY)

Formerly a journalist with For Di People, a lawyer and businessman. In 2009 Farouk Sesay came to Birmingham as a Cadbury Fellow and participated in a panel I facilitated on the role of Sierra Leone literature at CWAS in May 2009 alongside Syl Cheney-Coker and Delia Jarrett-Macauley. He has completed a novel which was being circulated for review and critique at the end of 2010 and has a poetry collection entitled 'Salute to the Remains of the Day' published in America in 2006.

PAT MADDY (YULISA PAT AMADU MADDY)

Playwright and novelist best known for his novel 'No Past, No Present, No Future' and 'Obasai and Other Plays'. Founder of Gbakanda Afrikan Tiata.

RANDOULPH WILSON

Poet and playwright, first worked as a secondary school English teacher and then at Zain (Mobile Phone Company) and ABC TV News. He has written several plays one of which called 'Fatal Consequences' was performed locally at the British Council in Freetown. He was a recent member of Falui when interviewed.

RAYMOND DE SOUZA GEORGE

Actor, playwright, poet and Senior Lecturer in the Department of African Studies at Fourah Bay College. De Souza George was originally a member of the Tabuleh Theatre Company in the 1970s. He is a prolific dramatist (his best known play is titled 'Borbor Lef'). He also writes and broadcasts poetry and gospel music.

SOJ BAILEYSON-MACAULEY

Writes poetry, hymns and sermons, plays and short stories and is a Lecturer at Milton Margai Teacher Education College. SOJ used to be a member of Tabuleh Theatre company.

SYDNELLA SHOOTER

A teacher at the International School, Sydnella started to write poems before the war. Her first poem, *Bleeding Africa*, was published locally. She was invited to the creative writing workshop held in Freetown in 1993 and has continued to write poetry and belongs to Falui.

TOM CAURRAY

Once a teacher at the American School in Freetown, he obtained a degree in Literature from Wisconsin, United States. He returned to Freetown in 1994 (having been away since 1988) and wrote newspaper articles. He had started writing poetry as a boy and had later been a member of the Tabule Theatre company. Caurray had written plays (including one called 'How Dis Bodi Go'), a screenplay called 'Reconciliation' and was working on a novel when he, sadly, passed away in September 2009.

Others who contributed at different times to my field work include Louise Metzger at Gaga Gallery, educationalist and writer Talabi Lacan, Gracie Williams who organised the British Council meeting in 2006 and Alusine Showers Jalloh, a musician and community arts practitioner. Ian Noah and David Turner also helped me with contacts and information during research visits.

UK Interviewees:

DELIA JARRETT-MACAULEY

British based author of Sierra Leonean parentage. Her novel 'Moses, Citizen and Me' was published in 2005 and relates to the aftermath of war in Sierra Leone.

SYL CHENEY-COKER

Sierra Leone's best known poet with numerous collections including 'Stone Child and Other Poems' published in 2008. His novel 'The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar' won the 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize. He currently lives in Atlanta, United States. A new poetry collection and novel are in the process of publication.

Although there are a spectrum of capabilities and experience within this list, we can distinguish different categories of writers from novice to informed or established writers. I did not undertake field work using such categories but it has emerged as a useful consideration when revisiting this material. Those writers with academic, informed and intellectual perspectives (and/or with established literary careers) will inevitably respond differently and, perhaps, are more likely to have already considered some of the issues I raised than those new to writing. I would suggest that most writers interviewed tended to fall into one of five broad categories, for example:

- Established authors with international reputations - Syl Cheney-Coker, Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Pat Maddy (Pat Maddy is the only author based in Sierra Leone from this category).
- Local academics and authors/playwrights - Arthur Smith, Raymond De Souza George, Julius Spencer, Aiyisha Fofana.

- Local authors/playwrights – Tom Caurray, Charlie Haffner. AVS Kamara, Fred Awuta-Coker, SOJ Macauley.
- Recent writers with university education (plus journalistic/governmental/NGO experience) - Elvis Hallowell, Oumar Farouk Sesay, Mohammed Gibril Sesay, Moses Kainwo, Mohammed Sheriff.
- Novice writers with at least certificate level education (plus educational/journalistic experience)
Raymond Wilson, Sydnella Shooter, Alpha Kamara.

Much of the impetus for the reinvigoration of writing after the conflict and, in particular of contemporary Sierra Leonean poetry, comes from the fourth category, that of ‘recent writers with university education’. These authors are relatively new to literature (but not absolute novices). They form part of the small intellectual elite driving the arts and media in Sierra Leone and together have the capacity to initiate publishing and literary events as well influence policy and public opinion. Several of them are wealthy and live extremely comfortable lives compared to the majority of Sierra Leoneans (and compared to many equivalent western writers). As a group they can help promote and involve the more novice writers and extend opportunities to longstanding (and often elder) local writers.

Generational differences in literature awareness and reading are particularly acute (mirroring the generational differences within society exacerbated by the civil war in which many young people now in their 20s and 30s, committed atrocities often against their elders). Of those I interviewed, few people were in the 20s age group and most were a generation above and drawn from the 30-50 years age group with the average age range in the mid-40s. The majority of participants were aged between 30 to 60 years old. Most of the Falui poetry

members were aged in their 40s with some in their 50s. These writers would have been in their late 20s and 30s during the civil war.

None of these authors interviewed questioned their use of English though I met several writers who also chose to write plays and poems in Krio particularly for local radio and community theatre. For example, De Souza George ran a daily poetry programme in Krio for a local Christian radio station explicitly to access a local audience and SOJ Baileyson-Macauley and Sydnella Shooter wrote poems in Krio for educational and public events. I also watched a charismatic female poet, called Daphne Pratt, performing her poems in Krio at a poetry event held in a Lumley beach hotel (attended by western NGO and UN staff as well as some local authors). She had published a book of her poems in Krio and sold copies at the performance.

I have chosen not to list the ethnicity of writers in this list though I do mention the ethnicity of certain writers where it is of particular relevance in the main text. Interestingly, writers were at ease discussing their ethnicity and that of other writers without. Ethnicity, or ‘tribe’ as Sierra Leoneans prefer to say, was discussed openly and not deemed to be a particular issue in relation to contemporary writing. Overall, I found that newer writers tended to be Temne and existing writers from Krio ethnic groups. Amongst those I interviewed there was one writer of Mandingo ethnicity and few, if any, Mende writers (which I suspect is just down to chance). Note that I do not know ethnic groups of all the writers and this was not a focus on my research.

In this study, what is more significant is that these writers are overwhelmingly Freetonians by residence (mostly) and some by birth.

The reading group

The main participants (and those who completed questionnaires) included, Aminatta Bangura, Ibrahim Jakema, John Kallon, Memunata Samura and Theresa Cole. All except Ibrahim (who was a sixth form student retaking his WASSCE exams) held posts at the Sierra Leone Library Board including teaching, library assistants and confidential secretary and were educated to Diploma or Tertiary level. Nearly all the readers worked at the library and had access to more books than the average Sierra Leonean. Reading group participants were, on the whole, visibly poorer than the writers interviewed. Their everyday frustrations (e.g. transport hold ups, tiredness, illness and money issues) spilled over into our meetings and was a constant presence during the discussions of texts.

Reading habits of writers and readers

The writers interviewed claimed to be influenced by Achebe and Shakespeare plus one or several of following authors and book titles: Soyinka, Rotimi (specifically 'The Gods are not to blame'), Keats, the Romantics, John Donne, Walt Whitman, Frederick Forsyth, Robert Ludlum, Sidney Sheldon, Alice Walker, Ngugi ('The River Between'), Jeffrey Archer and the theatre work of Stanislavsky. Sierra Leonean writers of influence included Syl Cheney-Coker (for his poetry), Dele Charlie (for his plays) and Kosonike Koso Thomas (a contemporary Freetown writer who had recently self-published a novel, 'Swimming Against the Tide' and also wrote poetry). Many readers also said they read the Bible and Koran.

Reading group members claimed to have read (in the last year) Ludlum, short stories in the newspapers, 'The Life and Times of J F Kennedy', 'Julius Caesar' (this was quoted by almost everyone), 'Hamlet', George Eliot's 'Silas Marner' and Achebe's 'A Man of the People'.

Also mentioned was a novel ‘The Wind Within’ by Rachel Massaquoi (a Sierra Leonean resident in the United States) had been distributed to the library. Many members frequently re-read their favourite books partly as a result of limited availability. One respondent had read “Julius Caesar and How to Cast out Demons” during the last six months. Another young reader had read ‘The Truth and Reconciliation Report on Sierra Leone’ and felt that all Sierra Leoneans would benefit from reading this. Readers tended to revisit literature from their own schooling (e.g. Shakespeare) combined with religious and political non-fiction. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction did not seem particularly important to readers probably due to the lack of reading material available.

In such a setting, literature becomes a specialised activity and there is a dichotomy between the fact that much contemporary writing is anchored to the social context and yet it is also alienated from that context because the relationship with readers is so limited.

Field work summary

When it came to summarising extensive notes, quotations, observations and analysis taken from interview and questionnaire responses, reading group sessions and work in schools, I found it helpful to gather my notes under four broad question areas:

- What is Sierra Leonean literature?
- Is there a war literature in Sierra Leone?
- What is the social role of the writer in Sierra Leone?
- How does literature contribute to peace in Sierra Leone?

Due to space considerations and the repetitive nature of cataloguing many similar responses to the same questions, I have included only brief summaries and selected quotations on each topic. However some Additional Field Notes are supplied in Appendix 3 for further reference

and evidence of field work undertaken. I have also used examples from field work, where appropriate, in other chapters. Surprisingly, perhaps, my conclusions are only partially informed by this information and have come more from having reflected on field work insights after completion, from consideration of texts, context and from exploring the wider role of the writer and where this may intersect with functions of conflict transformation and citizenship.

WHAT IS SIERRA LEONEAN LITERATURE?

Knowledge of the existing canon of Sierra Leonean literature varied between new and existing writers (see lists of texts in Appendix 3). Some Faliu writers were interested in discovering earlier Sierra Leonean authors in order to locate themselves within the wider national tradition. When I undertook these interviews (mostly during extended field work in autumn 2008 unless otherwise stated) there was a palpable sense of literature being in the making. It seemed as if there was a literary break with the past. Most participants felt that Sierra Leone was just beginning to get on the literary radar and earn its place as a literature in its nascent stage starting with poetry. By the time of our follow up interview in 2010, Arthur Smith stated “In a certain disparate sense, yes [Sierra Leonean literature] is in the process of being formed, there is an evolution... Sierra Leonean literature is “very reality based and social based”. Echoing Palmer’s concerns, discussed in Chapter 2, Smith states:

if you read the works of Sierra Leonean writers you will realise that what most of them are talking about is distinctly about the Sierra Leone situation – but not much drawing on Sierra Leonean folklore and idioms.

Mohammed Sheriff said Sierra Leonean literature does not exist yet except for poetry (e.g. by Faliu members) and drama which seems to be evolving as known Sierra Leonean literature.

“Poetry is easier to write and produce and covers a range of issues which relate to people. Novels will come later” (2010).

There was a sense that if the right ingredients were available (such as publishing, editing facilities, funding, improved literacy and better English provision in schools) then a national literature would blossom. Poets, in particular, sensed they were a vanguard, writing at a critical juncture when literature was in transit, in a new and socially-useful phase at a time when the national psyche was in need of positive cultivation. These writers (from the group previously identified as ‘recent writers with university education’) felt they could become the first generation of modern Sierra Leonean poets, or war poets acting as gatekeepers to the culture and spirit of the nation: Indeed Elvis Hallowell explained that he felt “part of a ‘new vanguard of writers capable of revamping a failed literary tradition”.

What appears to be missing is the legitimisation of this writing as the national literature by Sierra Leonean readers. Indeed, the crisis of illiteracy and the decline in reading was frequently cited as an obstacle for writers though in only one case, that of the student and lecturer, Emmanuel Bartholemew, did it dissuade him from writing. Some writers, such as Raymond De Souza George and Tom Caurray talked about increasing orality while Charlie Haffner claimed that “Reading for pleasure is dying. If the President wants people to change attitude he can’t do it by writing in newspapers he needs theatre”. He suggested there was a recognisable trend towards increased oralisation in society with radio shifting roles and theatre working with communities and comedians too. “Reading is not dead”, Charlie argued because “people read scantily, some schools are encouraging reading but reading for pleasure

is dying”. Randoulph Wilson agreed that people don’t like reading and writing and suggested texts be translated into movies, drama and song in order to capture audiences:

Literature and the arts is now shifting into being for education rather than pleasure. People read text messages, people don’t read literature in schools. People say they fall asleep when they start reading.

During this study, certain writers recognised the need to be socially active in order to create an internal readership, preserve Sierra Leonean literature and renew interest in local literacy and reading. Certainly, Sierra Leone Pen, Falui, the Library Board and the PEA were aware of these challenges along with Arthur Smith and Farouk Sesay. Having listened to participants describe literary developments in Kenya at the CWAS conference in Birmingham in 2009, Farouk Sesay asserted “We need a strategy to guarantee the survival of writing... Sierra Leonean writers should go into schools and share their craft and aims as writers in the future”. However, towards the end of my research in 2011, more literature was being introduced on SLBS television (as Elvis Hallowell became the new Director of the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service) and plans for ‘Reading Sierra Leone’ were in place for the fiftieth anniversary celebrations for independence. A new primary school literature reader had also been prepared for schools with pressure on the education ministry to adopt it for the national curriculum.

Reading group members knew of some locally published authors and earlier works but the general consensus was that literature from Sierra Leone was likely to be poor quality, probably about suffering and best avoided. Notably, this was also the view of English students at Fourah Bay College though I ascertained that this was expected of local (as opposed to international) Sierra Leonean writers. Even Arthur Smith claimed “Sierra Leonean literature

is very, very poor when compared with other West African literatures”. This ingrained and tremendously self-defeating prejudice adds another obstacle for local writers. Nonetheless, poems from the ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’ collection (2004) were, in fact, appreciated by both audiences. Exposure to these poems relating to the local context actually prompted pride amongst reading group members who thought similar poems should be part of school curricula. Despite initial reluctance, readers became animated and responsive when we read poems relating to the experience of conflict and they wanted to relate their own stories. Readers felt such poems were important as emotional records, reminders of the past and to enable others to understand the enormity of what took place and affected so many inhabitants. Many readers, then, started to write their own poems realising that they, too, could be writers.

The recent publication of Sierra Leonean poetry collections (see Chapter 4) and national literary criticism (Palmer and Porter, 2008) attest to the forging of a recognisable post-war literature albeit a small one. At present, novice writers are in a position to become part of this emerging body of literature and to contribute and participate in literary discourse. Similar writers in the UK, France or the United States by comparison would be extremely unlikely to see their early work reproduced in volumes of national poetry. I found there was a very strong and positive identification as Sierra Leonean writers amongst all interviewees. It is hardly surprising, then, that writers did not challenge the label of ‘Sierra Leonean’ author as such a label elevates them to the level of national writers and enables them to enter the wider (and more selective) arena of African and international authors and enjoy the benefits associated with membership of that arena. Adopting the label of Sierra Leonean writer does not exclude adopting other labels too and most writers claimed to be *all* the following in questionnaires and interviews:

A Sierra Leonean writer

An African writer

A writer

Tom Caurray, however, felt he was “just a writer, not a Sierra Leone writer”. He said “I am in a tunnel and do not think re Sierra Leone when I’m writing”.

WAR LITERATURE AND THE IMPACT OF WAR

This topic area sought to explore whether local writers and readers could distinguish a literature of war within a society that is saturated with the very real experience of war. I also asked writers about the direct impact of the conflict on their lives and writing.

Whether intentional or not, the civil war has tended to eclipse other themes as the writers and readers I interviewed have lived through a period of violent conflict which affected their homes, families, working and writing opportunities. The war also frames the way foreign audiences approach a Sierra Leonean creative work. Recent publications reveal a willingness to recognise the overriding theme of conflict; for example, in the naming of the recent poetry collection ‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’ (although this was the title of a poem by Tatafway Mani Tumoe in the earlier ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’ collection and the choice of naming may have been the American editor’s decision). Most authors agreed that poetry has been the primary tool for recording the war, drama has been the key medium used educationally in communities whilst music has offered an arena for popular youth expression.

All participants believed that there ought to be a Sierra Leonean war literature. Arthur Smith said that “Biafra was 40 years ago, Sierra Leone’s war was 7 years ago so there is not much writing about the war yet” and there is “likely to be much more amateur material” (2009). The

following year Smith reiterated this stating “Literature around the war is not large enough yet. Let’s wait and see...” At the 2009 CWAS Conference, Cheney-Coker was adamant, however, that war literature should not be a badge of identification for people. Alpha Kamara said that “we need war literature as Sierra Leoneans need to be made to know what happened so it cannot be repeated”. When asked, who wants to read this literature? He answered “the audience will come later”.

The readers I worked with had no conception of a Sierra Leonean war literature and, in fact, recoiled from reading about the war. They claimed to feel alienated and even chastised when exposed to local authors who, they claimed, were usually motivated to write as a means of ministering to fellow Sierra Leoneans about recent history, social ills and the need for attitudinal change. The readers craved entertainment and literary escape which they claimed were far from paramount in local writing. In reflection, I suspect that the shared acknowledgement of events and emotive experiences helped the reading group to bond. My presence, too, as an outsider acknowledging their recent experiences aided the trust that was built up within the group. Out of a range of local poems I had selected dealing with themes ranging from shanty towns, food, rain and war the most discussion generated was in response to Mohammed Gibril Sesay’s poem *On Being Commissioned to Pray* (published in ‘Songs that Pour the Heart’, 2004). This ironic poem, about the government setting up prayer committees in an attempt to turn around the conflict, led to much animated discussion and shared frustrations about the church and government amongst group members. The reading of the poem out loud by Sierra Leonean voices also gave the poem more poignancy than I had at first recognised (see full poem in Appendix 5).

The readers were notably more relaxed when reading poems about culture, traditions, landscapes and the situation of women, for example, than those requiring difficult recollections and reminders of the civil war. Readers resisted yet engaged with poems that aimed to teach, warn or document trauma but much preferred poems that presented a positive sense of being Sierra Leonean. For these readers, the war not only led to a lack of reading opportunities and available literature but it coloured what is written with an unappealing social realism.

Raymond De Souza George discussed how he wrote a collection of illustrated poems entitled Words of War under a British Council commission for a drama production called “A Jes De Memba” (Recollections)” performed at Fourah Bay College in January 2007. Describing how “some readers almost felt retraumatised” after reading it (I, too, had found it extremely hard to read), De Souza George said he wanted “to capture the spirit of the times and bring about social change. Most people shed tears and his students were divided”.

Overall, it would appear that contemporary Sierra Leonean literature (in the period I have studied – the first 10 years after the conflict) *is* overwhelmingly war literature. There are some poems about hardship, relationships, history and geography but I would suggest these, too, be subsumed within the broad category of post-war literature by virtue of their placing in time. For these writers war has been a defining moment adding gravitas to the role of national writer.

Arthur Smith suggested that the “war stimulated writers to look at war and other topics” although in terms of his own writing output he felt the war had “stolen” his creativity. By contrast, Alpha Kamara started writing poetry during the war and believes that exposure to war stimulates creativity. At this time, Alpha’s father had “been made poor” and Alpha had to

fend for himself and couldn't pay for his education. Poetry was Alpha's response: "I was born in Sierra Leone, I had nowhere to go, I had to express it". Alpha also remarked on how organisations starting using the arts for giving messages at this time including the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Charlie Haffner said that the "war made me go into theatre full time" after having been a Geography and Social Studies teacher.

In Randoulph Wilson's case the war "created more room to write" and stimulated him to begin writing poetry in 1997-8. Had it not been for the war he wouldn't have written poetry. The war was a rude awakening (the title of one of his poems), it "made people want to sit and write these things'. Sydnella Shooter, also started writing poetry at this time and joined the Falui group. SOJ Macauley "used writing to de-stress during war. Writing allows you to use experience and put in the recycle bin that writing gives you". He said that there was a proliferation of artists and songwriters after the war in particular. It is "good to write about it, it is necessary – if writing is trying to heal the nation". For Elvis Hallowell, the experience of war "fired the imagination". Poetry was fighting the "collective evil" eaten into the generation. "We could shoot bullets of poetry" Hallowell enthused.

Some writers recounted harrowing experiences. When rebels attacked Freetown on January 6th 1999, SOJ Macauley was asked to leave his house and taken at gun point. They took money and burnt houses. His family got across to a safer part of town and "spent the night sitting by the cotton tree". Tom Caurray was held by rebels in Freetown and could never sleep properly afterwards. For years he saw a neurologist but the drugs he took affected him and he was never fully well again. Mohammed Sheriff recounted his flight across Freetown with his family to then come face to face with rebels whom he had to ask help with an injured woman in his group.

For Syl Cheney-Coker “the agony of it [the war] is all in ‘Stone Child and Other Poems’. He stated:

War deepened my voice, challenged me to a greater sense of responsibility about the power of literature as the only true recording of man/women’s foibles and redemption in a world of naked ambition.

Many novice and existing writers were stimulated to write having witnessed and lived through a period of conflict. Farouk Sesay explained when he first read *At Tellu Bongor* at the British Council in Freetown, “Everyone was quiet” because they, too, had witnessed those same images of Tellu Bongor which horrified Sierra Leoneans with the realisation of what was taking place. He suggested that “No writer deliberately uses war, war stimulates literature and creativity”. In this sense, the war led to a creative awakening and honed a new focus and role for writers (in effect writers as peacemakers) when writers had not come together, previously, as a shared body with an identifiable discourse. Although not explicitly named in their responses, these writers represent a generation ‘bearing witness’. They share a history which dominates their work thematically and a present which is constantly being negotiated in the imagination and disseminated through hopes and depictions in their writing and discourses. The war, according to Smith, has produced a “literary catharsis” of sorts:

The conviction that any country that has gone through war will give rise to some rebirth in creative productions has gained currency after the spurt of literature that emerged after the Biafran war. But in Sierra Leone it is in the music and film sector that this spurt of creativity has been felt thus creating a great impact satirizing various aspects of society thus effecting reforms (2010).

When asked if they were tired of war writing, responses were mixed. Most writers said the task had only just begun whereas readers wanted to avoid any literature about the war though

they agreed there needs to be a war literature as a form of warning to future generations and to document history. Mohammed Sheriff explained he didn't want to focus on the war but found that "something sparks off and I cannot avoid it". Farouk Sesay, too, claimed "even if it is not in the foreground, the subtext is war... it is a dominant theme that is difficult to discard". In 2010 Farouk Sesay added "we are now dealing with the fallout" and talked about how he had recently written about the incidence of rape and how "the violence of war is echoed still today". Alpha Kamara said he was not tired of writing about the war.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF WRITERS

There was a strong correlation of response to questions about the function of writers. Most writers suggested variations on writers should inform, educate and entertain (for example, Randoulph Wilson claimed the function of writers was to "entertain, to correct society and to inform"). All the writers interviewed assumed that their role as a writer was to contribute to society. Writers based outside the country, such as Jarrett-Macauley and Cheney-Coker, defended their artistic freedom first yet were drawn to engage with what Achebe calls "the task of re-education and regeneration" (Achebe, 1975, p. 73) facing Sierra Leonean society. For example, Jarrett-Macauley suggested that African born writers may seek to promote social change but that "it should be a personal choice" whereas the response of Sierra Leonean based writers was to assume it to be a duty. Indeed, the belief that writing is socially and politically useful, I suggest, is taken for granted amongst writers in Sierra Leone yet the specificities of how writers actually impact society did not appear to have been investigated or significantly problematised.

Amongst Sierra Leonean writers there is an assumption that literature can raise aspirations and that the development of the creative imagination is a progressive human goal. There is

also an assumption once someone is educated and literate in English that it equips them an authority to speak on societal issues assuming an acquired wisdom. Undoubtedly social conditions and the recent experience of civil conflict has led to an overemphasis on the educative role of creative writers who might well be writing thematically different work of better quality if effective social, educational and publishing infrastructure were in place and a local readership existed. Were social conditions to improve and better channels of communication to exist between writers and society, writing might adopt more of an entertainment role.

Writers arrogate a role for themselves to act as a check on the excesses and shortcomings of both citizen and nation while novice writers, in particular, tend to adopt a didactic tone in their writing. As a whole the authors interviewed were unclear exactly *who* they write for i.e. the internal population or an international English audience (the latter being more prevalent due to potential international recognition, travel and new income opportunities). They subsist as a group that write, read each other's work, perform and discuss their work and Sierra Leonean issues through the gaze (and from the space they occupy) as Sierra Leonean writers.

AVS Koroma defined a Sierra Leonean writer as "a patriot who describes issues critically and is devoid of any bias or malice". He believes writers can bring social change because people become "better informed, sensitised and educated about the ills of society and it lays a foundation or basis for solutions" (2006). Sydnella Shooter seeks to make a "meaningful contribution to build a nation ruined by war" through her writing yet at the same time wants to leave the war behind. She sees writing as a way to "express deep thoughts and communicate experiences, to pour out what is in you for others to experience".

For Arthur Smith the individual role of the writer is “to entertain, teach and inspire high ideals”. The writer is the “trumpeter of the existence of Sierra Leone creatively, with a Sierra Leonean identity trying to have a voice in the world”. The existing condition of writers, however, means that:

you are disenfranchised, threatened by being readerless hence in a position of weakness and those who can read and write may not be interested. You are isolated unwittingly becoming elitist without meaning to be. If we only write about elite interests then literature becomes isolated. Even the elite are of the people and should talk not about the good life but all problems social and political.

Arthur Smith admitted that being a writer in Sierra Leone is “a challenge”. This challenge is:

wrestling the nation from a downward slide into illiteracy and ignorance tied up with abject poverty – reinforced by impoverished minds that cannot read or listen to other voices. [There is a] very limited and unprogressive mindset.

In 2010, Smith added “A reading country is a more development oriented country. The writer has a duty to go beyond just writing and raise national consciousness, public spiritedness and literary consciousness”. Similarly, Farouk Sesay suggested the role of writer is to “reawaken the consciousness of the people”.

Mohammed Sheriff considers himself an ‘engaged writer’ in that he “writes all the time, is committed and determined to see his writing reaching out to audience and make a difference”. Creative writers are almost always engaged in other professions so whether they are socially engaged or not depends on what their other work is. However, he also stated “You can’t avoid social responsibility if you are educated and can write.” Sheriff views his writing role as a form of social and development action.

Pat Maddy claimed that “As a writer, I want to know where the wealth is going, what kind of education people are getting and to be able to bring that consciousness so people know their rights”. He said his plays ‘Big Berrin’ and ‘Big Breeze Blow’ (both from 1984) “all happened – lawlessness, killing and raping is still here”. Maddy complained that some people produced “pseudo elitist plays whereas he used people from the street”. He was very frustrated with the lack of interest in literature and the decline of reading. “People who don’t read are becoming librarians” he complained “it’s crazy.”

De Souza George claimed he is “writing for and to the people” however he felt that writers are divided concerning whether they are the voice of the people or not:

Maybe the idea of being a voice for the people no longer holds as people have radio voices and music and are not listening or reading their authors.

According to De Souza George, there is a switch to arts for development and so people are writing for different audiences and with particular messages. His own motivations are very strongly geared to social improvement yet, as with other authors, the means for achieving this goal are not easily available: “If writers are convinced about the messages they preach, their commitment will induce the necessary atmosphere (to bring about social change)” De Souza George claimed.

Aminatta Bangura said “novels improve my English and help me know more about my culture”. She suggested that the best way to increase literacy and reading was to “decrease sports activities” and “close most cinema venues”. Memunata Samura said that literature helps “motivate people to read and learn more about society.” Other reading group members suggested the following purposes for literature:

“to know more about society, culture, practices”

“to help us know more re cultural behaviour, things happen in everyday lives,
“to motivate people to read and learn more”
“entertainment, social criticism and education” (John Kallon)

The fact that drama (in Krio and other indigenous languages) is thriving as a tool for community development promoted ambivalent responses amongst writers with those working in this field tending to defend it as a new incarnation of Sierra Leonean drama. The role of the writer, for Farouk Sesay, “should not be to work on sensitisation. Commercial theatre has been swallowed by sensitisation which kills creativity and restricts it. Theatre needs finance.” Tom Caurray talked of playwrights becoming “theatre messengers” switching from writing to represent the masses to selling messages to masses. “Authorial authority is gone” he complained. “People must be suspicious of theatre. Entertainment has become about education and likewise education has become entertainment”.

Writers value and actively enjoy the unique space that writing and **‘being a writer’** in Sierra Leone provides. In fact, Elvis Hallowell recalled that, during the war, they “talked more about what it meant to be a poet rather than representing people”. He also alluded to a sense of belonging to a tradition of revolutionary African poets:

The Sierra Leone civil war heightened consciousness and people weren’t occupied in other ways so they met, write, drank, talked and read Nigerian Literature for solace, we compared ourselves to Christopher Okigbo, JP Clark, the Senegalese negritude poet Senghor and Okot p Bitek. Literature in the war was full of fire.

Questions on the social function of the writer prompted further discussion on the crisis of readership which was raised as a constraint. The decline of reading was interpreted, initially, as another symptom of national malaise rather than something that writers could seek to

change by actively supporting or initiating literacy campaigns or translating their work into audio programmes in local languages, for example. Writers from the group identified as ‘recent writers with university education’ are becoming ambassadors for literature in order to promote the conditions in which their writing may be able to reach, and potentially influence, more Sierra Leoneans as well as to gain respect and popularity as national writers.

Although writers assume a broad social role as distinctly Sierra Leonean writers, there is a thematic disjuncture between writers and the populace. While Sierra Leoneans crave entertainment and escape (hence the popularity of Nigerian films and Premier League football) writers continue to produce socially motivated literature which people are either unable or unwilling to read. Writers are aware that Sierra Leoneans are becoming saturated with educational messages and advice and less aware that their own writing often leans towards that direction even if it is not commissioned as a form of sensitisation.

HOW LITERATURE CONTRIBUTES TO PEACE

Connections between literature and peace in Sierra Leone had not been considered in depth although writers assumed that such a link exists (or should exist) believing that literature about the civil war may deter future generations from venturing into conflict, for example. All writers claimed that literature is essential for social progress and recovery.

Song and drama, poetry and short story have had the most impact on shaping society De Souza George explained. The first two easily encourage more popular participation than the others. Indeed, Raymond sees “plays, poetry and radio in a triangle of their own together” (May 2006). Since the war, Raymond said, “growing out of writing for entertainment has been a realisation that writing is an effective vehicle for messages”. Now he thinks literature:

shouldn't be about futile pleasures. There is too much 'la-di-da', uncontrolled celebration, discos and picnics people have forgotten the seriousness of the past.

De Souza George is also convinced that improvisation in theatre is very powerful: theatre can be seen "as an arena to reveal issues in war – such as violations". Because theatre can have more than one ending it is particularly powerful as you can ask the audience to develop themes and then improvise them" he explained.

Cheney-Coker, in 2009, said that literature used to be "a healing balm" in Sierra Leone "the wonderful marriage of hope and unity. I believe there is a hunger for the magical word in Sa. Leone – people will respond to the magic if they have resources." Yet eventually Cheney-Coker concluded that theatre:

is perhaps the best vehicle for the journey from war to peace. For one thing, it has a visual effect – people acting out, creating dialogue, delivering monologues or mellifluous incantations to the best in us. At the end of a play dealing with the deadly chasm into which wars throw us, and how people strive to get out of it, I believe is always the beckoning image of peace.

Haffner, likewise, claimed that theatre offers the best arena for re-imagining peace and war and is the best form of education for "conscientising, so people can see themselves in their own language, in a huge mirror on stage". For Tom Caurray, street theatre and skits for peace contribute best to the way war and peace are imagined within Sierra Leone. He suggested Sierra Leone needs to develop a nation of "contented, civilised, refined beings. If we read or watch a film re Idi Amin we learn by other peoples experiences". Caurray lamented: "Literature is the most potent means to change people into decent beings but the opposite has happened.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley said that her novel was being taught in the United States on English literature, gender and peace studies courses and is being used in schools and the media. In this way she feels her writing can help “assist people in reflecting on their experiences of war and overcoming some of the trauma”. Delia also felt that the characters in ‘Moses, Citizen and Me’ (2005) who are dealing with war and peace “touch us in a vicarious manner”. Although Delia does not like to be limited by a social agenda she admits her novel contains evident social and political content:

I leave the reader to decipher the message. However I note Moses, Citizen and Me as the most overtly political in dealing with civil war, the use of child soldiers, governance, freedom and democracy in a variety of ways (2011).

In schools, teachers do not use literature as a vehicle to teach citizenship, history or peace education. In fact, during my time in Freetown schools, a literature teacher at Kissy Secondary School told me that literary texts tend to be read for exams only and there is no emphasis on the enjoyment of literature or on how it may add to one’s aspirations, values or social conscience. By contrast a literature teacher in a school in Birmingham, UK, recently suggested that literature

offers a personal insight into other people’s worlds which we can’t access otherwise and reading brings up human and social issues to discuss which may add to cohesion and peacebuilding¹⁸.

¹⁸ Informal discussion with English Literature Teacher, Georgia Preston Sell, Cadbury Sixth Form College, Birmingham, UK, 15 October 2010.

Key findings

Certain central themes are reinforced in the Field Work Summary; there is a compelling social motivation to write, the war represented a literary catharsis, writers identify themselves as national writers yet there is growing divergence between writer and reader interests and action is necessary to preserve literature and foster local readership. Having reflected on this, I have drawn out what I consider to be key findings from the field data and contextual material which further my overall argument and reveal a distinctly new way of interpreting the practice of writing and the role of the writer in a post-war context.

Literary discourse

The crisis of readership overshadows and, to a certain extent, limits the actualisation of the writers' social motivations and leaves them writing in a vacuum or void. In 2010, I returned to Freetown to discuss developments in literature with several authors including Mohammed Sheriff. During our discussion, Sheriff described how writers were talking to each other and reading each other's work but existing, for the most part, without a readership. Writers were clinging to the hope of attracting an international audience through personal and literary contacts with English and American publishers and through internet publishing and exposure. However, despite these severe limitations of readership, I realised that the writers' own discourse was perhaps more significant: the way writers talk about their role and, through discussion of their writing, consider pervading social and political issues.

In this sense, I am arguing that what is important is the discourse about and surrounding literature and how this impacts on writers and disseminates more widely through elite memberships, political, economic, communal and familial exchanges and communication.

Writers occupy an alternative space or platform from which to address social challenges.

During this field research I have witnessed a palpable sense of excitement and empowerment amongst writers who are writing in a void without literary infrastructure or readers. This is because they feel a heightened sense of social involvement and capacity to promote change (even if poorly articulated) and they are able to express themselves through writing to other writers and participate in a literary discourse as a member of a group of national writers. As such they represent what Said might call Sierra Leone's 'writer-intellectuals' (Said: 2004, p.127). The lack of internal readership is an obstacle, a frustration and a concern but being a writer brings with it significant benefits of involvement that are not dependent on extending the actual readership. The idea that Sierra Leonean writers are participating in a distinct post war literary-intellectual discourse outside (as well as within) their texts contribute to my concluding argument in the last chapter.

Dominance of social motivation and writing as social engagement

The key group which appear to be driving the development of internal poetry are mainly drawn from the 'recent writers with university education' group namely Elvis Hallowell, Farouk Sesay, Gibril Sesay, Moses Kainwo and Mohammed Sheriff as well as academic and writer Arthur Smith. These authors are considering the responsibility of the writer and the accompanying roles they need to play in order to promote and protect literature in the future in the face of economic hardship and the decline of reading. Poetry is not the obvious choice, however, for those seeking an expanded, popular audience and most write it because they desire to be writers and because it is a short and expressive format. The journalistic experience of many writers has helped to embed a sense of social responsibility into writing.

Indeed, for new creative writers like Randoulph Wilson, poetry appears to be a creative extension of journalistic writing.

Despite assertions of social motivation, inevitably many write because they can and because they wish to 'be writers' and then think about it later or when interviewed. Whether writers are genuinely socially committed or not (which is extremely difficult to substantiate), I suggest that creative writing – the very choice to write in a Sierra Leonean context - is a form of social engagement. For many writers, even those who were already writing prior to 1991, this engagement offered a form of literary catharsis in response to the civil war. The experience of writing further appears to heighten social involvement and prompt other forms of engagement such as involvement in politics, non-governmental organisations, education and journalism. Writing, therefore, appears to act as a step or platform to increased social and political awareness and action.

Writers foreground national identity

The writers interviewed are Sierra Leone's writers. Their national identity and the nation's plight is bound with their perceptions of themselves as writers and their sense of social responsibility. In a sense, creative writing has become a national project charged with an urgency to consolidate peaceful development after the war years and to reflect the emotional conscience of a country struggling with its recent past and difficult present. There is a sense of openness and opportunity as new writers are able to become national writers with relative ease and there is movement and jostling as existing and novice writers attempt to find a position at this time. Speaking at the same Centre for West African Studies Conference in 2009, Farouk Sesay said "war has reconfigured the markers for writers" and it is the writers who "remap countries and recreate nations".

The poets and writers I interviewed do not share an ideology as, for example, Neto or Fanon envisaged (see Chapter 1). Rather the experience and conditions of the war years propelled new and existing creative writers – many of whom were experienced journalists and socio-political actors already – to take up their position as Sierra Leone’s writers or post war writers. A space opened up for writer-intellectuals to negotiate the imaginative underpinnings of a cohesive and durable post-war Sierra Leone. This space provided an alternative discourse to mainstream party political and popular rap music dialogues. It also provided a unique multi-ethnic Sierra Leonean space in which educated writers could express themselves in English, be read by each other and by international audiences eager to decipher the mysteries of Sierra Leone’s predicament. Those writers taking up this space represent an emergent Sierra Leonean literary voice in the form of post-war poetry.

Binding this body of writers is the desire to chronicle the past, build a national literature which resonates with the lived experience and contribute to lasting peace. How the writers seek to achieve this through their texts is examined in the next chapter. The poems they have written reveal the complexity of personal responses within what appears to be a non-violent literary discourse. They also reveal the stages of acceptance and recovery that Sierra Leone has moved through since 2002.

I suggest that the making of literature enriches the way the writers I interviewed live and how they perceive themselves and it encompasses a transformative capacity: they are making art out of their experience. Interviewees felt elevated, empowered and validated by simply “being a writer” - a role which is frequently self-arrogated. I would argue that this epistemological state of being adds a further dimension to their lived experience; the transformative capacity

of creating poetry, of forging something new out of the damaged physical and emotional fabric surrounding them. Writing offers the combined release of getting something down on paper (a personal therapeutic effect) and provides a space with which to reflect imaginatively on recent and contemporary events and issues and, potentially, to respond with new social ideas. It is at once a personal, social and political act. These writers emit a sense of capacity which is ultimately optimistic. Their enthusiasm for the task of writing is charged with an impetus for social change which is, perhaps, less fully realised in the texts they write (see Chapter 4). Nonetheless, such impetus adds a refreshing contribution to national discourses and must inevitably disseminate more widely through elite political, familial, ethnic and business communications. The embodiment of new social ideas and the impetus for social change as imagined and transmitted through the internal national literature (and hence amongst internal writers and intellectuals), offers a fruitful and previously neglected component in the task of conflict transformation and peace consolidation facing Sierra Leone.

CHAPTER 4

Examining the texts: War and post-war Sierra Leonean poetry

In this chapter I suggest how to approach reading contemporary, indigenous Sierra Leonean poetry for the purpose of my study. Such an enquiry necessitates a consideration of what poetry represents to Sierra Leonean writers who continue to write in English in adverse conditions with negligible readership outside of their own circle. It also requires a rethinking of assumptions about literary quality and an investigation into the structure of poetic communication. The context in which these poems were written, transmitted and expected to be read must also be taken into account.

I then provide an overview of three poetry collections in chronological order: the first published in 1995 during the civil war and the last published in 2009, seven years after the cessation of hostilities. This chronological presentation reflects the order in which I obtained the books and reveals certain thematic progressions as well as crossovers between collections. In doing so, I have chosen to focus on several key poems in more detail which are supplied in Appendix 4. Six additional poems are included in Appendix 5. For other poems page references are supplied.

Appendix 4:

- *The Cotton Tree* by Sydnella Shooter
- *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh* by Moses Kainwo
- *Orders from Below* by Mohammed Gibril Sesay
- *At Tellu Bongor* by Oumar Farouk Sesay
- *Lamentations* by Sydnella Shooter

- *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* by Tom Caurray
- *Healing Wounds* by Tom Caurray

Appendix 5:

- *On Being Commissioned to Pray* by Mohammed Gibril Sesay
- *My Root in Flames* by Sydnella Shooter
- *Sights at PZ* by Bridgette Olamide James
- *Go Was Am* by Raymond De Souza George
- *The Winding Road* by Eldred Jones
- *Staring* by Oumar Farouk Sesay

When taken together, these texts can be seen to represent key aspects of the emerging literary dialogue in post-war Sierra Leone. How such poems contribute to a discourse of peace and how the efforts of writers can be understood to progressively foster social change and renewal in Sierra Leone will be discussed in the next, and concluding, chapter.

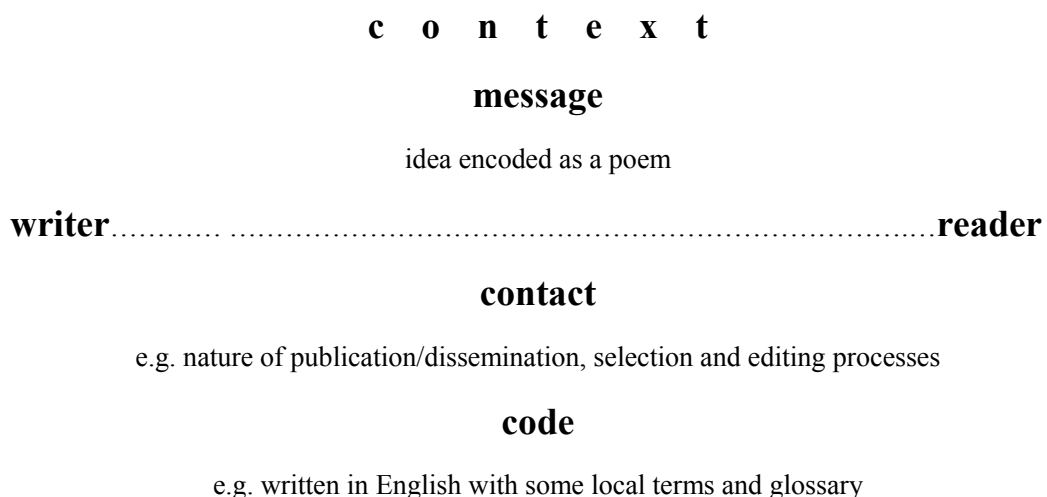
What has framed my thinking?

My own approach to reading these poems comes not from a literary background but from a social studies, conflict and citizenship perspective. I am, therefore, bringing a social consciousness to the reading of these works but I understand that there are other more literary ways of reading them. My research focus has led me to analyse these texts through a particular lens. I am looking at poetry as a form of social engagement through which to locate an emergent intercultural literary and intellectual discourse. In this, writers may poetically imagine national recovery, lament past errors, re-create notions of Sierra Leonean identity and debate moral and social issues. Inadvertently, they may also counter disillusion and foster the impulse to take action and move forward.

The fact that I write myself, and have published and performed my poetry (and taught creative writing) will have also framed my thinking yet I have not set out to provide a writer's perspective here. My understanding of poetry is strongly influenced by my preferences for writing style and my likes and dislikes in terms of reading poetry. As a writer of free verse and semi structured poems, I am less interested in form and more in how a piece reads, how it is shaped (literally how it appears on the page) and in how well it conveys a message or emotion and is able to 'move' you temporarily to inhabit another space which has the potential to be transformative. As a writer, I may read a poem and recognise it as a first draft, for example, whereas other readers may not think about the editing, shaping and layering that goes into the writing of poetry.

Approaching the texts: ways of reading

Poems communicate more than textual messages. They carry information about the context of the writer and intended reader and they are mediated to us via a distinct process using a particular language. I have adapted Jakobson's model of communication below¹⁹:



¹⁹ For an overview of Roman Jakobson's model of communication see Terrance Hawkes' book, 'Structuralism and Semiotics', published by Routledge in 2003 (2nd ed). pp. 59-69.

In examining published poetry, the editorial role – the framing, method of presentation and place of publication - contributes to what the structural linguist Roman Jakobson, writing in the 1960s, termed the mode of ‘contact’ which directly impacts on the communication taking place. Jakobson’s model emphasises the importance of codes and social contexts in any form of communication. The nature of this contact influences how the message (which is an encoding of the writer’s, or what Jakobson terms the ‘addresser’s’, original idea) is mediated between the writer and reader. The act of communication is also influenced by the choice of language (or ‘code’) and the varying ‘contexts’ in which all these processes take place and in which the message is read – bearing in mind that the readers and contexts of reading are often not those originally envisaged by the writer.

My reading of the poems in these collections, for instance, is dominated by the social context in which the poems were written and to which they frequently respond. My reading is also influenced by the social motivations of the writer and the potential of the messages to contribute to a discourse of peace through, for example, social criticism, chronicling and learning from history, promoting reconciliation and cohesion and offering new opportunities to expurgate the past and re-imagine national futures and renew national esteem. Such a reading does not require the poem to stand on its own in terms of form and the message it carries must be seen in the context in which it was written, delivered and read. This contextual background has been supplied in Chapters 2 and 3.

Poor educational and literary structures, illiteracy and lack of book availability severely limit the act of communication (signified in the diagram) from taking place at all outside the interested elite of writers and intellectuals based in Freetown, the elite in the diaspora and western visitors and writers. Bearing this in mind, it becomes difficult to identify poems that

succeed in terms of craft and insight and as texts which can foster social messages via widespread dissemination.

However, I propose that the social value assigned to literary activity amongst the writers themselves and the literary sensitivities of imagining and responding to the nation and its exigencies may be enough to influence discourses even if their actual work is little read or understood. In other words, the way writers talk about their writing and transmit their literary imagination across national debates may, at present, impact society indirectly more than their poems and writing (in which these literary ideas and responses to the nation are symbolised and represented). Drawing on Said's work (2004) I suggest writers in Sierra Leone also take the role of intellectuals who seek to articulate their calls for social justice in the public sphere through writing and the debate that it generates. In this way, writers (as intellectuals) proffer their own counter discourse to that of the dominant one which presents the status quo as the normal state of affairs (Said, 2004, p.142). The interaction, exchange, negotiations and confrontations that take place between and within internal political and literary discourses (via business, media, cultural and ethnic connections which overlap in such a small population) ensure that literary ideas are ultimately transmitted to a wider national audience than would be possible through the direct reading of literature.

Writers tend to see their world (and nation) as something that can be remoulded and transformed through the imagination and this gives them the idea that society can improve and is dynamic. The fact that their texts rarely get disseminated to a wider internal audience might not matter. Instead they represent a specialised form of elite expression and dialogue and support the belief that literature matters. This can influence the domain of politics, social and personal life which, itself, impacts on wider national discourses and fosters a greater sense of agency amongst actors and hence amongst the citizenry.

My approach to reading the selected anthologies has been to seek out poems which in some way respond to prevailing social conditions offering a contribution to the emerging discourse for peace and social renewal in post conflict Sierra Leone. I am therefore looking for material which responds to the national predicament (the social context in the previous diagram) and offers the possibility of thinking and/or acting differently as a result of exposure to this work. As mentioned previously, I have not needed to select poems with a social focus as they form the overwhelming majority of the material available. My analysis has evolved with repeated exposure to the texts and combines an informed social reading with elements of literary analysis (aided by an informal reading session I ran at the University of Birmingham, Centre for West African Studies in 2012). Originally, I developed a series of questions to help me engage with the texts in terms of the act of communication taking place, their success as poems conveying a message and their contribution to a discourse on peace. Though this helped to focus my thinking initially, I found that certain poems warranted a more in depth interrogation than others. These key poems have shaped my analysis and my understanding of author responses to social crisis and conflict which I bring together in the concluding chapter. I have reproduced the initial questions below:

The communicative act:

- Who is it written for?
- What is the point of writing this in English in Sierra Leone?
- Why choose such a narrow form i.e. poem?
- What is the message conveyed (or intended to be conveyed) through this poem?
- What can we determine about the social context of the writer and intended reader?

Does the poem succeed?

- Is there a distinctive quality to the author's voice and does the poem set a distinct tone?

- Is there a rhythm to the poem and a sense of tempo (determined by line breaks, spacing as well as alliteration and phrasing)?
- Does it inspire feeling/convey emotion?
- Is there a sense of completion, a whole-ness to the text?
- Does it offer interesting, new or unusual imagery?
- Does it ‘work’ or ‘succeed’ as a poem? As a Sierra Leonean war poem? As an example of ‘crisis literature’?

Functions of Sierra Leonean poetry:

1. to chronicle the horrors of the past, lamenting and the pouring out of emotion
2. to criticise aspects of the polity and society
3. to promote the positive aspects of identifying as a Sierra Leonean
4. to urge for active change in thinking and behaviour e.g. to rouse feeling, call for retribution, express anger or foster feelings of forgiveness
5. to portray alternative future scenarios and national aspirations
6. to promote empathy and understanding towards the other/enemy
7. to promote cohesion and intercultural accord
8. other functions...

What poetry in English represents to the Sierra Leonean writer

The writers I met believe that writing and sharing poetry is a valuable and powerful activity to invest their time in. They treat their work as ‘literature’ and, due to the lack of publishing and other literary infrastructure, legitimise themselves as authors by writing and by sharing their work with each other. Perhaps the most important influence on these writers (and thus on what a poem is) has been the success of the Syl Cheney-Coker. Notably, Elvis Hallowell and Farouk Sesay both mentioned Coker’s influence while Gibril Sesay and Hallowell’s free, surrealistic –and sometimes licentious- writing styles are reminiscent of Coker. Discussing

Coker's 1973 poetry collection, 'Concerto for an Exile', Fraser explains that Coker's first language is Krio which blends English vocabulary with a "part Yoruba part-Mende" patterning and rule structure. Fraser seems to imply that Krio contributes to making Coker's work diffuse and unruly (Coker uses a wide net of associations and ignores grammar) yet on final examination he recognises that Coker "distils poetry like wine" and, hence, "has no need of rules" (Fraser, 1986, p.287).

All the poets examined in this chapter speak Krio as their lingua franca and sometimes as their first language (Sydnella Shooter is a native Krio for example) and there is inevitably some "kissing and quarrelling" between English and Krio (see Osundare, 2000) especially as Krio lends itself to declamation, to dramatic articulation and, popularly, to comic expression. Of course oral traditions must inform and filter into writing to some extent but I am not aware of strong traditions in spoken or written poetry (especially socially critical poetry) in vernacular languages. There have been efforts to write and publish and, more successfully, to perform poetry in Krio but those writers I met were committed to authorship in English. They did not describe themselves as "chameleons" (Osundare: 2000: 9) but more as cultural brokers offering poetry as a way to access what it is to be Sierra Leonean (for outside readers) and to wrestle with what it means and attempt to direct and inform local audiences. The use of English becomes problematic because literacy levels are so low amongst the local population and severe economic conditions do not necessitate the reading of poetry or buying of books. To reach wider local audiences would require tackling the endemic problem of illiteracy, book availability and considering means of translation into the vernacular via cassettes, radio, drama and TV, for example.

Cheney-Coker's success (as a modern Sierra Leonean poet writing free verse), combined with the opportunity presented by the creative writing workshop in 1993 and the emergence of

Falui as well as the emotional impetus to write resulting from war experience, served to liberalise and remove what previous restrictions existed in the writing of poetry. These combined factors, I argue, opened the way for a new creative outpouring and intellectual outlet, literally for ‘songs that pour the heart’ – the title of the second poetry collection discussed later in the chapter.

I suspect the 1993 workshop (or the fact that it gathered together keen novice writers) stimulated a sizeable proportion of the poems I collected. Participants appear to have emerged with a strong will to become ‘Sierra Leonean’ writers and capture the experience of living in the country and the national predicament. Some of these poems might be conceived of as first drafts or ‘workshop poems’ (created in a workshop settings in response to certain stimuli such as themes or structural patterns) as there appears to be little facility for editing and redrafting. Crafting tends to focus on the shaping of the lines and stanzas on the page and many poems use repetitive words or refrains perhaps echoing back to oral forms (or written with performance in mind as a result of prior experience as teachers, actors and in making speeches).

Inevitably customs and practices associated with spoken (and read) English help determine form and layout. For second language English speakers, the syllabic emphasis, choice of words and phrases and line breaks differ from mother tongue writers of English. These differences conjure an alterity and perceived ‘Africanity’ for a western audience especially for a listening audience. Fellow Sierra Leoneans, however, automatically read with the same style and rhythm as spoken hence these poems will come across as accessible, familiar and Sierra Leonean.

Nigerian poet and commentator Femi Oyeboade claims that in written texts the “articulation and ornamentation of speech by such devices as pitch, tone, rhythm, tempo, melody and harmony” is lost. To capture the depth of poetry (“the interface between pure music and prosaic speech” which can “alter feelings, sensibility and belief...”) he suggests a notation of gestures and movements of the poet and responses from the audience (Oyeboade, 1995, p.91). However, the poems I have gathered are not, as Oyeboade discusses, in Yoruba form (or Sierra Leonean Krio, Mende or Temne) requiring different pitch for delivery but written in English and they are not overtly oral poems in that the authors seek to write in English and to see their work published in English. However, I suspect they are unconsciously re-imagined as oral texts (with the intonation and articulation of 2nd language English speakers and as Krio speakers) when read within Sierra Leone by other writers and readers which goes some way to support Oyeboade’s claim that “the text only lives through the human voice” (Oyeboade, 1995, p.91). Indeed, at the Freetown reading group (and at a poetry group I run in Birmingham, UK) people always want to start by reading poems aloud while following the printed texts. My own experience of Sierra Leonean poetry read aloud is that texts become imbued with a distinct lilt and intonation which adds a new dimension and persuasiveness to the poems.

Nonetheless whilst recognising the difficulty of making sense of “written literature in European languages within such a context determined by oral performances in the vernacular” (Fraser, 2000, p.7), I cannot go so far as Fraser in emphasising the precedence of orality. Contemporary Sierra Leonean poems are not songs; they are at best hybrids seemingly brought more to life by their ‘utterance’. Indeed, Osundare describes poems “as utterances” (see Osundare, 2000, p.26). I have not heard of Sierra Leonean writers complaining about translating linguistic tones from vernacular languages as they are not writing or, to my

knowledge, creating poems in these languages although vernacular words, customs and descriptive sounds sometimes appear in Sierra Leonean poems in English. The existence of other layers of language, custom and life experience (beyond the literate and literary) is occasionally glimpsed through these poems adding a depth which is not fully penetrable to outside readers and which, arguably, adds to their appeal. These poems are written in a public language and in the official language of politicians and journalists.

As a short written form, poetry tends to be treated as the quickest (and by implication easiest) form to write especially as free verse no longer necessitates submission to the rigours of writing meter. At its most stripped back form, poetry is a compression of language - whatever the form. It requires an element of magic, of what the Spanish poet, Lorca²⁰, described as 'duende' – a mysterious force combining energy and aliveness of the spirit with a rootedness and depth of emotion often apparent as suffering. Perhaps this can be likened to what Senghor described as the "essential element which bound it [the poem] together: the regular pulse or ictus of the principal drum which, like a time keeper, kept all else in place" (Fraser, 1986, p.312).

I also suggest that the writing of poetry offers an elevated role and platform in society that is otherwise unavailable along with near-instant membership of a body of national writers. Journalism, by contrast, is now overwhelmingly sponsored by political parties and of such a poor standard that it cannot confer the same respect on writers or the same freedom of agenda and opportunity to contribute to a nationally inclusive peace-oriented discourse. Meanwhile drama has become an arena for theatre for development rather than for spontaneously written plays which can reach a public audience.

²⁰ See Lorca, F.G. (1988) 'In Search of Duende'. New Directions Publishing: London.

Writing creatively in English serves a specific function: it allows writers to talk about Sierra Leone outside other channels which tend to be divisive in terms of ethnic, regional and party allegiances. Thus, English could be seen as a unique mode for expressing and constructing a contemporary ‘Sierra Leonean-ness’. Brown (1991) similarly accounts for the upsurge in English authorship in Gambia as representing Gambian identity. Obviously the geographical placement, history and ethnic breakdown of Sierra Leone and Gambia differ but literature in English can be seen as a vehicle for advancing a national imaginary in both cases.

Some of the authors discussed here may contribute, via the Sierra Leone web for example, to divisive discourses and hold political or politically-backed positions but as *poets* they are able to take on a different persona – a nationally inclusive one, allowing for emotive collective expression. Indeed, the accessibility of English to outside, national and (to a limited extent) local audiences means that these texts are able to impact more widely beyond the national boundaries. In this sense writing may be used to translate global, transnational, national and local narratives between readers and writers.

It is important to note here that, historically, Sierra Leonean (and most Anglophone West African poets) were not strongly influenced by the negritude movement as British colonial policy was not as assimilationist as the French²¹. The writers I interviewed identified themselves as Temne, Krio or Mandingo (rather than black) and as writers and predominantly as Sierra Leoneans. Note, however, that writers are self-selecting and we cannot assume that all writers are educated, enlightened philanthropists fit for the exacting social role aspired to by most of them. The poems I examine in detail, for instance, reveal very different responses to the war including veiled calls for retribution, anger and sarcasm (which are barely

²¹ Fraser explains that in British West Africa, Lord Lugard aimed to “bolster up local chiefdoms and reinforce regional differences” (Fraser, 2000, p.69) rather than promote assimilation.

recognised by the authors themselves). Those poems written closest to violence experience, such as *At Tellu Bongor* (by Farouk Sesay) and *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh* (by Moses Kainwo) from the *Songs that Pour the Heart* (2004) collection though passionately felt, I suspect, are less considered in terms of subtext and implications.

Quality and value in Sierra Leonean poetry

Sierra Leone is not particularly feted for the rigour and elegance of its literature. Indeed, the texts I have included and commented on here are perhaps best conceived of as being in the process of becoming a national literature judged by accepted standards. As to whether the poems succeed as literature in English, this is especially difficult to evaluate when written in response to the immediacy of actual violence and conflict. In this case, the affective nature of the work and the traumatic subject may overtake the usual norms for judgement of quality and the occasion may set the critical agenda. Similarly, what readers garner from the poems may be more significant than subjective ideas of quality. Any assessment must allow for the difficulties of the prevailing social context and the lack of supportive literary institutions which undoubtedly creates an urgent and immediate kind of poetry. Perhaps they can be understood more as spontaneous responses to conflict and human suffering (in the way that folk songs are understood, for instance) rather than particularly 'literary' responses.

On first exposure to these poems, it would seem the aspirations and intensions of the writers (discussed in the previous chapter) are more grandiose and ambitious than the writing they produce. This may be due to inadequate literary training, editing and preparation coupled with

economic and literacy problems affecting accessibility and the expectations of local readers. However, with each new reading I find added depth and social significance in this material in terms of charting the personal and social processes of change and renewal taking place after the civil war. I also recognise the emergence of distinct voices, rhythms of speech and patterns of crafting and poems exemplify a stronger Sierra Leonean character than I first observed. In the same way that Yoruba or French speaking English writers will inhabit the language differently, I have found obvious and subtle indications that these poems are written in ‘Sierra Leonean English’. However, although the use of language and rhythm, crafting and patterning, invention and emotion adds to the effectiveness of poems and gives them their unique geographical, national and cultural placing, these are literary devices and of secondary importance to my social reading focused on how literature contributes to a Sierra Leonean discourse on peace. Ultimately, I am interested in how this writing can impact and influence the context through both the impact of the message and the surrounding dialogue amongst writers.

Overview of publications

I have purposefully concentrated on those writers I interviewed who are based in Freetown and featured within the following publications:

‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ (1995 – published during civil war)

‘Songs that Pour the Heart’ (2004 – published two years after civil war)

‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’ (2009 – published seven years after civil war).

I have also included poems given to me by authors in Freetown (for example by Tom Caurray, and Raymond De Souza George) and discuss certain poets I was unable to interview, such as Ambrose Massaquoi, whose poems exemplify aspects of my argument. As such, this chapter offers a sample of the poetry available and attempts to draw out the pertinent features of contemporary Sierra Leonean poetry using these texts as a guide. The sheer existence of such a number of poets (there are eighteen featured in *Songs that Pour the Heart* and twenty two in *Kalashnikov in the Sun*) appears testament to the resilience of literature in such challenging and unfavourable circumstances.

I obtained the three anthologies during visits to Freetown. The first collection, 'Lice in the Lion's Mane', was published by PEA in 1995 with the help of a visiting student and friend of Elvis Hallowell, Hannah Hope Wells. It includes a Foreword by Eldred Jones (Emeritus Professor of Literature at the University of Sierra Leone). This collection is a stapled paper booklet (or large pamphlet) comprising 125 pages with a card cover and simple illustration. Originally some of the pages had not been cut apart. After several years, my copy is looking worn and beginning to fall apart.

'Songs that Pour the Heart' is slightly larger than the standard size and glued with a glossy green card cover and a simple illustration and title on the cover. Published in 2004 by 'New Initiatives' (which was probably work of editor-contributors Gibril Sesay and Moses Kainwo) in Freetown, 'Songs that Pour the Heart' is the most locally-led, and edited, publication.

'Kalashnikov in the Sun' (published in 2009 in America by Pika Press and edited by visiting poet Kirsten Rian) is the most recent publication. It is also the glossiest and most professional in appearance and would slot in alongside other poetry collections in a western bookshop.

Most of the poems in these collections will have emerged spontaneously though some were written for special events and a good number emerged as the result of the 1993 workshop and “*pul na do*” (informal, outdoor poetry evenings), at the American Embassy library, British Council and at “countless readings at Victoria Park, eating places and homes” (Kainwo and Sesay, 2004, Foreword, p. 4).

Lice in the Lion’s Mane: Poets and Poems of Sierra Leone (1995)

Extract from the Foreword by Eldred Jones:

Most of the poems in the collection reflect the concern of these young poets for the plight of their country (and of Africa in general) exploring its culture, lamenting its ills and indicating a path to the future. They all passionately look for support to their African roots and often deplore the denigration or neglect of their culture which they try to re-affirm... they write with a sensitive social conscience which, in turn, through publications like this one, they hope will influence the future.

For their readers, these poems will certainly show what burns in the minds of young Sierra Leoneans, how they regard their country, its leaders and its future in which they see a role for the young. So many of the poets express frustration at the lack of an audience and the difficulty of publication which daunt but not totally discourage them. This collection will do something to give them heart. (p.7)

Despite Eldred Jones’ muted optimism, this collection comes across as a down-hearted (at times tormented collection) containing few especially memorable poems on first reading with many appearing amateur and naïve as if the result of first drafts. One is not particularly aware of the existence of the civil war (with the exception of poems such as Moses Kainwo’s cogent

and, for that time, daring *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh* (the rebel leader) which I discuss as a key poem later in the chapter. Rather, ‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ is permeated by a sense of sadness, struggle and by the toil of existence. Poems such as *Agony of the Dark Child* (p.50) by Cheney-Coker and De Souza George’s *The Harvest of Greed* (p.37) exhibit a sense of foreboding. Others return to defining periods in national history (for example, *From the Diary of Pedro de Centra* by Hallowell, pp.16-17. and Haffner’s *1787*, pp.25-26) as if the seeds of misfortune were sown from these points. Several poems explore the Sierra Leonean Awujoh festival (e.g. Gracie Williams poem *Awujoh*, pp.62-3, and Moses Kainwo’s *AWUJO*, p.99) and several poems describe the slaving post at Bunce Island (built in 1670 off the coast of Freetown). Sierra Leonean culture tends to be the overriding theme which was probably suggested by the editor, Hannah Wells. Indeed Wells claims to have chosen poems that “define a unified Sierra Leonean national character in these times of changes and uncertainty” (Wells, 1995, p.5). I suspect that many of the poems were written during an earlier period and/or when the civil war had not started to impinge on life in Freetown.

Eldred Jones applauds the inclusion of a scattering of poems written in Krio. These include poems by authors known mainly for their plays such as Dele Charley and Thomas Decker. Some of the poets I interviewed have contributed separate poems in Krio and in English (rather than provided translations of the same text).

The authors I interviewed who are published in ‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ include Elvis Hallowell, Charlie Haffner (usually known as a playwright rather than poet), Raymond De Souza George, Syl Cheney-Coker, Sydnella Shooter, Gracie Williams, Sam Macauley, Frederick Borbor James, Farouk Sesay and Moses Kainwo. I also interviewed Julius Spencer (best known for his film and media work as well as his role as Minister of Information under the previous SLPP government) and met Mohammed Gibril Sesay several times.

Elvis Hallowell claims (in his author biography) to be:

soul-searching in regard to his people's national identity... I refuse to come to terms with my country's history.... I condemn the fratricidal¹¹²² brother. I blame the elder generation. I write about my country's politicians who damage the country... My poems are calling for the urgent revision of my country's history.... Sierra Leoneans must consider themselves unique because they are Sierra Leoneans where others are not; and because of that the whole world waits to see what the Sierra Leonean dream is. (p.12)

Hallowell is an entertaining, eloquent, and often firebrand orator when introducing and reading his poetry at performances or events and this biography reveals how his writing is passionately charged. Often his rhetoric is more moving and accessible than his poetry which tends to be surrealistic and difficult to penetrate. *From the Diary of Pedro de Centra* (pp.16-17) is probably his best piece here. In this, he reflects on the naming of Sierra Leone (meaning lion mountain) by the Portuguese explorer, Pedro de Centra:

what I now behold is a warrior land

in the meaning of the lion's roar (p.16)

Unfortunately Hallowell is not best reflected in these collections (and his work is, strangely, absent from the 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' collection along with Gibril Sesay's). To some extent, this skews the glimpse I can offer of post-war poetry as Hallowell is a key presence amongst poets in Freetown and his character, oratory skills, behaviour (and position) brings him a platform and influence as well as growing notoriety. Able to move between journalism, poetry (and venturing into music recording) Hallowell's poetry is worthy of more study than I

²² Here, Hallowell echoes his mentor, Syl Cheney-Coker's, terminology in his widely published poem *On being a Poet in Sierra Leone* (see Cheney-Coker, 1980).

have given it here. I believe his latest poetry collection will be published by Farouk Sesay's new publishing venture, Karantha Press. Excerpts I have read give the impression of new and, perhaps, less complicated work such as the following piece *We no longer write poems in camera*:

No longer do we write poems in camera
with helicopters hovering over our heads
enervating the sticking fingers
of our branches which like the sierra
now stand unkempt
Illogical though we may seem
like languages falling down babel
our poems are read all over the place
from Freetown to Conakry
where the malarial mosquito expends
from Rwanda to Soweto
where black blood illustrates the future
before each of liquid
surges to fill helpless skeletons.

(See Sierra Leone Web: <http://www.sierra-leone.org>)

Song, play and story writer Sam Macauley includes a formation poem called *Those Lion Mountains*. Though seemingly a first draft, he captures the same mood of frustration and impending crisis echoed in other poems:

Your roars are futile
While you remain stagnant
Erupt like a volcano
And your aggressors will flee.

(Extract, p.85)

De Souza George's *The Harvest of Greed* (p.37) warns that greed is spreading like cancer into an incurable and deadly epidemic characterised by "Mental and moral decadence". This can be read as a literal warning of the dangers of greed and consumerism (associated with the

money oriented culture that came with the discovery of diamonds, perhaps) or as a more cloaked warning of impending doom associated with the onset of violence. In declamatory style, its rhythm builds until the point at which the poet directly addresses his audience (of Sierra Leoneans) as if delivering a lesson “Therefore, my sons and daughters... take heed...”. Here De Souza George is urging people to beware the dangers of greed in much the same way as a church sermon. Indeed, De Souza George is a committed Christian and runs a poetry show on a Christian radio station.

Gibril Sesay also includes cautionary poems. *How can I love you?* (p.69) evokes the idea that Sierra Leone is not functioning normally, that something is awry:

How can I love you?

If love is digging in
One's being in another
How can I love you
Salone
When nothing settles in you?

(Extract, p.69)

In *Where will our Child Lie?* Gibril Sesay writes succinctly of the growing sense of hopelessness and poverty. The BBC African Performance Website (Boreham, 2007) includes a different version (described as an excerpt). This version is also reproduced in the Songs that Pour the Heart collection and works better rhythmically from the outset:

WHERE WILL OUR CHILD LIE?

Where will our child lie?
The bed is three work-bench wide
The room twice that wide

And my woman pregnant

Where will our child lie?

(p. 69)

Where Will Our Child Lie?

Headside-footside-jamming-wall

The bed

Is workbenchwide

The room twice that

And my woman pregnant

Where will our child lie?

(see Boreham, 2007)

Julius Spencer includes two poems celebrating African (note not specifically Sierra Leonean) pride (*African Woman*, p.39, and *My African's plea*, pp.40-41) whereas Syl Cheney-Coker contrasts this positive portrayal with the short poem, *Agony of the Dark Child* (p.50), drawing on racial prejudice and superstition against dark skin amongst Sierra Leoneans. Frederick Borbor James includes a simple, short piece called *Freetown* celebrating the city especially at night when her "rust, dilapidation and garbage" are hidden (p.89). *Pleasant Innovations* records the irony of new innovations:

These pleasant innovations

Have taught us sophisticated warfare

The culture of depravity

Poverty in the midst of affluence

And death by starvation.

(Extract, 4th stanza, p.90)

Borbor James ends by calling for an appreciation of traditional knowledge and retrieval of culture (note he chooses the word exhume as though it were dead):

We now want to exhume our cultures
To teach our children the history of their peoples,
The songs of the past, present and future
We want to resurrect our traditional knowledge, expertise and values.
Oh in the face of all these pleasant innovations
We want to retrieve our past!
(Extract, last stanza, p.91)

Farouk Sesay claims, in his author biography, to “emphasise the cultural values of Sierra Leone”, and critically appraise the country’s political scene... “I am writing for a purpose – to help society reform for the better” Writing on the lack of publishing in the country and the significance of such a deficiency, he includes this small poem:

Publish me

Publish me or I perish
As I pour my blood and soul
In papers that perish
As I perish unpublished.
(p.96)

Although I was not able to meet and interview Ambrose Massaquoi, his work is noteworthy in that he combines social ambition with a confident command of his craft and a distinctive voice. His poem *Bo by bus* from the *Lice in the Lion’s Mane* collection captures the everyday experiences of people travelling by Bus and the harsh nature of interaction. In his biographical introduction, Massaquoi explains:

I like to lift the bedsheets to let my countrymen catch their breath at the accumulated trash beneath their cosy concepts and conduct. I want to convey to them that there are worthier ideas and richer values around. What I do is cheapen their own system in their own eyes so that they start thinking of better options. (p.119)

Sydnella Shooter's poems, she claims, celebrate cultural aspects of Sierra Leone and, in *Steeped in Blood* (p.52), she explores the clash between western and African culture. She hopes her poetry "will help her readers better appreciate their own cultures" (p.51). I selected Shooter's *The Cotton Tree* (along with Moses Kainwo's *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh*) as key poems from this collection. These key poems can be found in Appendix 4.

In *The Cotton Tree* (which is also included in the 'Songs that Pour the Heart' collection) Shooter manages to write a poem that on first reading appears generic, ordinary, unrooted in distinctly Sierra Leonean imagery using images that are the product of western informed education such as 'Siamese Twins' (second stanza) and 'the eagle' (last stanza). This is not surprising as Sydnella works as a teacher at the American School but I suggest she writes simply and authentically (without contrivance) as a Sierra Leonean having begun writing poetry for teaching and events at her school and then after attending the writing workshop in 1993. In fact, in interviews she tends to slightly demean her position explaining that she does not hold the same level of higher education as some of her poet compatriots.

The tree described in the poem could not apply to any oak, palm or flamboyant tree: it is undoubtedly the Cotton Tree in the heart of Freetown, one of the capital's main landmarks with a history trailing back to the first liberated slaves who were said to have waited there to be assigned their land and freedom. The use of the word "paramount" in the first line cleverly borrows from the well-known 'Paramount' Hotel in Freetown subconsciously locating this poem for those readers familiar with the capital city. In stanza five, Shooter describes the

legend warning of the dangers of chopping down the tree “Great men will fall / Their powers embedded in its core”. *The Cotton Tree* is ultimately a hopeful poem representing the resilience of Freetown despite history changing around it (see first stanza) and its changing usage (see stanza three: “Home of Paupers / Lunatic Asylum / Stations and mini parks / And nests of all degrees”). In the last line of the last stanza, she writes “Its vigour is renewed.” Therefore, the cotton tree continues to stand during the war and this poem ultimately signifies survival. As it focuses on a physical landmark in Freetown it could also be said to contribute to promoting identification as a Sierra Leonean.

The Cotton Tree poem is well-known amongst the local writing circle and was enthusiastically received in the reading group I ran in Freetown. This was because they recognised it to be a distinctly Sierra Leonean poem as it depicts a local landmark and stands out (especially amongst many on themes of violence and war) as a hopeful poem. In fact, it was read as a post-war poem. Readers felt it quietly revealed how the great tree had withstood the war and remained standing either side of it.

Readers from the group explained that they had grown up exposed to English and, occasionally, Nigerian poems at school and that it was something of an epiphany to read a poem (in print) from a resident Sierra Leonean writer about the locality. In fact, *The Cotton Tree*, in particular, prompted readers to begin writing and the following week several members of the group brought in poems they had written about Freetown landmarks.

In *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh*, (see Appendix 4) Kainwo seemingly pleads with Sankoh, the RUF rebel leader, for peace yet, at the same time, his sarcastic tone undermines this ambition and reveals his utter inability to forgive or treat the leader courteously. From the very first line he mocks Mr Sankoh referring to him as “mr sun-core” and, in the third stanza,

“field marshal / president of next world / chief justice of injustice”. This is a strange and interesting poem because it reveals the complexity of the initial ‘peace’ response amongst writer-intellectuals. It is an example of an initial poetic response to what was then the beginning of civil war in the provinces and reveals how literature enabled authors to confront and grapple with a complex and disturbing social reality.

In the second stanza Kainwo makes a snipe at Foday Sankoh implying that he is not as worthy as Kai Londo (a celebrated Kissi warrior from the 1880s) and that he will not be remembered as a great warrior. In the next line he then writes “I know your wavelength is deaf” which reminds me both of Sankoh’s media expertise (he was originally an Army photographer and known to be extremely media savvy) and presupposes that Sankoh has no intension of listening to this poem (or to its entreaties). This means that the poem itself is futile or about the futility, the anomie or social breakdown of attitudes and values that has brought a dishonourable rebel leader to wage war on his own people. It is also a poem about pessimism: of the unlikelihood of an end to hostilities at this juncture which conveys pessimism to the reader because the poet (who is a pastor too) displays such antagonistic and unpeaceful sarcasm throughout. Kainwo uses this opportunity to display his knowledge of Sierra Leonean history at the same time as taunting Foday Sankoh. I suspect he may have written this with his peers and fellow writers in mind to show his prowess in poetic mockery and his frustration yet he evidently wished to reach a much wider readership as it was submitted for publication. A Methodist Minister working for ActionAid (a British NGO in Freetown), Kainwo claims how his Christian faith influences his work. He writes: “Almost every poem of mine is didactic” (author biography p.97).

Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh is structured free verse presented confidently on the page.

Although free, it is punctuated with the repetition of the word “hold” which acts as a powerful

pause mechanism or refrain. The effect of this is to conjure a hand held up in front of you preventing you from continuing to read or from getting away. By using such a technique, Kainwo manages to instil an accusatory tone as if the poet were temporarily interrogating the rebel leader while also knowing that neither of them have any intension (nor, yet, the imaginative faculty or emotional acceptance) to shake hands for peace.

Some idioms are not clear to the reader. For example, “grant the cocoa your freedom” and “the insane your sanity” in the penultimate stanza is confusing and “touch wood” appears to imply caution by its English meaning and possibly a meaning that implies being spineless, unfeeling according to African definitions²³.

Overall, the ‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ collection appears to be seeking what is deemed to represent indigenous Sierra Leonean culture as well as warning of potential crisis and revisiting periods of historic formation as a way to problematise the present. The poems in English, which form the majority, are accessible to readers for whom English is their first language though certain poems would benefit from an introduction.

Although published during the civil war, conflict forms only a minor presence in these poems as though it were lurking in the back of people’s minds or had yet to happen (with the obvious exception of poems such as Kainwo’s *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh*). Concerns raised are with poverty and the harshness of life. In fact, I suspect many of the poems were written much earlier. (1995). Poems such as Massaquoi’s *Bo by Bus* cause the reader to reflect on the endemic harshness of society while De Souza George’s *The Harvest of Greed* alerts the reader to reconsider the path he and his fellow countrymen are taking.

²³ This interpretation was put forward by African research students at a literature reading session I ran at the Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham in 2012.

Lice in the Lion's Mane documents the evolution of a contemporary national poetic voice and exposes the nascent stage in the literary discourse on peace (emerging with the onset of the civil war in 1991 to publication in 1995). This discourse evolves in later collections with the growing need to re-examine and renew society after the cessation of conflict.

Songs that Pour the Heart (2004)

Collated by the combined efforts of Moses Kainwo and Mohammed Gibril Sesay (a Christian and Muslim), this book reflects the ease of interfaith and interethnic dialogue in Freetown within Sierra Leonean poetry. According to Gibril Sesay, this collection of poems or “songs” that “pour the heart” are:

Sad recountings tinged with hopes of fertile times, eclectic narratives mirroring the rainbow influences on our experiences, our songs are also memories of moments during the decade old deluge. They are paeans of fortitude, hope and faith; they are dreams of the rainbow happenings that would end the deluge and restore the land. (Foreword, p.4)

The poets included in this collection are mostly based in Freetown and part of the Falui poetry group. Of these, I met with Elvis Hallowell, Frederick Bobor James, Moses Kainwo, Mohammed Gibril Sesay, Oumar Farouk Sesay and Sydnella Shooter and I will focus on their contributions primarily.

Songs that Pour the Heart could be read as war-affected writing. Some of the poems will have been written during and in response to the conflict or ‘deluge’ (as Gibril Sesay refers to it above). Other poems are reflective and look back to the war as the book was published two years after the end of the conflict. Others document a Freetown of the past such as Bridgette

Olamide James' *Sights at PZ* (see Appendix 5), a locally themed poem loved by reading group members in Freetown. However, depictions of cultural events and even food can become corrupted as in Bridgette's *Foo Foo in Greens* (p. 21) which depicts the pleasures of eating foo foo balls dipped in palm oil then likens that palm oil to blood as the paper announcing war sits on the dining table. Much of the work exudes raw emotion, anger and unease and, as if mirroring this, the writing can be careless, confused and seemingly haphazard in places. Many texts emit a sense of urgency, a lack of time devoted to editing and revision and lack of concern for the ramifications of expressing oneself without control. This collection is a product of a particular time in Sierra Leone's recent history and an intense and urgent phase in the developing literary discourse on peace.

The poems in *Songs that Pour the Heart* are written in English with occasional indigenous terms explained in a glossary. Poems in Krio are not included though there are occasional Krio phrases or titles such as the infant grocer's call reproduced in italics at the start of the *En You Ge Di Voice* poem by Ambrose Massaquoi (pp.48-49). The peppering of local words gives this collection a distinctly Sierra Leonean feel. At the end, Moses Kainwo urges readers to start writing themselves: "So, with pen and paper around, what stops you from writing?" (Afterword, p.140).

In 'Songs that Pour the Heart', the author biographies are shorter, less prominent and not stated by way of introduction as they are in 'Lice in the Lion's Mane'. Instead, each author is assigned one or two lines summarising their education and profession towards the back of the book.

Hallowell, again, is not well represented here with only three poems submitted the most successful and penetrable of which does not address the war but depicts the squalor and

blighted nature of the shanty towns of Freetown. The last stanza of *Their shanties* (p. 11) begins with the “Their shanties exist in them as a cup of life” implying the shanty towns enable the inhabitants to only subsist but Hallowell completes the poem with the sombre image “At dusk they return to their coffins in the guise of sleep”. Frederick Bobor James, meanwhile, aptly captures the absurd justifications for conflict and the futility of speaking out in *Still in Control* (pp.23-4) which reads as a long dramatic dialogue (without pause) between, I imagine, an army officer and a junior soldier. The piece lends itself strongly to performance. I have selected excerpts below:

My boy the gun is doing it for us
It keeps us on top of everything
B-u-t, S-i-r ...
But Sir, But Sir, What?
B-u-t, S-i-r
Soon we will be on top of nothing
You mean ...
The people are dying under us
Their settlements and property go up in flames
And we can neither put out the fire
Nor stop them from dying.....
.....
B-u-t, S-i-r
Can't some one hold his breath
Say the truth for once
(Extract from *Still in Control*, p.23-4)

Bobor James manages to capture the absurdity of the prevailing political situation and the extent of subservience and inability to challenge authority that exists however corrupt that

authority may be. From this perspective it is a strong piece as it highlights intergenerational tensions, the denial taking place and the impending implosion of the country. During the civil war, Sierra Leonean army soldiers were known to loot, kill and rape civilians and part of the post war recovery process included efforts to retrain and improve the accountability, moral and skills of the army. Borbor James' *New Beginning* (p.24), by contrast, takes a bird's eye view on the devastation of war. It recognises the horrors of the past and ends on a more positive note by calling for rebuilding. Writing about the egrets who have suffered under the war, Borbor James prompts readers to envisage how conflict devastates the wider environment and wildlife. The environment can also teach us about regeneration and recovery as it begins to grow "greener leaves". Borbor James is urging fellow Sierra Leoneans to do this through this poem.

This mournful tone is echoed in the works of other poets such as Kosonike Koso Thomas who, in *Country Alone*, laments the state of nation. The first and last stanzas of this are reproduced below:

I mourn today my country's woes
As war pollutes its fields and streams
Cries of victims displaced in droves
Float above in muted screams.

This war descending on this land
Saps vast pools of human kindness
It leaves behind a new wasteland
Of deep spite and bitterness.

(p.115-6)

Another poem by Kosonike Koso Thomas focuses on those victims whose hands were severed in the rebel attacks which was a common atrocity during the civil strife. In *When Will These Hands of Mine Grow Again* (p. 121-122 and also included in 'Kalashnikov in the Sun'), Koso Thomas is calling for the nation to weep and for the victims to find some solace in time and forgiveness. His strongest work is, however, *Trying to Forgive* which I discovered as a recording on the World Service African Performance website (see Boreham: 2007). In this, he manages to convey the difficulty of forgiveness as he continuously grapples with it and then find it fails him. Such a poem clearly charts the embryonic beginnings (the forwards and backwards steps) that mark the initial stages of post conflict recovery and rebuilding. There is a heart rendering recording of Koso Thomas reading *Trying to Forgive* an excerpt of which (the only text available) I have included below:

I hear your plea but now I'm losing
The spirit to forgive,
Just when it moves through me
And enters right into my thinking lobe.
I sense it fail to instruct the bits in me
Which respond to acts of love,
And keep me trying to forgive.

(extract from the BBC Africa Performance site, see Boreham: 2007)

Tatufway Mani Tumoe includes a poem called *Diamond Rhapsody* (p. 125-6) and *Kalashnikov in the Sun* (pp127-8) which forms the title of the third collection of poems 'Kalashnikov in the Sun'). In this Mani Tumoe laments the losses of war through ruminating on the weapon itself "...a Kalashnikov/ a rusty piece of imported/death" which lies in the sand a lizard sunning itself on the rifle butt. Twice asking the reader to "Think with/me;" he is

able to deepen our reading by making us step deeper into the piece. His last stanza finishes hopefully considering how to harness the energy and metal of the kalashnikovs for a life affirming purpose (reminding me of the Tree of Life sculpture in the British museum made out of dismantled guns from Mozambique):

Let us make the belly-full
of kola nuts
and then beat the Kalashnikov
impotent as weapons,
turn them into hoes
machetes and pick axes
and go turning and tilling
the soil anew.

In *We the People*, Tumoe identifies himself with the people of Sierra Leone who have suffered and put up with injustice and oppression. It ends with a rallying call:

NOW
We have decided to be with the people,
WE
CANNOT
TAKE
IT
ANY
LONGER
FOR
WE
ARE
A
PEOPLE

LOOKING
FOR
A
CHANGE
FOR
WE
The PEOPLE.
(p.129-130)

In *Fragments of Peace*, Tumoe reflects on the effect of conflict on writing itself:

We cannot write peaceful poems anymore.
While our huts burn in the sun
(extract p.131)

Moses Kainwo contributes nine pages to poems many of which carry religious emblems though none seem to be sufficiently complete or reach the standard or complexity of *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh* (which is again included in this collection). Fellow poet and editor, Mohammed Gibril Sesay, contributes a compelling piece *On Being Commissioned to Pray* (see full poem in Appendix 5) which I discussed briefly in the previous chapter. In this, he finishes with the following lines:

i'm sick and tired

with this game of apology to god
for what we do to ourselves

what a great misplacement of hands (extract, p.67)

Here Gibril Sesay is pointing blame towards the people of Sierra Leone themselves who look to God to interpret events and avoid responsibility and he is also pointing towards the government who wash their hands of responsibility. Written in 1993, this poem is broken into lines and stanzas of unpunctuated free verse which just manages to satisfy the eye in forming a loose pattern on the page. The paper space and lack of punctuation perversely enables the reader to embellish its reading with imagined hand movements and emotive expression. Through these techniques the message that people need to accept their responsibility for their country's predicament is powerfully underlined and I find this an accomplished piece of poetry.

Gibril Sesay's large offering of poems (16 pages in total) includes the second version of *Where will our child lie* (reproduced in the last section), the poem *Mama* (pp.78-9) about books coming between his relationship with his illiterate mother (echoing themes of Oket p'Bitek's renowned 'Song of Lawino', see Heinemann: 1984) and *There is no God* the last stanza of which follows:

But life
Is still soil bound
There is no God
Death is the end
We cannot soar
We are bound
To dust.
(Extract, p. 71)

Although not as stylistically accomplished, or as complex as *On Being Commissioned to Pray*, I have selected Gibril Sesay's *Orders from Below* as a key text from this collection (see

Appendix 4). Written in February 1996, *Orders from Below* highlights the malfeasance of Sierra Leone's leaders whilst also illustrating the 'fityai' of Gibril Sesay's poetry (the youthful disrespect and resistance that Shepler assigns to hip hop artists in Sierra Leone²⁴). The call and response nature of the text is best suited to performance. Here the poet is revolutionary, calling for change and critiquing the government with a clever use of the third person. In doing this Gibril Sesay can take a stand and belong – or at least represent– the voice of the masses. In recovering the poem in the last line with "ORDERS FROM BELOW" the people are able to regain their agency.

Farouk Sesay (contributing 15 pages) opens with a poem on one of his recurrent themes: the loss of poetry if unpublished. In *My Will*, he urges the reader "Don't bury my poetry...

Read my poetry
Sing my poetry
Act my poetry
The only legacy
I will leave
To the cruel world.
(Extract, p.81)

In *At Tellu Bongor* (see Appendix 4) Farouk Sesay laments the loss of 63 people massacred by the RUF rebels at Tellu Bongor with gruesome images of 'butchering' and 'raping' and 'dismembering limbs'. He explained during interviews that images of Tellu Bongor were amongst the first seen on television news and in newspapers by Freetown residents and

²⁴ Interestingly the lyrics Shepler studies (Shepler, 2010, p.634) at election time include "Now di Pa de Pack for Go" echoing the words in Gibril Sesay's poem.

represented a new realisation of the horrific nature of the war in the north. In *At Tellu Bongor* he is not only chronicling the event, he is livid and engaging the reader in mourning and bemoaning this horrendous loss and in calling for the butchers to receive the same treatment (see the penultimate and last lines of each stanza e.g. stanza 1: “pouncing to puncture / your heart for raping your mother at Tellu Bongor” and “firing to scorch you to ashes for entombing wombs at Tellu Bongor” in stanza 3 etc.) The rape of mother and butchery of father are issued as if taboos warranting curses or vengeance for defiling all that is decent and good. This poem reveals that Sierra Leone has been decimated by its own citizens and the use of “nursed rage” in the first stanza indicates that the anger has been building over time like a sleeping explosive.

At Tellu Bongor appears to serve a personal and socially therapeutic purpose in its expurgation of emotion and it would work well in performance with an audience that recollects the events and feelings invoked. It reveals the scale of the author’s anger and is surprisingly bloodthirsty on repeated reading. He calls for vengeance here despite considering that his writing performs a broad peace education function and I suspect Farouk Sesay was not conscious of this discrepancy (or its implications) when writing. Evidently, then, *At Tellu Bongor* cannot be categorised as a peace poem but it is a brilliantly impassioned illustration of the poetic response to war and part of a literary discourse on peace which is characterised by contestation and struggle in the initial phase in the midst of violent conflict. Despite its militancy this poem demonstrates a passionate commitment to nation. It is a lamentation, a dedication to the massacre, an edict, rant and a casting out. Using repeated (and changing) alliteration in each stanza, Farouk Sesay builds up the fury of the poem as it develops at racing pace. The amount of repetitions and alliterations enhance the sense of attack that comes from reading the poem and the growing, amplified anger.

At Tellu Bongor is also an example of a poet urgently responding to social events which (by virtue of their extremity) have seized energy and taken over other inspirations and thematic concerns that Farouk Sesay may have hoped to follow beforehand.

In what might be termed a confessional style, Farouk Sesay pours out his anguish in another of his contributions: *I Want to Cry*:

I want to cry
A cry of anguish
Anchored in pent up anger
For the devil Angels
Robbing and Raping humanity
(Extract, 2nd stanza, p.94).

There is also a short poem by Farouk Sesay on the suffering from conflict in *Somalia* (p. 85) which reveals a certain educational and world awareness (he mentions the Gaza strip too, albeit in the rather far-fetched phrase “like an Intifada in the Gaza strip of my mind” in the penultimate stanza of *At Tellu Bongor*). In *Letter to an Imprisoned Journalist* (pp.91-92) he asks what kind of prison he is in: “Is it the prison where children / Rape the motherland to quench their thirst?” In *When my Pen Pours Poetry* (p.93), Farouk Sesay again reveals a militancy and “gnawing hate for the / Monsters who munch / The mutton and leave / The morsels for the mongrels” yet in the last stanza he claims “When my pen pours poetry / It pours it for a social change” telling us that he is moving towards a new direction compared with *At Tellu Bongor* but unfortunately he does not show the reader what this change would look like. Overall, Farouk Sesay’s tone is often militant and his language can verge on aggressive as in his early poem *Come On* (from the ‘Lice in the Lion’s Mane’ collection, p.96) where he reminds us that his pen will “**stab** her [Africa’s] oppressors”.

In much milder and perhaps more palatable tone, Sydnella Shooter pours out her grief in *Lamentations*, another key text (See appendix 4) which warrants further analysis. This is a straightforward yet vivid example of verse lamenting what has befallen Sierra Leone. Here Sydnella manages to record the desecration in milder tone than Farouk Sesay as if she were recollecting an event noted in a book and returning to it later. Both moving and peaceable, it is about loss rather than retribution. The lack of punctuation (and unpunctuated final line) creates a sense of the poem trailing into the ether as if a kind of smoke forcing the reader to continue and follow the lament. Shooter manages to combine rhyme, alliteration and chiselled free verse effectively without the simple rhyme (“pain/vain” in the first stanza and knife/life in the second) diminishing the subject matter. From the first ‘b’ sound in the word “body” in the second stanza, there are repeated b-words (“butcher’s”, “blockades”, “blood”, “boomings”, “blind”, “beauty”, “bones” and finally “bullets” – the last word of the poem). These add to the feeling of being under gunfire with the b-sound literally booming throughout the poem framed by the incantatory and sorrowful refrain “Oh my Sierra Leone”.

The use of “withered” in the first line implies environmental devastation as well as human devastation and a sense of defeat in terms of the energy required and the ability to understand what is taking place. The description of “boomings never stop / ear-drums are perforated” suggest that bombs were going off in addition to gunfire. By this, Shooter transmits the magnitude of what was taking place through the imagined and real layering of sound in her work. At the end of the same, fourth, stanza, she writes “for every minute disasters are nurtured” which implies that certain people are to blame and have the power to stop this loss of life and livelihood. Here the reader may summon the involvement of national politicians or the Liberian ex-warlord Charles Taylor or, even, arms dealers. Despite writing “nature’s

beauty is now history” I feel that Shooter offers a more reconciliatory possibility (after time is given for lamentation) though I do not believe this is an intension of the poem.

Shooter’s *Cotton Tree* poem is included again in this collection and another powerfully evocative poem *My Root in Flames* (see Appendix 5 for full version) which begins as follows:

Massive eruption everywhere
consuming my town and bush
my cherished cradle my ancestral shrine
all ablaze

(Extract, p.101)

Returning again and again to the vision of ash, she uses language such as “incinerating Sierra Leone / Vomiting and flaring up” and the poem uses a striking, and daring, amount of rhyme and alliteration along with the repetition of the word “ash”. It ends with the profound statement “Atrocities eroding my root”. This is a remarkably strong (and surprisingly accomplished) poem and it was read at the opening ceremony for the Special Court in Sierra Leone.

Most, though not all, of these poems relate to the war, suffering and social crises. Other themes include *Independence* (Farouk Sesay, p.85) and Rwanda (in *Rwanda a Wonder* by Sydnella Shooter, p.104) as well as family, rain, love and religion. Some poems continue the emphasis on cultural roots, traditional customs and landmarks. Bridgette Olamide James (who resides in the UK) includes remembrances of Freetown in *Sights at P.Z* (see Appendix 5) to food and customs becoming affected by war such as *Foofoo in Greens* (p.21) and *Masks on Parade* which, in the second stanza moves to comment on violence: “Guns and guns / Too came / Unannounced / Out in war colours...(p.20)”

In the Afterword of the 'Songs that Pour the Heart', Moses Kainwo claims the collection is not committed thematically:

Rather it covers a multitude of themes as fall within the range of the poets themselves... The decade old war pushed a lot of these poets into exile but poetry reminds us of their continued presence in our midst (p.140)

Kainwo also urges the reader to write themselves and begins by saying that this book breaks the myth that "good poetry comes only from a foreign culture" for "all the poems contained in it have been written by Sierra Leoneans" (Afterword, p. 140). Indeed, this collection comes across as a book of contemporary Sierra Leonean poetry whose main preoccupation is the predicament of the nation. The reader is not instructed how to receive the poems in the same way as they are (by way of the author biographies and introductions) in 'Lice in the Lion's Mane'. I interpret them as serving a therapeutic role and one that narrates elements of a violent history, laments and agonises and sometimes points beyond the war. I view such poems as war literature in that most poets are responding, by necessity, to the times they are living in. Nearly all the work is gazing inwards at Sierra Leone. A few poems, such as Farouk Sesay's *Somalia* (p.85) and Shooter's *Rwanda A Wonder* (p.104), gaze outside yet these are focusing on conflict. Although written in English, they constitute part of an interior discourse in a country that continues to face severe poverty and development challenges. At this stage, though certain poems are provocative and broadly call for change (*At Tellu Bongor* by Farouk Sesay, Mani Tumoe's *We the People* (pp.129-130) and Gibril Sesay's *Orders from Below* for instance) they do not identify or envision alternatives or future scenarios. Hence, there is no recognisable ideology uniting this work except to condemn the atrocities of war and to begin the recovery process.

Kalashnikov in the Sun (2009)

By way of introductory quote, Rian has chosen the words of Tom Caurray whose work is included in this collection and to whose memory it is dedicated:

Forgetting would be an insult to one's humanity. To heal we must remember. We need to know what the scars are for. [Tom Caurray, July 2007, quoted on the inside page]

In a very poetically composed Foreword to the collection, Rian opens by likening the recent history born by Sierra Leonean writers to:

strings of days shadowed by such unfathomable breakage that the geography of peace – of mind, heart and country – is an acceptance of shards. And then it becomes a choice whether to fling the glass into the sky to cut the wings of birds and slice at the sun, or press them into the grout of our hearts and mosaic what's left of the world. [p.9, Foreword]

Describing an intensive, colourful and challenging four weeks gathering material and meeting Sierra Leoneans in many contexts, Rian then recalls her poetic exchanges with a girl who survived the war and had a child as a result of rape. "Sometimes the stories of those who survive are not as loud as the stories of those who do not" Rian claims (p.10). She concludes by stating that this collection is:

a revolt against background noise. It is a palm held up to the face of those who refuse to believe people do horrible things to each other... And it's for those who wake up each morning, in whatever corner of the world they stand, no matter what they've endured, who choose to bend down and gently pick up the shards... And we tilt the piece of glass up to the sun to catch the light. And we call it a good life, the best one we can have under the circumstances we're given or make or choose. And we call it survival, and we make it our own, and it's pure, sad, joyful, it's everything all at once, all the time, it's the space in between

the tears, it's the punctuation of love and hope, it's the stanzas of loss. It's poetry. [p.11
Foreword]

Rian (an American poet) appears concerned to frame this book as the gathering of these poetic shards into a mosaic that constitutes contemporary Sierra Leonean poetry. This framing (and the selection of poems included) is her prerogative as the editor and contributes to the nature of the 'contact' in Jakobson's model. Perhaps because of publishing this book in America, Rian has also chosen to provide bullet point information about Sierra Leone after the Foreword and to keep author biographies to two or three lines at the back.

Of the poets in this collection, those I met and interviewed include Tom Caurray, De Souza George, Frederick Borbor James, Moses Kainwo, Oumar Farouk Sesay and Sydnella Shooter. Farouk Sesay, Moses Kainwo, Frederick Borbor James and Ambrose Massaquoi all have a strong presence in this collection with 5-6 poems each.

As the book title suggests much of the writing looks to war. *Bush Path Labor Room* by De Souza George (pp.27-28) depicts the horrendous murder and butchery of a mother, N'demoh, and her foetus. This is an emotional outpouring, a lament for N'demoh and all like her which also chronicles real events (as with Sydnella's *The Dark Sunday*, p.88) to warn future readers, no doubt, of the horrific atrocities carried out under the auspices of war. De Souza George wrote a number of poems detailing the kinds of violence endured during the civil war in a booklet called *Words of War* (performed at the British Council in 2007). One of the more gruesome and disturbing poetry collections I have ever read, De Souza George seeks to chronicle the barbarity suffered and inflicted by fellow Sierra Leoneans. In 'Kalashnikov in the Sun', De Souza George includes the poem *Go Was Am* (see Appendix 5) which illustrates how the Krio term, literally meaning 'go wash him', was subverted by rebels to mean 'go kill

him' and was used flippantly and indiscriminately with deadly consequences. Similarly *The Hungry Orphan* (p. 30-31) speaks from the perspective of a boy who lost his parents to rebels in abominable circumstances. It makes for extremely disturbing reading. *Parliamentarians* (pp.32-33), in contrast, comprises a list of commandments organised in acrostic form. Moving from "A - lmighty God always invite / into your deliberations" to "N - ulify your national enemy, tribalism in any form", the broadness of De Souza George's directives, unfortunately, fail to link the imperatives tightly enough for the poem to be sufficiently persuasive.

Frederick Borbor James' *New Beginnings* is again repeated in this collection. His poem *The Armed Messiahs* (p.34-35) portrays the atrocities committed by rebels and how those who survived were made to sing and dance whilst being "subjected to a macabre show" then reduced to living in fear in the bush. There are extremely unsettling images such as the disembowelling of pregnant women and other abhorrent acts (described by Borbor James in stanza six) which I feel unable to reproduce here. Like De Souza George's war compositions, the poetic form struggles to carry the weight of such actual reportage without recourse to metaphor and simile. It is very hard not to recoil from these poems though they might be necessary (or feel necessary) to the author at the time. However, I advocate that writing poetry is, to varying extents, a transformative act; the more successful poems being able to transmute hard fact and experience and take us beyond this to a different space without diminishing the gravity of the subject matter. This space may alter our perceptions, deepen our sensitivity and emotional response and, ideally, open up the possibility of hope and transcendence. This can be achieved by finding resemblances to real events, allegories, by writing as a painter paints with the tools of colour, expression and framing and appealing to the realm of universal forms and human sympathies. In these terms Shooter's poem *The Dark Sunday*, though depicting a real event (the invasion of Freetown and coup under the AFRC in 1997) manages to capture

the feeling of that day through accurate descriptions interspersed through simile and metaphor as with these excerpts:

Cockcrows shrouded

By R.P.G.s

What could this be

Like termites

Radio's mute

The media has lost its tongue

Our stomachs churned

like wheels in mud.

(Extract, p. 88)

It could be argued that such writing is attempting to make an appalling reality more palatable and take away from the profound horror of describing actual events but I believe that Sydnella's approach enables the reader to better access what it must have felt like -as much as ever possible. In this manner, readers are able to stay with the poem when they would balk at a journalist account or photograph yet recognise the subject matter needs to be addressed.

Grafton Amputee by Kosonike Koso Thomas (p.62) is a very powerful and yet more personally distanced depiction of wheelchair bound amputees: "Heroes: their body parts they gave / In country's name". In *When Will These Hands of Mine Grow Again?* (p. 65) Thomas writes of the need to move on, to foster hope after the war and the physical amputation that people (and the nation) suffered. Reminiscent of the impressive poem *Revenge* by Luis Enrique Meja Godoy (2004) Thomas effectively evokes the scars of war and the need for healing.

On a similar theme, Farouk Sesay's *Fingers of Democracy* (p.82) charts how "democracy came with ink of my blood" referring to one of the reasons given for amputation of hands and lower arms during the war: to prevent voting. In *Staring* (reproduced in Appendix 5), Farouk Sesay's choicest contribution to this collection, he playfully portrays a staring match between himself and a girl through which "the sins of past generations" are presented. This could be used effectively for teaching peace education and Sierra Leonean literature in that it relates to an everyday experience yet conveys a deep divide within Sierra Leonean society: that of youth and the older generation both of whom (whether explicitly or not) tend to hold the other in some way responsible for the recent past (see Richards 2008, Peters 2011 and Boersch-Supan, 2012).

These texts reflect a wounded literature, bearing testimony to the depravity endured during the war and the enduring damage left in its wake.

Other poems embody a wider range of themes and issues under the broad category of social comment. Farouk Sesay's *Our cemeteries* (p.86) describe the state of Freetown's burial grounds and liken this to wider neglect. Moses Kainwo, meanwhile twice refers to rulers "like snakes among the people" in *The Rare Rulers* (p.57) and *A strong, strong Dance* (p.58).

Another poet, academic and politician, Wiltshire Johnson writes competently in an eight part sequence titled *Jail House Muck* of appalling prison conditions within which critiquing wider issues in society. In stanza 6, for example, he depicts a damaged and violent youth:

In most you sense a painful void,
Empty of background, crude, uncouth,
The animal in natal truth,
Callousness in misguided youth:
They'd lost their sense of self-esteem,

They'd grovel in the dirt, I'd seen
Some fight like dogs for scraps of food,
What dignity there may remain
Is quickly crushed by threats of pain;
Violence rules at every plane.
(p. 46)

Two more accomplished poems include *The Winding Road* by Eldred Jones (see Appendix 5) and *Bo of the People* (p. 69-72) by Ambrose Massaquoi. *The Winding Road* encourages the reader ("We who have been through fire and come out refined... We who outstared the lightning bore the rain") to draw strength from his survival and move forwards heralding the dawning of a new Sierra Leone. Despite Jones' elder status (he was born in 1925) this poem points towards the future and is fundamentally a rallying call for reconstruction and moving forward. More than other poets have attempted, he also outlines (albeit using rather hackneyed allusions) what needs to be done to recover and move forward as seen in this extract from the fourth stanza (p.48)

Let us retrieve our broken tools
Hone once again our broken hoes
Plough up the land sow fresh seeds of truth
Caress the mortar of the earth and build new homes
Eat but let others eat their share
Guard freedom with our watchful eyes
Woo justice back to centre ground
Restore our children to their youth
They will eat bread again not stone
Our women's breasts will suckle a new nation

Ambrose Massaquoi's *Bo of the People* is a commanding and masterful poem summoning the indomitable spirit of the second city in Sierra Leone, Bo in celebration of defending the city against attack in 1994. With fierce invocation, Massaquoi writes as the inviolable and impregnable Bo resisting the rebels and daring anyone to attack:

I am Bo
The Potter's Clay
Crafted to cradle
The prototype of
THE PEOPLE's indomitability

Those without my spirit
THEPEOPLE is my spirit
Catch the dysentery of
Fear of Death
At the blast of my name

...
Let degenerates come
O let the RUF come
With rough tactics
Let them come

(extract from *Bo of the People* by Ambrose Massaquoi, 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' pp.69-72)

Claiming powers from secret society and past resistance figures such as Kendekai (who is said to have withstood Siaka Stevens' security unit soldiers), Massaquoi jeers at the "Qaddafi trained / Taylor paid / Sankoh led / Real rebels / Renegades / Collaborators and claims "Machetes and Bayonets / Bend on the ironstone of my belly". Using the refrain "I am Bo" (which manages to bellow despite a quiet reading of it) Massaquoi rebukes the rebels,

demeaning them in the shadow of the city's great strength and warrior spirit. Welding past to present, clay pot with RPG and encapsulating the magical and fearful nature of the men's secret society (Poro) with animal totems of tiger and mamba, Massaquoi delivers a blazing, masculine, representation of his city successfully creating what Hamilton terms 'telluric' in Chapter 1 -coming from the very soil (Hamilton: 1979: 51). In alluding to clay, and to the moulding and forming of Bo, he creates an idea of Bo forged from past encounters, by people, traditions and from sheer will.

Of all the collections, 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' contains more vivid descriptions of conflict and violence although there is a remarkable crossover in writing and repetition of work throughout the collections. Shooter, who usually contributes some work on cultural aspects of Sierra Leone, only includes poems relating to the rebels arriving in Freetown in this collection, see *The Dark Sunday* and *Freetown in the Heat* (pages 88 and 89). However, there are poems on other themes e.g. *The Ancient Oil Palm* by Thomas Kpukumu (p.67) and the power of words in *Weigh your Words* by Tom Caurray ("So sages warn / beware of words", p.22) and *I write what I feel* (p.83) and *My poem in your poem* (p.84) both by Farouk Sesay.

As the latest publication, 'Kalashnikov in the Sun' looks back and makes social comment. The focus is predominantly on recollecting the past and, to a lesser extent, documenting the present. The future (which I had expected some writers would be envisaging with foresight- in bold colours or via dystopian dour warning) was not the subject matter of these poems. I suspect the reason for this is that it is still too early and the proximity of the civil war has almost monopolised poetic themes.

I would like to add two further poems to this examination which were given to me in Freetown by their author Tom Caurray: *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* and *Healing*

Wounds (both found in Appendix 4). Recalling meeting with Caurray in 1995, Gberie explains that Caurray had been expelled from Milton Margai for being critical of the ruling junta (the, then, NPRC). In the BBC World Service programme (see Boreham, 2007) Caurray describes his abduction by rebels and an extract of *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* is provided on the website. On the several occasions when I met with him, I was struck by the extraordinary pathos of his work in relationship to Sierra Leone and his booming, passionate, near-Shakespearean declaratory reading style and I regard these two poems as key texts in this study. The first, *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* is a nostalgic lament which is utterly without hope and yet possesses a quality of tremendous beauty and sadness. It is a rich and vast poem chronicling the total destruction of what Sierra Leone once was announced in the second stanza: “Love and Honour, Truth and Pride, are gone, / Their labour lost.” He then describes the layers of generations who have become more cursed leading to the:

... sassy, rough-hewn, miscreant youth

Whose gifts are rape, ravage and chaos,

Are now the wheels of genocide.

Poignantly utilising environmental images as a way to reveal the extent of dissolution and the offensive nature of war²⁵, Caurray replaces his recollection of the smell of “earth perfume” after rain with the offensive “scent of smouldering flesh” (stanza six). He then describes the death of “cheerful twigs on the bush-road edge,” (stanza seven), “shy rivers”... stained with blood” (stanza nine) and a very moving account of the effect of the war on the birds “Their twitter, chirp, and raucous chatter gone, / Vanquished by the ill cacophony of war.” (stanza

²⁵ Interestingly, there is a developing new academic field of ‘environmentalism’ which explores environmental depiction in literature. See The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (<http://www.asle.org/>).

ten) and “The woodpecker is undertaker,... bees hum the dirge” (stanza eleven). *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* imparts a sorrowful tone of hopelessness and decay as well as revealing the huge depth of affection that Caurray feels for his country.

Compared to Sydnella’s *Lamentations*, this poem charts a wider historical loss and desecration of what Caurray has valued, admired and respected which leads him to say goodbye and leave his beloved country of birth (he did leave in difficult circumstances for America). Caurray feels that what he has known and loved will not return. In *Lamentations*, by contrast, although Sydnella writes in the last stanza “nature’s beauty is now history”, it feels as though the poem belongs more to a particular moment. Furthermore, as Sydnella is not abandoning the country this could imply that the situation may be more recoverable than the one Caurray portrays.

In the much shorter poem, *Healing Wounds* (written in December 1999 in Wisconsin) Caurray reveals a more hopeful mode despite the finality of the previous poem. *Healing Wounds* is written in a much milder tone, is pared down and has a more contemporary feel to it (perhaps as a result of the author’s exposure to America and American writers). It is, nonetheless, a powerful and extremely moving piece which captures a combination of beauty, melancholy and hope and transforms them into an atmospheric mood as if a minor chord were sustained throughout the poem. The civil war is not mentioned except by referring to “the scorched and wounded rocks below” and via the title itself. In this poem Caurray uses words of healing throughout the poem e.g. “mended”, “healing”, “blooming”, “mothering”, “caring” and “solace” using the environment to depict the possibility of recovery and renewal. This smaller scene of rocks and ferns also depicts a tentative step towards believing in a future for Sierra Leone and in hope returning more widely. By not naming the war or land explicitly, Caurray, perhaps subconsciously, makes this feel all the more precious and new-born. When

interviewed by Penny Boreham for the BBC (see Boreham, 2007), Caurray discussed writing his poem *Healing Wounds* in reflection when he was safely outside Sierra Leone in the United States. In this interview he is much more positive about his relationship with Sierra Leone than when I met him later. He describes this relationship as carried privately within himself:

Most of my mind was in Sierra Leone but I carry the spiritual side of Sierra Leone within me, my own Sierra Leone could never be hurt by anyone, I love Sierra Leone so much you see.

You have to love Sierra Leone as you love your woman, let's make lady Liona beautiful...

Literature for Peace

Taken together these poems can be seen to constitute an evolving discourse on peace, a location for writer-intellectuals to respond to, and engage with, social issues and recent national events. Writing provides a space for the evolution of new ideas which can be filtered through the poetic imagination and speak, albeit in limited manner, to a Sierra Leonean audience. Such a location for peace is distinctive in that it offers a non-combative arena for contestation and expression by national writers from different ethnic backgrounds and political affiliations. Writers have, in effect, a supra-citizen role in that they potentially command the direction for the emotive, moral and imaginative recovery that needs to take place alongside political and economic reconstruction and development.

Having considered the poems in these collections and submissions, I propose that certain texts can be seen to exemplify an essential social role in their contribution to the emergent discourse on (and for) peace in Sierra Leone. These poems reveal a range of first literary responses to the civil war and its aftermath written by educated Sierra Leoneans disillusioned by traumatic events yet grappling to find the appropriate words with which to construct a literature for peace. How this body of Sierra Leonean war poetry represents a potentially

transformative revisioning process, provides space for the development of new social ideas and reveals the stages of post-war recovery will be explored in the following, and concluding, chapter.

CONCLUSION

There is a certain paradox about the fact that such a destructive war could fuel such immense creativity, about the license of terror leading to unhindered free expression of the sort these poets represent. (Gberie, 2009)

Summary of findings

At a time of chronic underdevelopment, high illiteracy levels and in the aftermath of prolonged violent conflict, the analysis of writing offers a prism through which to view the myriad challenges facing Sierra Leone. At this particular juncture in time it reveals a society in transition seeking the real and imaginative underpinnings for recovery and a literary landscape both in decline (in terms of lack of books, reading and neglect of education) and in expansion (in terms of the number of socially inspired poets to have emerged during this period).

In conclusion, I contend that writing in Sierra Leone represents what I call a location of peace. By this, I mean writing offers a non-confrontational space for responding to the recent civil war and its aftermath and, potentially at least, for the reorientation of social ideas. The distinctive nature of the conflict (in which ethnicity, though prevalent, was not central) did not lead to cleavages in support for one faction or another. Thus the emerging literary arena allows for contestation and disagreement in a non-violent, non-partisan context. Creative writing has not taken on a propaganda role but appears to foster a shared sense of being Sierra Leonean and is much less divisive than other forms of writing. Nonetheless, this literary space is limited by its elite nature and inevitably by the absences of other voices and concerns.

The experience of living through a period of violent conflict, for the most part, stimulated creativity leading to emotive outpourings amongst new and existing writers as well as efforts to chronicle and make sense of what had taken place. The texts produced and the discourses surrounding them provide an alternative platform for Sierra Leone's writer-intellectuals to engage in social and political debate, to point out errors of the past (and present) and renew the national imagination in an era characterised by fatalism. The practice of writing represents a form of social engagement and the experience of 'being a writer' fosters the desire to bring about social transformation both through and beyond the realm of writing.

The writers I met and interviewed are forthright about their Sierra Leonean identity and socially motivated such that they see themselves as social actors. Indeed, untangling the labyrinthine trajectories which led Sierra Leone to this point continues to be the primary focus of writers in the post-war context. Poems from this period deserve to be recognised as a distinct new genre of Sierra Leonean war poetry revealing the complex phases of adjustment and recovery that have taken place. Embedded in these texts are the various narratives on conflict and peace consciously or unconsciously articulated by the educated Sierra Leonean literary elite.

The very existence of such a body of work amidst the dire social, educational and literary conditions facing the country is a testament to the tenacity and enduring nature of literature. However, without adapting to the realities of illiteracy, changing technologies and habits and without better connection and interaction with local readers and audiences, such durability will be challenged in the long term and literature will lose its rootedness in the locality.

Within this concluding chapter I discuss these findings in more depth. In doing this, I amalgamate literary and sociological approaches (Chapters 1 and 2) with field work and

textual analysis (Chapters 3 and 4) to support an interdisciplinary argument that poetry in post-war Sierra Leone represents a discourse for peace. In the last section, I consider the limitations of this study describing difficulties encountered and unexpected developments and findings.

Writing as a location of peace

The writers I interviewed and their poems are helping to construct a literature for peace in Sierra Leone. In bearing literary witness to the past (and demonstrating the regenerative potential of turning the earth from visions of war to remembrance and reminders of pleasure as well as pain) literature offers, what I refer to as a location of peace. This is an expression I have adapted from my previous study of Conflict Analysis. In this field, individual conflicts are analysed or mapped through the detailed identification of, for example, specific actors, political figures, triggers, issues, histories, victims, areas affected as well as enclaves of relative normality. These are the spaces or ‘locations’ that during wartime, remain peaceful. This could be a physical town or institutions such as hospitals or civil society organisations and NGOs. Such enclaves, once identified, can be supported and strengthened to create what are known as peace constituencies²⁶. What I am arguing is that literature is one of these: a

²⁶ A peace constituency is defined by Berghof Foundation as:

a network of social and political actors (groups and individuals, especially influential leaders ... who have an interest in crisis prevention and peaceful forms of conflict settlement). Peace constituencies are expected to effectively counter ‘war constituencies’ (networks of those who benefit from war) and ‘cultures of violence’. Influential middle-range actors from different communities in a society who are willing and able to build bridges to like-minded people across the lines of conflict are seen as key for peace constituencies. These constituencies are citizen-based and grow from within a society, but can be supported by external actors.

(<http://www.berghof-foundation.org/en/glossary/peace-constituency>). Accessed 17 April 2012.

location of peace. It is doubly so in that it remains a unique space for non-violence and cross-communal dialogue through the cohesive function of English and, through texts and the discussion surrounding them, literature contributes to the wider national discourse for peace and to imagining and envisioning lasting peace too. In this way, literature contributes to social harmony and counterbalances those discourses which may favour a return to conflict or severely limit the national view and vision.

The writing, reading and discussion of literature provides a space for Sierra Leone's writer-intellectuals to address urgent social issues and, ultimately, to narrativise, re-imagine and revision social ideas in the aftermath of civil conflict. My argument has been shaped by desk and field research and inspired by aspects of theory from conflict and post-colonial cultural theorists including Jabri (1996), Richards (1996), Lederach (2005), Said (2004) and Gikandi (2012).

In 'Discourses on Violence', Jabri confirms that war is rarely a one-off aberration and, instead, the social structuration of society allows for the recurrence of violent conflict (Jabri, 1996, p.150). Inevitably discourses reproduce the existence of war as a potential social continuity. Therefore, my research suggests that in a context such as Sierra Leone, literary discourses may offer an alternative, countering space in which the dominant principles of society can be reassessed and discussed. Even amateur writers experience a heightened sense of social agency by participating in the constructive social practice of writing and by sharing work and ideas. During the civil war years, writing offered an important location (and refuge) from which to respond and it continues to provide a location for creative responses to social crisis in the post war period.

I would also suggest that the civil war itself can be ‘read’ as an extreme, alternative discourse in response to a social and political context which severely limited participation, expression and access to resources and social mobility. Reflecting Richards’ (1996) early view that war is an outlet for frustrated creativity, I again put forward that writing offers a vent or space for expressing emotion and considering social ideas in an imaginative, non-threatening and democratic context. Indeed Gerhard Stilz outlines a similar idea in relation to the preventative and transformative potential of literary space:

literature and the educational reading and comprehension of literary texts proves to be an invaluable and irreplaceable site of negotiation. Literature can take the role of a passionate but non-violent public and educational forum through which we may possibly understand and come to terms with contested spaces and their burning questions before they kindle new forms of terror²⁷.

Such a literary space in Sierra Leone offers an arena for emergent intellectuals and complements that of more popular local musicians. (Mostly younger and less educated, musicians reach much wider audiences echoing concerns of corruption, social need and youth exclusion as well supplying provocative ‘sexy girl’ dancehall-style lyrics). The civil war could be read, in fact, as a crisis of education and literacy as few of the fighters were able to write or succeed in education or had the capacity or ability to formulate realistic agendas for social change or to express themselves via forms of positive social engagement. The absence of outlets and near-collapse of educational provision and employment opportunities meant that, for some combatants, participation, recognition and access to resources through rebel (or

²⁷ See Stilz, G. (2007) ‘Introduction: Territorial Terrors – Home to Cosmopolis’ in Gerhard, S (ed.) ‘Territorial Terrors: Contested Spaces in Colonial and Postcolonial writings’. Germany: Konigshausen and Neumann. p.15

government forces) action became a viable way of life and anomic form of communication or discourse.

The social function of writers in a post-conflict context

It is evident from Chapter 1 that there are no existing studies relating to the social role of writing in post-war African contexts and, therefore, it is necessary to borrow and extend ideas from various literature and social theorists and reformulate these with insights gained from my own analysis and field work. Hollist (1991), for example, emphasises the teaching role of writers which tends to provoke discussion rather than revolution and this discursive nature is still a feature of Sierra Leonean literature today. Whilst Ngugi frames writing as an inherently political act (Ngugi, 1981b), Achebe's work and commentary reveals how poetry becomes the key mode of literary expression in the immediacy of war and that being a writer carries with it an assumed social function. For Achebe, writing in his biography (2012) the role of the writer is:

not rigid and depends to some extent on the state of health of his/her society. In other words, if a society is ill the writer has a responsibility to point it out. If the society is healthier, the writer's job is different. (Achebe, 2012, p.57)

According to this view, Achebe would argue that war makes the social role more acute and that Sierra Leonean writers will feel a strong responsibility to improve society which will inevitably dominate their work at this point. Indeed, in 1970 Achebe remarked that people "reinterpret their lives and roles in new lights" in a period of conflict (cited by Ogungbesan, 1974, p.47, see Chapter 1) and hence the writers I interviewed are situated in this liminal and

shifting post-conflict phase where the writing of poetry takes on extra significance and force. Quoting Burness, Obiechina suggests that poetry can also “find a way to point, however tentatively, at prospects and possibilities of healing” (Obiechina, 2002, p.557).

For Said, writers and intellectuals are related and interconnected sharing a similar role²⁸.

Indeed, he cites the role of the writer:

as an intellectual testifying to a country or region’s experience, thereby giving that experience a public identity forever inscribed in the global discursive agenda (Said, 2004, p.127).

Writers “may provide leadership no longer provided in dynastic regimes” referring to a moral and spiritual role (Said, 2004, p.122). In a Sierra Leonean context this could apply to writers providing an emotional conscience and promoting renewal of the national imaginary not provided by the state. Writers create alternative discourses and construct fields of co-existence (see Said, 2004, pp. 141-142) and along with intellectuals represent:

a kind of counter memory, with its own counter discourse that will not allow conscience to look away or fall asleep. (Said, 2004, p.142).

The restriction of party political discourses (including in journalism) may, in effect, force intellectuals to use creative writing as a means to comprehend and articulate ideas. Literature provides a safe space to discuss contested issues and writers play a pivotal cultural brokerage or gatekeeper role in filtering between western, nation state and subaltern discourse and translating lived experience through poetic narratives. I suggest that literature be conceptualised as an arena for social change where writers can creatively manipulate social

²⁸ Note that Said suggests that writers hold a more honorific place than intellectuals because of their capacity for creation and originality (2004, p.127).

realities into past and future narrative scenarios which have the capacity to reconstruct and transform the Sierra Leonean imagination. Membership of such an arena brings with it varied rewards even in the absence of an extended national readership. One such reward is that membership appears to act as a step or platform to increased social awareness and action.

Poetry as a discourse for peace

The idea that writing represents a location of peace could be misconstrued as an amorphous concept. What I am proposing, however, is that writing be conceived of as a non-violent space and vantage point inhabited by Sierra Leonean authors and intellectuals. From such a space, poetry can be understood to represent a discourse for peace firstly via the texts or poems created, and secondly, via the discourses generated amongst writers and through the practice of writing. I will now elaborate on these two categories using the insights gained from textual analysis and from undertaking field work.

Discourse within texts

Poems inform us about the process of recovery

Many of the poems examined in the previous chapter were stimulated by living through a particularly challenging period in Sierra Leone's recent history and some authors started to write as a result of their experiences and concerns. The difficulty and complexity of what is required to recover emotionally and gain trust in society and the polity after an extremely brutal civil war is poignantly portrayed in these poems. Koso Thomas, (see his work in

Boreham, 2007), writes about how difficult it is to forgive while others attempt to express the enormity of what has been lost and the horrors of certain events and behaviours. There are dirges, laments, veiled calls for retribution and beautifully crafted calls for healing and we can recognise transitions over time as poets move in tone and position. Farouk Sesay, for example, becomes less fervent and enraged in *When My Pen Pours Poetry* compared to *At Tellu Bongor*. Sydnella Shooter moves from *Lamentations* to the tentative possibility of continuity and survival implied by the *Cotton Tree* poem (though I believe the Cotton Tree poem was written earlier, before the invasions of Freetown). Tom Caurray moves from utter despair and hopelessness in *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* to the watchful recognition of renewal in *Healing*.

The poems I have explored contribute to the discourse on peace and conflict transformation in the following ways:

i) By chronicling the past and lamentation

Through chronicling the horrors of the past, by lamentation and the pouring out of emotion (of anger as well as sorrow) the reader is moved to recoil from violence and feel their own grief shared. These poems are a testament to Sierra Leone's traumatic past and a warning for the future. By virtue of their wounded nature and subject matter this body of work could easily be identified under a category of 'war literature' and as 'national literature' in that they offer a "vivid recreation of such traumatic events in the nation's recent past" (See Brown's discussion of what constitutes Gambian literature in Brown, 1991, p.53). The process of chronicling and lamentation is not without complication however. In Moses Kainwo's *Letter to Corporal Foday Sankoh*, for example, we discover how difficult it is for everyone (writers

included) to wholeheartedly adopt a stance of forgiveness and embrace peace and hence this struggle becomes intrinsic to the emergent discourse. Interestingly, although some of the poems reveal anger and, in the case of *At Tellu Bongor* veiled calls for retribution, none of these poets (to my knowledge) have ever physically actualised such anger, used or found their work to catalyse anything but positive action. In fact, I suspect that certain writers are unaware of the extent of their own vehemence. In itself, this is testament to the trauma of their lived-experience which normalises otherwise abnormal emotion. The best of these poems, such as Tom Caurray's *Farewell to a Native Dying Land*, manage to achieve an incredible pathos and reveal a depth of love for homeland. Other strong poems in this category include *Lamentations* by Sydnella Shooter and also De Souza George's disturbing poetic accounts of war in *Bush Path Labor Room* and *The Hungry Orphan* as well as *I Want to Cry* by Farouk Sesay.

ii) By criticising aspects of the polity and society

Mohammed Gibril Sesay's *Orders From Below* and *On Being Commissioned to Pray* (and a poem called *Friendly Fire* submitted by Nathaniel Pierce) challenge the normal state of affairs as being the only option. Based on author claims in field work interviews, I had expected this category of poem to be more significant. On reflection, I suspect that the recent experience of war has diverted attention from this task as writers are concerned to chronicle and lament rather than critique at this stage.

iii) By promoting the positive aspects of identifying as a Sierra Leonean

Despite the dyslogistic nature of many poems (e.g. *Farewell to my Dying Native Land* by Tom Caurray and *On Being Commissioned to Pray* by Gibril Sesay), these writers are determined to hold on to their Sierra Leonean-ness and to reconstruct and redeem national identity (though the latter aspirations are only nascent at this stage). Certain poems, such as Sydnella Shooter's poem *The Cotton Tree* portray a re-identification with positive aspects of being Sierra Leonean. In this, she describes the tree as an enduring national symbol, accentuating Sierra Leonean heritage in a way which bolsters the national image without wholly negative connotations. Ambrose Massaquoi's *Bo of the People* meanwhile transmits an indomitable spirit of resistance and endurance confirming that Sierra Leoneans (especially Bo citizens) survived before the war and will continue to do so afterwards and must celebrate their strength, distinct nature and heritage.

iv) By urging for active change in thinking and behaviour

The most persuasive and adequately formulated of poems in this category focus on acceptance and forgiveness - perhaps the extent of change which can realistically be conceived of at this juncture. Of these, Tom Caurray's *Healing Wounds* simplistically and succinctly evokes the need for forgiveness and healing along with Koso Thomas' *I'm Trying to Forgive* and another poem submitted by Nathaniel Pearce called *How I Forgive*. Similarly, Borbor James' *New Beginning*, though depicting the horror of violence, ultimately calls for forgiveness and rebuilding. Poems such as *We the People* by Tumoe and *Change* by Farouk Sesay are unable to offer anything more than the desire for change at this stage. Even Jones' *The Winding Road* and Tumoe's *Kalashnikov in the Sun* only suggest, in somewhat clichéd language that people return to their tools and plough the land again.

None of the poets formulate clear ideas for what must change or portray imaginary futures for Sierra Leone in which circumstances may have improved (or worsened as a warning). I am not suggesting that Sierra Leonean, or any other post-conflict African poetry, should outline an explicit social and political agenda but I was surprised that writers' social visions were not as developed as they stated during field work. My explanation for this absence is that Sierra Leoneans are so overwhelmed by the enormity of what needs to be done, (managing the economic and psychological fallout from the civil war years, tackling endemic corruption, lack of safety nets, poor healthcare, education, housing, employment, security etc.) that this stifles the formulation of vision – even for extremely imaginative writers.

Interestingly, these poems are not being used to promote forgiveness through understanding and imagining the perpetrators of violence. This is one of the key aspects of peace education (which many of the writers purport to be their aim). By accessing the lives of others through literature people can develop a sensitivity and understanding for how it must feel to face very different circumstances and contexts and, hence, build empathy. However, this kind of writing has, so far, appeared more in biography and fiction than poetry from writers based outside the country (e.g. Beah, 2007 and Jarrett-Macaulay, 2005). This may be due to the proximity to war which has entangled local poets in a past which still imposes itself on their present. The precariousness of contemporary social conditions, further, means that literary imaginations are overtaken by real, concrete concerns and poetry moves closer to emotive journalistic discourse. The pervading feeling is also one of a shared sense of blame and even recourse to faith (and fate) for the predicament in which Sierra Leone finds itself. There is not a clear delineation of who the 'enemies' are especially since communities were sensitised to accept returning combatants and view them as victims of brutal exploitation.

The body of work examined in Chapter 4 reflects the transition of responses to conflict and loss and the struggle and contestation implicit in creating a textual discourse for peace. Poems are characterised initially by anger, bitterness and hopelessness (yet sometimes in the guise of promoting peace). Next we find tentative formulations of acceptance, self-belief and national confidence combined with revisiting past acts of violence. However, violence begins to be narrativised and made sense of in terms that necessitate or support existing aspects of social transformation. This is the point at which we learn the lessons of a conflict and use these to underline more hopeful expressions of the present day. Gradually the focus moves from forgiveness and trust-building to re-identification (in this case as Sierra Leoneans), tentative renewal, to more open -and honest- social criticism followed by aspiration, re-evaluation of social ideas and the emergence of positive social visions and imagined future scenarios.

Texts provide space for rethinking and reimagination

Through the production of imaginative texts, writers have the capacity to manifest alternative realities and social visions. Literature can encourage the re-narrativisation of events and provide an emotive outlet for national trauma and for rerouting personal preoccupations into the imagination and articulation of national goals by placing personal aspirations within these expanded borders (what has become known as ‘envisioning’, see Dugan, 2003).

Arthur Smith described the war as enabling a regeneration of societal values and a “literary catharsis” (informal interview with Smith, 2008). This enabled writers to begin to explore and reformulate social ideas through literature and writing has provided the outlet and platform for the emergence of new resident writer-intellectuals. Therefore, creative writing in Sierra Leone offers a location for the reorientation of social ideas and provides a countering discourse to

that which reinforces the status quo - the ideas and values that have permeated society to become the “common-sense” view or ordering principles (see Gramsci for a Marxist interpretation, 1971, p.197). In Sierra Leone this status quo has had to accommodate a brutal and complex civil war as part of the established political order.

The “intimate intertwining” of the relationship between writing and the production of a new social order in the wake of crisis echoes Gikandi’s assertion that creative writing was the key mode of expression for African intellectuals at the end of colonialism providing the space in which a new moral order could be envisaged and outlined (Gikandi, Keynes Lecture, University of Cambridge, 2012). I suggest it is the void that conflict has created, the disillusionment with post-colonial African politics and the absence of alternative platforms which has prompted writers to respond to social agendas – to chronicle, critique, explore identity and call for change – *through* writing and through the discourses surrounding it. In so doing, Sierra Leonean poets gain access to the public arena as the nation’s writer-intellectuals and their output constitutes a new body of post-war poetry.

Texts as war literature

This study comes at a critical point for the establishment of Sierra Leonean literature and at a time of growing interest in the field especially amongst American-based scholars. As a result of western exposure to Sierra Leone through media coverage of the civil war and due to the small output of literature, it is likely that new material will be assimilated into a broad genre of ‘war literature’ (or in this case ‘war poetry’) owing to its historical proximity to the civil war. Indeed, by focusing my study on the war period and its aftermath I am potentially aiding

the creation of such a ‘war literature’. Although I am not solely focused on literature about the war, I have used the war period to delineate the selection material.

Many writers witnessed the breakdown of society into violence and disorder (during the two periods when the rebel war encroached into Freetown). These writers, a sizeable proportion of whom are journalists and involved in education, are now engaged in the subsequent period of lamentation, interrogation into causes, urging forgiveness and consolidating social cohesion. Their work contributes a new phase to the canon of Sierra Leonean literature yet continues to perpetuate national literary trends such as its strong discursive element. Indeed, Palmer recognises that history has a great influence on Sierra Leonean writing: “All these events have left a soaring impression on the imagination of Sierra Leoneans and can be reflected in the creative works produced over the years” (Palmer, 2008, p. 14).

In the future, it is likely that commentators will discuss 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation writers in terms of their proximity to the civil war in much the same way as Nigerian civil war literature is discussed today. The authors I have focused on are, therefore, the 1st generation in terms of Sierra Leonean ‘war literature’. Some of their work was written very quickly in response to traumatic events, perhaps too quickly, although fiction has been slower in coming.

Interestingly, British novelist and commentator, Martin Amis, said that he thought it took at least four years for a traumatic event to work its way into creative writing; into the body, psyche, heart and spirit of an author (speaking at the Hay Sessions, 2012). Too much proximity and lack of distance with which to filter and transcend is evident in the jarring, at times abhorrent, nature of poems detailing with atrocities such as De Souza George’s ‘Words of War’ collection.

The 1st generation writers in Nigeria wrote few novels initially (as is the case in Sierra Leone). In fact, even after the Second World War in the UK, it took 10 years for novels to experience a renaissance with the publication of books such as Tolkien's 'Fellowship of the Ring' and Golding's 'Lord of the Flies'. The initial period after the war was known as the age of anxiety following the experience of conflict and the use of the atom bomb. In researching Nigerian civil war literature, Krishnan (2010) suggests the early first generation Nigerian civil war narratives presented a vision of the nation as a viable and shared community. In recent years, however, the narrativisation of this conflict has taken a different approach, refusing to assimilate the conflict into a discourse of nationality and national experience. Instead the war has been represented as a "still-open conflict, reflecting the fragmentation of personal and communal identity, whose traces linger in the fractured state of the postcolony" (Krishnan, 2010). She argues that first generation Biafran novelists tended to seek narrative closure as a result of proximity to the trauma whereas distance from the event has enabled contemporary authors to use more ambiguous forms highlighting the instability and volatility of the post-colonial 'Nigerian' condition. In this way current 3rd generation writers represent a "shadow cast over the national imaginary" (Krishnan, 2010).

Since I began working on this study, I have started to wonder if literature is stained and wounded by war in the same way that infrastructure is broken and bullet-ridden. Poets who should be free to create are forced by circumstance to write out about conflict, violence and loss and this, unavoidably, colours their work. War leaves a collective memory of suffering as its heritage as well as damage to buildings and relationships that requires effort and the passing of time to mend. In the same way, perhaps, the literature of a nation becomes polluted and damaged by war and requires bolstering and reconstruction. Certainly, in Sierra Leone, the war undermined any progress that had been made in the educational and arts infrastructure

and writers today face a country without functioning, accessible and affordable bookshops and without a constant source of electricity or light for reading almost extremely limited publishing options.

Some of the poems coming out of the civil war and post war period can be read as the effects of that war (and years of misrule and neglect) and, thus, as ‘damaged’ literature and a literary reaction to extreme political and social crisis. In such circumstances, I would argue, we need to look beyond the damage to retrieve the original intension, the kernel of idea or essence in the ruins which can be built upon to construct a recognised and socially useful literature that can speak passionately about the past and imaginatively for the future. Such new writing may contain the seeds with which to mount a literary recovery and reconstruction by challenging and countering those forces which marginalise literary discourse and its participation in national debate. Hence, through the writing of poetry, plays and fiction, new possibilities are imagined and the potential for transformation is awakened and transmitted to a war-affected and politically disillusioned society. The production of a poem in such a context represents a radically optimistic and constructive act as Gibril Sesay explained, so poetically, when interviewed by Boreham (2007):

The poet is there being in the driving seat of telling, being in the driving seat of healing, being in the driving seat of hope, giving hope, an announcer of the rainbow... you know, it’s wow, the deluge is over, this poem is a rainbow.

Certainly the war has been the primary influence on this generation’s poetry. Although some of the early poems explore aspects of Sierra Leonean culture and depict life in Freetown (e.g. *Sights at PZ* by Bridgette Olamide James - a nostalgic piece which was popular with the

reading group) there are few poems that don't in some way address either the war or social issues. Poems which mention family, such as *Where will our child lie?* by Gibril Sesay, portray need rather than a celebration of familial or personal love. I suspect that this is due to a range of factors: writers feeling that a social response is required of poetry at present, that the exigencies of recent (and current) social conditions demand that poems abandon other concerns or authors are simply not sharing their poems about love and nature, for example. One might have expected the experience of living through a period of volatility to have sharpened the appreciation of beauty and relationships as these are potentially threatened and appear more vividly by comparison but this has not been evident in my study.

This new genre of post war Sierra Leonean literature of which poetry, I suspect, is only the first wave, will add to the evolving, yet little known, national canon. These texts represent a damaged literature and are inextricably linked to their social context. They also serve as a "foil" (see discussion of Achebe in Chapter 1) reflecting back contrasts and differences between the literary and the lived experiences which serve to raise social consciousness. Importantly, this body of poetry reveals the existing process of recovery and response to conflict and crisis amongst Sierra Leone's small literary elite. Providing space to rethink social ideas, retell the past and re-imagine futures further provides an alternative discourse on peace inside, and beyond, the nation.

Discourses amongst writers and as writers

Being a writer in Sierra Leone

The idea of ‘being a writer’ amongst those I interviewed, amongst academics, NGO staff and, to a lesser extent, national politicians²⁹ is one that assumes writing to have status and the writer to play an elevated social and artistic role. This means the writer is able and expected to speak about and/or on behalf of the nation and to speak in such a way which is not permitted in other circumstances. The Falui poets, for instance, named themselves after a mask enabling the wearer to ridicule and criticise anybody including those in high positions. The idea of the West African ‘griot’ (embodying wise man, keeper of history and praise singer) though not particularly prevalent in Sierra Leone, may be intrinsic to how writers are perceived within a broader cultural context.

There is also a widespread assumption that education and literacy to the level of writing literature in English equips the author with an authority to speak back to society on critical issues with an acquired wisdom. Undoubtedly social conditions and the recent experience of civil conflict led to an overemphasis on the educative role of creative writers who might well be writing thematically different work in another context. If literary audiences existed who were prepared to challenge and engage with writers, this would act as a check and balance on national literature and add to what Palmer might term its authenticity, see Palmer’s Introduction, (Palmer and Porter, 2008).

The key point to make at present, however, is that the experience of being a writer in Sierra Leone positively impacts on the writers’ sense of self. It provides a heightened social role, a sense of belonging and a platform to access the public arena. Being a writer bestows instant membership of a select body of writers who provide an interested and engaged audience for writing. Through peers review and discussion, Freetown’s poets expand on ideas expressed

²⁹ Writers, such as Farouk Sesay, claimed that many politicians were only semi-literate and did not assign particular value to cultural or educational professions (Field work interviews, 2010).

within their writing as well as discuss ideas about what it means to be a writer. This reflexivity and social consciousness appears to augment amongst writers despite the crisis of readership which one might expect would lead to literary disenchantment. This crisis, in fact, sharpens the need to justify the act of writing and writers feel more committed to their practice and prompted to be ambassadors for writing.

As many active writers are involved in journalism, media and government or NGO sectors, the discourses generated by this group have the potential to disseminate more widely. New writers from poorer backgrounds also benefit from contact with writers in more influential and higher income elite positions.

Writers in Sierra Leone are compelled by a strong social mission echoing Achebe's emphasis on the function of writers drawn, unavoidably, into the task of "re-education and regeneration" (Achebe, 1975, p.73). This social mission has been accentuated as a result of the war and, perhaps more significantly, by the journalistic tradition of writing and what Hollist refers to as an "interrogative" style (see Chapter 2). Writers do not put forward a particular ideological position but are united in so far as they are animated in the pursuit of peaceful development and social change. They are also alternative spokespersons on the civil war especially for visitors and overseas media (see Boreham 2007) and promulgators of social change. Interestingly, writers rarely claimed to be spokespersons 'for the people' and focused more on the ontological nature of writing and its potentiality.

There is a monumental switch from notions of writers speaking on behalf of a non-represented, marginalised, illiterate African populace (which characterised African writing in the early post-colonial period) to overtly seeking to influence and animate that populace. Dramatists such as Sheriff and Haffner are commissioned by NGOs and government

departments to transmit messages using drama to community groups: to provide ‘sensitisation’ (now an accepted term in Sierra Leone). I suggest that to be a writer in today’s Sierra Leone is to be a cultural and social activist with a special citizenship status and role which is assumed and legitimised by the authors themselves. Able to reconcile and transform history and the present into hopeful literature, writers adopt an elevated status and a heightened sense of social agency. They speak the emotive political language of what Gramsci would term the traditional intellectuals who though appearing independent tend to represent the dominant class. The fissure of conflict, though not significantly challenging the dominance of the elite, has opened debate on national narratives which writers seek to fill. The particular situation of the writer in post-war Sierra Leone promotes a more participative style and aspiration more commonly associated with organic intellectuals who Gramsci considered more radical in representing mass interests against the prevailing authority³⁰.

I have found that the civil war prompted people to begin writing in the struggle to find a personal and socially transformative response and it also broke down old restrictions allowing for the emergence of new amateur authors without restriction. It also gave writers in Sierra Leone a unique cultural brokerage position as a demand was created for literature amongst international visitors and overseas readers. With minimal literary infrastructure, authorial authority is, however, self-legitimised and writing has become a kind of free-for-all.

The practice of writing as a form of engagement

³⁰ Concepts of organic and traditional intellectuals are attributed to Gramsci (1891-1937) from his Prison Notebooks. Note that Sierra Leone’s writers are embedded within the elite and cannot be considered to represent the radical element of Gramsci’s organic intellectuals.

In circumstances of widespread lassitude and disillusionment when society is recoiling from war and there are limited opportunities to contribute directly to shaping national recovery, the practice of writing becomes a personal and a social action – a form of active citizenship if you like. I have found that being a writer promotes social consciousness but, at its most pared down form, the very act of writing is a form of positive social engagement. Writing also offers a forum in which to imaginatively consider the past, create literature *from* that past and construct transformative social ideas and visions. It provides a unique space for cross-ethnic and non-violent imaginative discourse and the experience of being a writer stimulates further social participation. Writers, for example, might develop or support literacy and reading campaigns (as Arthur Smith does), join NGOs, pressure groups or arts organisations seeking to advice and influence government on policy.

Writing as a transformative act

The experience of writing not only draws the writer closer to the society he/she is addressing; it is also a profoundly transformative act: creating an original piece of text from one's imagination and from social reality. I suggest that implicit to the practice of writing is a view that conceives of the world as capable of transformation and improvement. The writer is ultimately a creator. Through the practice of remaking the world anew in literature, a capacity for transformation and social agency is fostered and a propensity to believe in the ability to change and create the conditions for peace. Writers can potentially summon that world into existence through the creative imagination. I would suggest that writers are, ultimately, peacemakers and that writing itself is a positive and hopeful act (as the British playwright, Pinter, remarked “to write something is to be optimistic” (Pinter, 2005). The conflict resolution theorist, John Paul Lederach, similarly suggests that artists and writers remind us that “the birth of something new is possible” as they:

embrace the possibility that there exist untold possibilities capable at any moment to move beyond the narrow parameters of what is commonly accepted and perceived as the narrow and rigidly defined range of choices. (Lederach, 2005, pp.38-9)

This is especially relevant in the immediate post war Sierra Leonean environment as writers claimed to be driven to make sense of what had happened, to piece together the “shards” (see Kirsten Rian’s Foreword to ‘Kalashnikov in the Sun’ 2009, p.9)

Inevitably Sierra Leonean creative writing will evolve and change as recent history moves into the past and new issues and preoccupations arise. Nonetheless, during the period of this study, I suggest that poetry provides a discourse on peace: an alternative location for responding to social conditions and issues as well as a socially cohesive platform for ‘Sierra Leonean’ writer-intellectuals to come together to explore and re-imagine national identity, aspirations and create visions for the future. Writing also provides an arena for social engagement. By way of extension, I would also like to suggest that literature may serve similar functions in other severely deprived and volatile African contexts.

To be a writer in Sierra Leone automatically elevates one to an accompanying role as intellectual in the public arena and, as Gikandi has recently argued it has been through creative writing that “modern African identities could be imagined, African life ordered and a new social order narrated” (Gikandi, 2012). Whether or not Sierra Leonean writers manage to open up and extend their work to create wider national readership, the discourses surrounding their writing (about their texts and the agency of writers) provide a unique emotive, imaginative and intellectual response to agendas of social renewal and recovery. Writing, functions as a transformative social activity and as offers an alternative discourse for conflict transformation.

Limitations of this study

Although it is impossible to disconnect Sierra Leonean writers from their social context, their texts are reaching only a small audience the majority of whom are other poets and writers. Meanwhile Sierra Leoneans are becoming saturated with educational messages and poetry is thematically mismatched to local interests and needs which have embraced the escapism of Nigerian film, for example. In such an environment where the culture of reading is in decline, it is perhaps unusual to uncover a vibrant strand or new growth in literature. However, if these poets and writers are to represent new and continuing growth (rather than constitute the last surviving branch of a lost and irrelevant tradition) then writers need to tackle illiteracy, translate texts and disseminate them through new media to support the conditions for the reproduction and survival of future writers and readers - even if only a very small group. I consider that Sierra Leone's writers are being forced, by circumstance, to defend literature and become ambassadors for literacy and writing. Writers are starting to engage publicly in national debates about reading and writing over and above the thematic concerns or implications of their writing.

The buoyancy and commitment of a small number of poets and writers seems at odds with the evident disenchantment with books and growing disillusionment with education as a route to betterment, enlightenment and fulfilment (which can be traced back to Siaka Stevens' rule, see Chapter 2). The talismanic nature or "aura" of the book, whose mastery represented a near-magical route to western modernity and to the powers associated with it for early aspiring African intellectuals (see Gikandi, 2012), has faded. Nonetheless, the production and publication of creative writing in English still holds a certain aura for the literary elite and confers respect and esteem beyond that of writing for print journalism, for example.

When I began this study, I planned to examine Sierra Leonean literature through the views of writers, readers and through an analysis of texts but readers were not accessible (or much in existence). Although I carried out a reading group in Freetown which provided valuable insights, particularly in terms of how readers appreciated poetry about their own country, I had to supply the material to read and therefore *generate* responses. It would be interesting to contrast this study with another setting in which there was a much higher existence of national readers and to explore how this dynamic would impact on findings.

I had also hoped to demonstrate that literature promotes a renewal of the national imagination through alternative re-narrativisations of the past and depictions of future scenarios but only elements of this hypothesis are in evidence. However, I have demonstrated that writing provides a location in which to explore urgent social issues relating to post-conflict recovery. Depictions of future scenarios in creative literature, I predict, will become more pronounced during the next decade and the evolution of social vision will characterise literature after the exigencies of the initial post war period.

Unexpected findings

As I conducted this research study, I came to realise that the discourses created around texts (and the space that literature provides) was more significant than textual content, quality and communication with readers. I had expected that the disconnection between writers and local readers would become central to this study but I had not expected to conclude that poetry provides a discourse for peace without this factor. I realise that this is controversial, and have already argued that the link with readers needs to be made to ensure the longevity of Sierra Leone's literature and writers, but it felt like a radical breakthrough during my research.

It is my hope that this study will contribute to debate on the role of writing (and the arts more widely) in other post conflict and/or severely deprived settings in which creativity can represent a peaceful arena for contestation and for imaginatively engaging with social agendas and concerns. Post war English writing in Sierra Leone, I suggest, is not an outdated remnant of a colonial era but rather a resilient and progressive component of social recovery.

I have synthesised knowledge of different disciplines with ideas gained from field interviews and textual resources to create a bridge between creative writing and peace studies in order to make a social argument about literature. Although literature is at the heart of this study, I have focused on writing in the locality relating to the locality, what is increasingly termed ‘community writing’ somewhat disparagingly in the UK. Occasionally, great literary works are able to transcend such boundaries. Despite the limitations and preoccupations of context, I would like to think that the seeds of such a literature could be found scattered here amongst Freetown’s writers.

APPENDIX 1:

Fieldwork completed by date

Nov 2006	<p>British Council meeting</p> <p>WRITER QUESTIONNAIRES (2006)</p> <p>Joyce Wilson</p> <p>Talabi Lacan</p> <p>AVS Koroma</p> <p>Informal interviews with:</p> <p>Memunata Pratt, Peace Studies, FBC.</p> <p>Kelvin Lewis, Awoko</p> <p>Raymond De Souza George, FBC</p> <p>Victor Fashole-Luke, FBC</p> <p>Joe Allie, FBC</p>
May/June 2007 (during working trip with Macmillan Education)	<p>Informal interviews with:</p> <p>David Turner and Fati Haffner, Freetown Players</p> <p>Meeting Red Cross</p> <p>WRITER QUESTIONNAIRES (2007)</p> <p>Raymond De Souza George</p>
May 2008 (during working trip with Macmillan Education)	<p>Informal interviews with:</p> <p>Emmanuel Bartholamew</p> <p>Moses Kainwo</p> <p>Aiyisha Fofana, FBC</p> <p>Sydnella Shooter</p> <p>Pat Maddy</p> <p>Oumar Farouk Sesay (at poetry meeting)</p>

	<p>Meeting with Elvis Hallowell</p> <p>Oumar Farouk Sesay Meeting May 08</p> <p>May 08 Arthur Smith</p> <p>WRITER QUESTIONNAIRES (MAY 2008)</p> <p>Mohammed Sheriff</p>
Autumn 2008	<p>WRITER QUESTIONNAIRES (2008)</p> <p>Pat Maddy</p> <p>Raymond De Souza George</p> <p>Randoulph Wilson</p> <p>Alpha Kamara</p> <p>Oumar Farouk Sesay</p> <p>Charlie Haffner</p> <p>Sydnella Shooter</p> <p>SOJ Macauley</p> <p>Arthur Smith</p> <p>Mohammed Sheriff</p> <p>Tom Curray</p> <p>Informal interviews 2008:</p> <p>Culture Radio, Julius Spencer. Meeting at Rokel School, Mount Everest Publishing, Fred Awuta-Coker, Raymond Randoulph & Raymond De Souza George</p> <p>READER QUESTIONNAIRES (2008)</p> <p>Aminatta Bangura, Ibrahim Jakema, John Kallon, Memunata Samura and Theresa Cole Aminatta</p>
Spring 2009	<p>Worked on literature project in Cathedral Girls Primary, Freetown and Kissy Secondary school.</p>
CONFERENCE MAY 09 AND UK INTERVIEWS	<p>Conference Panel on Post war literature in Sierra Leone: what role for literature?</p>

	<p>Syl Cheney-Coker questionnaire</p> <p>Responses A Smith</p> <p>Delia Jarrett-Macauley Questionnaire</p>
Nov 2010	<p>Worked on literature project in two Freetown schools</p> <p>WRITER FOLLOW UP QUESTIONNAIRES</p> <p>Oumar Farouk Sesay</p> <p>Arthur Smith</p> <p>Mohammed Sheriff</p> <p>LITERATURE TRAINER QUESTIONNAIRE</p> <p>Arnold Jones</p> <p>Interview with Pastor Gbla</p>

APPENDIX 2

GENERAL QUESTIONNAIRE: 2006/7

WHAT NEW LITERATURE E.G. PLAYS/DRAMA (FOR THEATRE, FILM, TV, RADIO, NOVELS, SHORT STORIES, POETRY) HAS BEEN WRITTEN/PUBLISHED/TRANSMITTED SPONTANEOUSLY SINCE 1991 IN SIERRA LEONE ABOUT SIERRA LEONE?

WHAT NEW LITERATURE HAS BEEN WRITTEN/PUBLISHED/TRANSMITTED WITH THE AIM OF BRINGING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE (E.G. RECONCILIATION/HIV PREVENTION ETC) SINCE 1991 IN SIERRA LEONE?

HOW IS MODERN DAY SIERRA LEONE REFLECTED IN POPULAR AND OTHER LITERATURE?

WHAT CREATIVE WRITTEN MATERIAL DO YOU READ? LISTEN TO? WATCH?

WHAT ARE THE MOST POPULAR FORMS OF LITERATURE CONSUMED TODAY BY THE MAJORITY OF SIERRA LEONEANS?

DO YOU THINK WRITERS HAVE THE CAPACITY TO BRING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE? IF SO. HOW?

DO YOU THINK WRITERS SHAPE OUR IDEAS AND DREAMS OF A COUNTRY?

WHO, IN YOUR OPINION, IS A TRULY SIERRA LEONEAN WRITER – AND WHY?

HOW IS SIERRA LEONE DEPICTED IN SIERRA LEONE DRAMAS?

HOW IS THE WAR DEPICTED IN SIERRA LEONEAN DRAMAS?

HOW IS THE FUTURE DEPICTED/IMAGINED IN SIERRA LEONEAN DRAMAS?

HOW IS THE PAST DEPICTED?

WHAT ARE THE FAMILIAR STORIES TRANSMITTED TO CHILDREN TODAY?

WHAT BOOKS HAVE YOU READ IN THE LAST 2 YEARS AND WHERE WERE THEY WRITTEN/PUBLISHED?

WHAT TYPES OF CREATIVE LITERATURE HAVE THE MOST IMPACT IN SHAPING OUT IDEAS AND WHY?

[Writer questionnaire used in 2008]

AUTUMN 08: INTERVIEWS WITH WRITERS

Name:

Date:

What do you write?

- Poetry
- Plays
- Short Stories
- Novels
- Other/essays/journalism etc.

What is your profession?

Where do you live at present?

Where from in Sierra Leone/Ethnicity?

Motivation for writing? Why do you write?

Have you been commissioned to write creatively? If so please give details and reflect on the experience.

Who do you write for? Who is your 'audience' - real and ideal? Importance of readership...

Prior writing history pre 2001?

Overview of creative writing pre 1991

Where were you located during the civil war? How did you survive during this period? Direct impact of war?

What did you write during the war period?

How did the war impact on your creative writing?

Does war subdue or stimulate literature? Do you feel writers 'use' the war? If so, how?

As a writer are you tired of literature about the conflict which looks back to the past or do you think the war needs to be documented further through creative writing and Sierra Leone needs to have its own 'war literature'?

Choose 2 pieces (up to 5 poems max) to discuss in detail...

What is the *role* of creative writing?

Is there a specific social role? In world/Africa/Sierra Leone particularly?

Is there a particular role for writing today in Sierra Leone?

Has this role changed/is it changing now?

What is your role as an individual writer? Do people have certain expectations of you as a Sierra Leonean writer?

What does it mean to you to be a writer in a country where approximately 10% of the population can read well?

Is the reading of literature dying out in Sierra Leone? If so, why?

Can writers here today claim to be writing for the voiceless, for the people or are they writing from an elite to an elite?

Impact of writing in Sierra Leone today? Potential impact? Ideal impact?

How, if at all, does literature contribute to way that peace and war are imagined in the immediate post conflict environment?

How, if at all, does literature contribute to the formation of a Sierra Leonean identity?

How could it?

Ought it aim to do this?

How, if at all, does literature create shared ideas about the future of Sierra Leone?

Tell me in a few sentences only the story of Sierra Leone so far...

What do you think the story will be in 2025?

Do you think that there is a genre which could be called Sierra Leonean literature?

If so, what does it comprise? Genre as in a category of literary composition, marked by a distinctive style, form or content

What do you read? What newspapers do you read?

How do you access reading material?

What books and writers have particularly influenced you? -*past and present*

What are your impressions of writers like Aminatta Forna, Ismael Beah and other Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora writing about Sierra Leone. How do writers in the diaspora differ, if at all, from those writers located within Sierra Leone?

How do you relate to the literature of Biafra?

To what extent has the arts been taken over as a vehicle for the transmission of social messages – for ‘sensitisation’ and ‘edutainment’?

What new work are you developing at present? (Please include new genres of work e.g. if you are writing a novel/novella whereas you are normally focusing on poetry)

What impact does the commissioning of writing for development have on literature for pleasure and entertainment?

What is the primary function of literature?

To entertain?

Escapism?

To learn about the world?

To teach about important issues?

Why do you write in English?

How important is publication to you? In Sierra Leone/outside?

Do you use internet to read/to publish?

Are you a member of any writing groups (Pen, Falui, other) and what does this offer you as a writer?

How do you ensure continuous improvement?

Who scrutinises your work?

[Reader questionnaire used in 2008]

READING GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE AUTUMN 2008/ FREETOWN CENTRAL LIBRARY

NAME

AGE/GENDER

OCCUPATION

EDUCATION

HOW OFTEN DO YOU READ?

WHICH NEWSPAPERS DO YOU READ?

WHICH NOVELS, STORIES, PLAYS OR POEMS HAVE YOU READ IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS?

WHICH OTHER BOOKS HAVE YOU READ IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS? [i.e. NON FICTION] –

HOW MANY HOURS DO YOU SPEND IN AN AVERAGE WEEK:

Listening to the radio	Reading for work/prof purposes	Reading for pleasure	Watching TV	Watching Nigerian movies	On the internet (not for work)	Watching football

WHY DO YOU READ?

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE BOOK?

HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO TO LIVE THEATRE OR POETRY PERFORMANCES?

DO YOU PREFER TO LISTEN TO OR READ LITERATURE?

DO YOU USE ANY LIBRARY SERVICES IN SIERRA LEONE? IF SO GIVE DETAILS

WHERE DO YOU ACCESS OR BUY BOOKS IN FREETOWN?

WHICH SIERRA LEONEAN AUTHORS HAVE YOU HEARD OF?

IS THERE A PARTICULAR BOOK OR WRITER THAT YOU FEEL ALL SIERRA LEONEANS SHOULD READ?
PLEASE EXPLAIN YOUR CHOICE

WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE WOULD YOU LIKE THERE TO BE MORE OF IN SIERRA LEONE? (E.G.
POEMS, STORIES, NOVELS, PLAYS + CONSIDER THEMES)

HOW DO CONTEMPORARY WRITERS DEPICT SIERRA LEONE TODAY?

HOW DO WRITERS DEPICT THE FUTURE OF SIERRA LEONE?

WHICH BOOKS HAVE HAD A STRONG INFLUENCE ON YOU AND WHY?

WHICH BOOKS DID YOU READ FOR ENGLISH LITERATURE AT SCHOOL?

DO YOU AGREE THAT READING IS DYING IN SIERRA LEONE?

WHAT ARE YOUR CRITICISMS OF SIERRA LEONEAN WRITING?

IN YOUR OPINION WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF CREATIVE WRITING IN SOCIETY? -

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRONG NATIONAL LITERATURE IN SIERRA LEONE?

WHAT COULD BE DONE TO INCREASE LITERACY AND INTEREST IN READING IN SL?

[Follow up questionnaires for writers used in 2010]

November 2010: Follow on questionnaire for writers

Name:

Are there any major changes to your thinking since our last interview? Consider following questions?

1. Is there a Sierra Leonean literature?

Is the state of reading in a worse or better situation that previously discussed?

Is any contemporary Sierra Leonean writing being used in schools? Do writers go into schools?

2. Is there a war literature? Should there be one?

Has the war grown more or less important as a theme in your writing since the last interview?

3. What is the role of the individual writer in Sierra Leone in terms of social change?

Give examples of ways in which you and/or other writers have been involved in social action

Are there informal or formal organisations of writers developing plans for national literature development/literacy campaigns/publishing?

What does the term 'engaged writer' mean to you

4. What role does literature play in promoting peacebuilding, social renewal? E.g. through schools, through general promotion of the arts?

Give examples of Sierra Leonean writing which made an impact in some way

Have the narratives that people tell themselves about Sierra Leone changed?

What place does the government give to Sierra Leonean literature in promoting Sierra Leonean culture?

How important is literature to the 8 May 2011 50th Anniversary celebrations.

Are there new initiatives to guard the literary heritage?

Other comments

[Follow up questionnaires for literature teacher trainers used in 2010]

Literature Teacher Trainers

Date:

Names of Trainers:

1. How is literature taught (i.e. methodology) at primary and secondary level and how much time is it given?
2. *Are Literature teachers in secondary school also teachers of English language?*
3. Is literature used as a way to promote discussion about social issues? *(May discuss literature teacher in Birmingham recently said literature promotes discussion, gives us a unique glimpse into another person's perspective on and experience of the world...)*
4. How does literature relate to the wider aims of promoting citizenship, history, community cohesion, inter-cultural understanding within the school environment and beyond?
5. *Comment on how literature fits into government initiatives in terms of 'key issues' identified in curriculum and peacebuilding*
6. How do pupils perceive the importance of reading/the function of reading?
7. What is the national approach to tackling adult illiteracy?
8. Describe access to school (inc. fees) and how many years of schooling the average Sierra Leonean child has today
9. What percentage of school age children attend junior and senior secondary?
10. What literacy skills and literature awareness do most children possess on leaving school?
11. What are the true barriers to reading more in Sierra Leone?
12. How could new writing be disseminated more widely and people be encouraged to read more?

13. Is there a decline in the standard of English being spoken and taught in schools and in wider society? Why is much of the writing in Sierra Leone of a poor standard? Have you witnessed a decline? Is there a reaction/prejudice against using English?
14. Do teachers teach in Krio/English? Do they translate literature into Krio/other languages? Please discuss differences across the country as well as in Freetown.
15. Is creative writing taught as part of literature? How do pupils perceive the importance of creative writing/the function of creative writing?
16. Are there opportunities for studying local authors within the existing curricula? What difference would it make if there were more Sierra Leonean writers included in the curriculum? How do students relate to local writing? (e.g. Sydnella's Cotton Tree poem/Ismael Beah...)
17. Do you invite local authors to visit the school and discuss their work and careers?
18. Do you run reading groups and prizes for writing in schools? Levels of participation?
19. It is often said that Sierra Leone suffers from a malaise of laziness and self-interest. Do you agree with this and, if so, do you find evidence of this amongst teacher trainees and young people in schools?
20. Is there a Sierra Leonean literature? If so what does it include? What would you *like* it to include?
21. Is there a Sierra Leonean war literature? Should there be one? What would you like to see as part of such a genre?
22. What is the role of the individual writer in Sierra Leone in terms of social change? Give examples
23. What role does literature play in promoting peacebuilding and social renewal? E.g. through schools, through general promotion of arts?
24. Are you aware of recent collections of Sierra Leonean poetry? Have you read these? Please comment. Are these anthologies used in schools?
25. Do you think that the local literature produced in English is written in a way which is accessible and meaningful to young people in Sierra Leone? Please give examples.
26. What are the identifying characteristics of being a Sierra Leonean? Does it feel like a negative description? Do you associate your national identity with landscape or literature in any way?

27. Can you describe who you imagine to be a Sierra Leonean writer? What would they be writing? (e.g. theme, quality, aims/other).
28. Who would you like to become Sierra Leone's writers and what would they write about in order to capture the imaginations of the local audience and make a positive impact on developing society and to become part of the canon?

OTHER COMMENTS

APPENDIX 3:

Additional Field Notes

Note that unless otherwise stated, field work was carried out during autumn 2008. The original questionnaires used with authors and readers can be viewed in Appendix 2. A list of authors is included in Chapter 3.

WHAT IS SIERRA LEONEAN LITERATURE?

- Poetry and plays by Maddy, Easmon, Conton, Nicol, Wellesley-Cole, Most plays are unpublished e.g. Kargbo and Dele Charlie. Aminatta Forna and others are Sierra Leonean writers but not like Sierra Leonean writers due to western connection; their work is successful due to connections outside. [**Mohammed Sheriff, 2010**]
- Various poetry. [**Pat Maddy**]
- Kalinder, Syl Cheney-Coker's novel 'The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar', 'Obasai and other Plays' and the novel 'No Past, No Present, No Future' both by Pat Maddy. [**Tom Caurray**]
- Oral praise songs, poetry, proverbs, stories, riddles and passwords. Conton and Maddy's novel, 'The Truly Married Woman' by Davidson Nicol. The most accomplished is Cheney-Coker. Lots of budding writers, plays – 'The Blood of a Stranger' by Dele Charlie, Sarif Easmon's 'The New Patriot', John Akar's 'Valley Without Echo' plus Sierra Leonean community theatre – which discusses problems, dramatises them and finds solutions. [**SOJ Macauley**]
- Traditional stories and praise songs. [**AVS Komora**]
- 'Ancestor Stones' by Aminatta Forna and 'Songs that Pour the Heart', Kosonike Koso Thomas' novel and Rachel Massaquoi's 'The Wind Within'. [**Talabi Lacan, 2006**]

- Dele Charlie's 'Blood of a Stranger', Eustace Palmer, 'Boboh Lef' (his own work), Maddy's 'No past No present No future', 'Poyo Ton Wahala' (Kargbo). **[Raymond De Souza George]**
- Welleley-Cole's 'Kossoh Town Boy', Hunter's 'Road to Freedom' and Conton's 'Price of Liberty' were the texts I used to teach at Secondary schools. **[Arthur Smith]**
- 'Kossoh Town Boy' which is used in teacher training but no longer in schools and Aminatta Forna's work (she came to the British Council and gave a workshop). **[Arnold Jones, 2010]**

In 2008 there was a module at FBC for Literature and Language students to study Sierra Leonean literature for the first time. This course, to the best of my knowledge, included:

- Wellesley Cole's 'Kossoh Town Boy'
- Lucilda Hunter's 'Road to Freedom'
- Sarif Easmon 'The Feud and Other Stories'
- Ismael Beah's 'A Long Way Gone'
- 'Songs that Pour the Heart' poetry collection
- Abioseh Nicol's 'The Truly Married'
- Aminatta Forna's 'The Devil that Danced on the Water'

Themes of Sierra Leonean literature:

- Issues affecting Sierra Leone **[Alpha Kamara]**
- If I see a Sierra Leonean novel I don't want to read as it will be rubbish and/or miserable **[Fourah Bay College literature student]**
- Themes putting war behind and moving on, restoring values (this is common). Typical themes are marital infidelity, betrayal, traditions of life, sufferings and woes undergone **[Joyce Wilson]**

- Today issues are ills of society and urgent need for reforms [Arthur Smith]

Comments re Sierra Leonean literature

Joyce Wilson suggested “radio plays in the lingua franca do better than novels in English. The era of Krio plays seems gone and replaced by locally produced music”.

Sydnella Shooter explained that storytelling is in decline: “Even African women teachers tend to think storytelling is only for little children”.

Raymond De Souza George complained that much literature is given too much of a comic slant either in content or presentation and it is poor quality [2007]. He bemoaned the situation of youth in Sierra Leone saying “We live in an ongoing story of which the children are active participants so they also help to make the stories in which they feature – decadence, sex and war”. This view was echoed by Tom Caurray. Both writers seemed to be struggling with writing within the literature of a country which had become in some way alien, degenerate and horrifying to them. Raymond described Sierra Leone as “a country with divine potential but whose people are selfish, greedy and don’t care about each other”.

Arthur Smith described Sierra Leonean literature as “mostly Sierra Leonean narratives” e.g. Hunter’s ‘Road to Freedom’ (1982), historical narratives such as Cheney-Coker’s Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar (1991) and short stories such as those by Abioseh Nicol:

Novels are mostly restricted to portrayal of sadness, the poetry is more diverse. Poems are shorter and people have access to them through radio, newspapers, magazines, religious and voluntary organisations. There are few women writers and little romance, fantasy or escape.

Smith said the literature comprised “Sierra Leoneans writing about Sierra Leonean issues, expressing opinions of a literary elite about society. He claimed:

I can’t remember using a single book written by a Sierra Leonean when I was reading English as an undergraduate. There is not a thing called Sierra Leonean literature which has agreed characteristics. It requires a feel, a sense of belonging through the story. It is a blood thing even if in another land. It is blood that ties you with land not land in you as blood (as for the English). All of what we can boast of now is more from the Diaspora, which results often in these works being estranged or seeming removed from the cultural milieu that they are supposed to be products of as they remain uninformed of current social, economic and political realities at first hand.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley (2011) did not feel she could state what Sierra Leonean literature might comprise. The term Sierra Leonean writer, she claimed, especially in comparison with Nigerian writers “carries little meaning in the West”. Sierra Leone is “a geographical nation sharing a particular history, which is especially important from 18th century onwards. It is also a place of family connection, my roots, familial home”.

Syl Cheney-Coker explained that as Sierra Leone itself is in struggle, it lacks a cohesive national ethos and politics is never really played out in ideological terms, “I don’t think we

have evolved a Sierra Leonean identity in literature”. He claims his own work is based on a “unique multi-cultural inheritance: one that straddles boundaries” (i.e. his Krio heritage):

It has greatly enriched my life and work far more than had if I had been confined within a particular group. Whether a country should aim for a national identity in literature is best left to time. [Written questionnaire, 2010]

Members of the reading group were not aware of a national body of literature. Reading group participants tended to imagine that local literature would reflect the difficulties of daily life and recent history and thus imagined the reading of it to be traumatic. The sense of ‘Salone tranga’ (Sierra Leone is hard) that is echoed on the streets coupled with a sense that Sierra Leone is ‘no good at anything’ – even the football team does badly, one contact told me. This translates into an expectation that if a national literature were to exist it would be equally “tragic and lack good quality reflecting a state of turmoil and corruption” [John Kallon]. Theresa Cole added that “Sierra Leone literature is not very interesting like Nigerian writers”. Returning again to cultural debates, sixth form student, Ibrahim Jakema, added that Sierra Leoneans have become too westernised no longer observing their culture in writing.

After several weeks exposed to locally written poems the readers said they would have felt a greater sense of national pride if they had read these poems at school. They would have realised that Sierra Leone had (and could have) its own literature. School teacher and poet, Sydnella Shooter, reiterated this very strongly in her interview. It was Sydnella Shooter’s poem *Cotton tree* which readers felt was *their* poetry as it gave them a sense of ownership and belonging as Sierra Leoneans. Across the range of writing we analysed it was aspects of food, geography and ways of thinking and remembering which the readers felt captured something quintessentially Sierra Leonean. Sydnella claimed that most poetry at school was based on

“another culture” so Sierra Leoneans tended to feel that “poetry is far fetched and children find it difficult”. However, “Sierra Leonean poetry is much better and more accessible than Keats”.

John Kallon knew the writing of Sarif Easmon and Massaquoi’s ‘The Wind Within’. He had also read Aminatta Forna’s ‘The Devil that Danced on the Water’ claiming “it lays bare our political intrigues and what it is like with family in distress... All Sierra Leoneans should read it”. Aminatta Bangura knew of Talabi Lacan’s book for primary schools plus several local short stories I have not come across (titles included Pademba’s Heir and The Lost Ear Ring). Most of the readers knew and appreciated the work of the late Abu Noah. Noah set up Sierra Leone’s only publishing house in 1998 called Mount Everest and published several of his own titles which were widely known in Freetown including ‘Bai Bureh Goes to War’ and ‘Measuring my Country Heart Beats’. Mount Everest discontinued its activities following the death of Abu Noah in 2005. One reader had heard of the ‘Songs That Pour the Heart’ collection via personal contact with the editors but little else was known of contemporary writing or criticism inside or outside the country. The Central Library in Freetown did not hold a comprehensive collection of national literature in the library or a copy of Palmer and Porter’s recent ‘Introduction to Sierra Leonean Literature’(2008). However, the Director, Sallieu Turay, was interested in creating a Sierra Leonean collection.

At a British Council PEN meeting in 2008, one of the speakers recounted how their Grandmother used to scare them with stories and talked of how stories had been used to check behaviour. Someone in the audience replied “there is no time for stories anymore”. At the same event the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner spoke of the importance of

supporting writing within the country. “We might lose gems to the cemetery if creativity is stifled”, he said. “Writing as regular practice leads to a creative solution to problems”.

Does a national literature exist or is it evolving?

None of the respondents questioned the category of Sierra Leonean literature except for Tom Caurray: “Sierra Leonean literature? I can’t really find it. About Sierra Leone? By Sierra Leoneans? Yes but it is bound to be something outside this.” Tom had difficulty assigning creative work to a country particularly a country so wholly corrupt:

I love my country not the people, chaos, local government or filth. I don’t feel Sierra Leone has learned its lesson, there is so much indiscipline, rudeness, secret societies preoccupied with occult, Christians and Muslims going to sorcerers.

Within such a context, Tom complained “literature in Sierra Leone is at the level of posters”. He also added “a lot of writing is to celebrate themselves” and called for more “organic” writers, such as Raymond De Souza George to emerge. Tom felt that “possessiveness of literature for one’s self or country limits that very literature”. Nonetheless he went on to suggest that if such a literature were to exist it would comprise the work of folklorists such as Kalinder, ‘The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar’ by Syl Cheney-Coker, Pat Maddy’s ‘Obasai and Other Plays’ and his novel ‘No Past, No Present, No Future’.

Pat Maddy admitted poetry is at the forefront of the development of Sierra Leonean literature. However, he was more critical of theatre: “theatre isn’t what passes for theatre for education” and “literature isn’t Freetown. It happens outside”.

SOJ Macauley agreed that Diaspora writers “are recognised as Sierra Leonean writers though aspects of their writing is second hand”. Sydnella Shooter (on hearing of Aminatta Forna’s work, location and heritage) said “yes she is a Sierra Leonean writer writing out of Sierra Leone about Sierra Leone”. Raymond De Souza George considered distinctions irrelevant at such a point in history: “any Sierra Leonean with a view to achieving wholesome self-examination at this time would qualify [as a writer]”.

Arthur Smith claimed writers are working against the odds and face negative expectations for success among compatriots: “We are in fact almost dormant”. Even within his own university setting, he explained:

colleagues were telling me not to bother sending a play to a BBC competition as it was meant for Nigerians, Ghanaians, East and South Africans... If you say you want to write you will be told that Sierra Leoneans are idlers who don’t want to come together to project a positive image of the country through the creative works that they produce.

Alpha Bedoh Kamara [2008] commented:

We have not had a breakthrough of Sierra Leonean writers. Some do exist but how many know them? The Ministry needs to uplift Sierra Leonean writers and put in curricula.

Both Arthur Smith and Farouk Sesay stated that Sierra Leoneans have been held back as Sierra Leoneans have traditionally been trained as critics as opposed to writers citing Eldred Jones and Eustace Palmer as examples. Farouk Sesay said that “Nigerians are writers whereas Sierra Leoneans are critics”... “Very few people who studied literature became writers as the bias was on criticism” he explained, “this makes students fear to write”. However, he felt literature was evolving. He also mentioned that a Sierra Leonean, Olufemi Terry, had won the

Caine prize. Although he was not based in Sierra Leone, Farouk Sesay said “the theme resonates here, the environment informs you though it is not about here” Conversely, lecturer Aiyisha Fofana complained of a lack of literary critique in the country (perhaps pointing to the lack of review and editing as well as criticism). Arthur Smith also bemoaned the quality of criticism stating that “critics are the midwives of literature, they fashion out standards. If students aren’t critical, literature will be poor quality”.

SOJ Macauley claimed the “tendency to cultural arts is not deep” and so what literature that there is “doesn’t need much to understand”. He linked this to the early emphasis on administration and law in Freetown rather than academic arts subjects.

Syl Cheney-Coker (at the 2009 CWAS Conference) argued that for those with a “national identity”, there has got to be a writing tradition. In Cuba, for example, he claimed “there are more poets than any other professionals except for doctors.

Do writers feel part of a national literature?

Mohammed Sheriff said he was ‘A writer -which encompasses all’ although his writing is very much rooted in Sierra Leone. By contrast, fellow dramatist Charlie Haffner considers himself “a nationalist artist”. De Souza George also claimed he was very much a Sierra Leonean writer and also a universal writer. Raymond sees his role as “ministering to Sierra Leoneans and to wider humanity” but his primary audience is the nation [2007]. He explained he cannot write without his country present: “Sierra Leone is the only girlfriend I have never been able to give up”. Although other writers may not have phrased their national affiliation

in the same manner, Sierra Leone is frequently treated in writing and in conversation as if it were a person, often a woman (Lady Leone) with a brilliant and terrible history.

When I asked Alpha Kamara if people had certain expectations of him as a Sierra Leonean writer he replied: “yes, to inform and educate Sierra Leoneans as well as the international community”. This is similar to what many journalists may state as their role. Asked who do you write for? Cheney-Coker responded: “whoever loves good literature”.

Defining herself as a British, African, Sierra Leonean and International writer, Jarrett-Macauley explains “my fiction defines me as a Sierra Leonean writer, interested in the development of the nation’s culture and history and as an international writer whose work resonates with wider audiences.” [Delia JM, 2011] Delia claimed it was important for her to have an audience in Sierra Leone though she recognised that:

people [in Sierra Leone] were more interested in the fact that the novel won a prize and that I was appearing on BBC Radio than in the actual book. However discussions were held in Freetown by some groups.

Arthur Smith said he writes primarily with a “Sierra Leonean English language audience in mind” and then for a universal audience. Tom Caurray, by contrast, claimed he didn’t write for Sierra Leone but for an international audience partly because there are “so many illiterate and few who can read in Sierra Leone. They are interested in money, corruption and beer” and still living “in the dark ages”.

Can there be Sierra Leonean literature without a readership?

Emerging writers such as Randoulph Wilson saw themselves as in a very challenging position with so few people (less than 10%) appreciating reading and even fewer appreciating poetry. Alpha Kamara likened his choice to be a writer to “someone going for a pilgrimage, the reward is minimal”. Both Randoulph and Alpha said that literature is shifting to being for education rather than pleasure.

Perhaps the greatest advocate of the importance of literacy and reading in Sierra Leone is Arthur Smith. Even at university level he admits his students read minimally for the purposes of passing exams. Smith tells his students if they “don’t keep reading they will become in a sense illiterate”.

Charlie Haffner said that with 85% illiteracy rates, theatre is now the best form of education.

Fred Coker attributed the reversal in reading to post independence political manipulation and neglect of educational institutions and social care:

Quality is poor, any publishing is poor, teaching is poor, everything is negative. Reading develops the mind, it takes a lot of push to get people reading and electricity is failing. People are out selling kerosene and petty things for a living.

Mohammed Sheriff expressed concern that “reading is dying” and that “the *culture* of reading” is dying. By 2010 he said that PEN was developing their School clubs which ‘may rekindle some interest they hope’ but there had been a general “dumbing down of culture”. Mohammed remembers having a circle of friends and fellow pupils who read when he was at school and they exchanged books and comics excitedly devouring each new title.

However, when Mohammed created and published a comic in Freetown (the only one of its kind) sales were so bad he has decided not to publish another one. Mohammed admits his readers are generally other writers and that people want to get published outside. In the 2010 follow up interview Mohammed, though saddened by the demise in reading in general, was optimistic that recent exchanges with PEN writers in Ethiopia, Guinea and Uganda, a third publication for Falui and a new publishing venture including the writing and publishing of a new locally written Primary school reader (by Farouk Sesay) would help to fuel the steady growth of Sierra Leone's writers. The efforts of UNICEF and IRC, PEN and plans for a Reading Sierra Leone project as part of the Anniversary events in 2011 proved there was growing awareness of importance of reading and efforts were being made to combat falling standards of English.

Farouk Sesay echoed this view saying that reading is "almost extinct". He said "the elite are reading less, people are very busy". Recounting what he called the Siaka Stevens parable (when Stevens said "den say Bailor Barrie you say Davidson Nicole" meaning he preferred the diamond miner Barrie to the intellectual Nicole), Farouk Sesay said Stevens started the drive for business and money as opposed to intellectual study and academic achievement. After Stevens' rule, Momoh followed with his edict that 'education is a privilege and not a right'. Nigerian movies and football came when the damage had already been done. Not even 5% read newspapers Farouk Sesay lamented:

Reading is worse than ever, it is not government but homes that have failed. The culture of reading and even healthy discussion and analytic expression is being eroded and those who should have been gate keeping have been bought over by semi-literate politicians who do not respect culture or education. [2010]

Raymond Wilson (in 2007) complained that “even graduates don’t have good English so how can they teach English?” He stressed the importance of training journalists in language skills as the “quality of English has slumped and students speak Krio or other languages”.

Raymond De Souza George was gravely saddened by the education decline “Teachers have retreated into a very poor system which means Sierra Leone is committing suicide”. Believing that poetry is a medium for the highly educated and wanting to transmit his work more widely, Raymond had started a radio programme called Poetry Corner on BBN 93.0 at 7.30am since 2003-4. Using Krio writing for this programme he “wants to popularise poetry and deal with issues daily”. When he writes in English “it cannot seep down”. He also wants to use Sierra Leonean Krio phrases to “resurrect the use of wisdom and expressions which deepen meaning and impact”. Raymond suggested that orality is increasing and:

Krio is gaining prominence. It is now used in official events and used more interchangeably with English. It started with Siaka Stevens. Reading is dying – culture dying and our sense of civilising/civilisation. Thinking is also dying, objective discrimination. Analysis will also die or shrivel (2007).

Education and schooling lacks not only funding but rigour and energy. Amongst De Souza George’s students (he was teaching 109 students in one class) he explained:

they are reluctant to do research – they want lecturers to give them all the information. The Diploma programme of graduates who were bright made lecturers read more, there is laziness even among academics.

Past Presidents Stevens and Momoh both discouraged reading and now education is associated with ‘read and write’ and working in offices and offers very limited expectations.

Sydnella Shooter asked “if reading is lost what else? People prefer finding money than reading, they do not see the gains. There is hardship –no time to read. Sierra Leone is a very sad story”. Talabi Lacan also said “how much reading can you do with no electric? The kids used to sit under the street lights but where are they? People don’t read, they watch Nigerian films”. Talabi Lacan talked about Emerson’s song ‘Borbor Belleh’ which mocks politicians becoming obese. “People love music now” she told me.

SOJ Macauley claimed “reading for pleasure is not very common. Listening is becoming stronger”. One young lecturer and student I interviewed, Emmanuel Bartholemew, explained he had given up writing stories when he realised he would “only be read by a few people”.

Tom Caurray suggested that reading may become popular again. “Orality hasn’t benefitted society” he argued listing the “noise pollution of loud speeches” and “mosques and evangelists barking like dogs”. It is “so loud people are discouraged to read and go to listen instead”. Also complaining of language decline (such as the increasing use of expletives against children) and the collapse of discipline, he blamed widespread long-term poverty and decades of government neglect. Poor education and traditional education has let people down. He quoted a phrase I had often heard during discussions which is in popular usage in Freetown: *Na sense mak bok, no to bok make sense*. This translates as you can have sense without reading; sense makes a book but a book doesn’t have it on its own implying that, therefore, you don’t need it.

For Syl Cheney-Coker, the level of illiteracy “gives me a greater challenge to be prescient than if say 60% could read well”.

It was evident when working in Freetown schools where there was no culture of reading beyond memorising certain passages for exams which were written on the board in chalk and repeated rote fashion. The children I worked with said they would like to read and have books but they had no funds for them or the ability to read to a competent level in English. Most children had little or no comprehension of what creative writing is or how literature can transport them vicariously into the lives of others, entertain and educate them and that it can be a pleasure and a pastime. For them, reading was a skill that was necessary to master at a basic level if they wanted to pass exams and to go on and 'know book.' Even this did not seem to be an overriding ambition compared to other financial ambitions unless that education would help them get out of the country. This is evident in the following quotes from secondary school children about the way they imagine England:

As for me England look like heaven to me, that is why I want to go. (Emma Koroma)

England is a place where the government provides jobs for the nation, help those who are in need of help all over the world. England is a lovely country where both black and white people are living together and both of the rich and poor are living but they are more manageable their lives than here in Sierra Leone. Even though things are hard but they help each other so I love England more than here for 100%. (Foday Marrah)

If I was in England I will become a rich man. (Sallu Conteh)

The ways I think of England is just of certain things because of their good education and their well-planned organisation of things. The queen put in order for their country to be more developed. I like it because it is like a paradise. (Ibrahim Lebbie)

The children at Kissy and Cathedral schools responded well to creative writing activities (better in groups than individually) and were thrilled to be able to express themselves through their writing and to listen and react to work by other local writers.

Gathering thoughts from friends and colleagues for the panel interviews at the CWAS conference in 2009 (which he was unable to attend) Arthur Smith reported that “although literature is troubled in Sierra Leone it is not dying out”. “It is only in the shadows” reported one of Smith’s writer friends “all we need are publishing opportunities”. Others writers complained to Smith that English language and literature performance in exams was steadily lowering. Smith explains:

the reading and writing culture which was once ingrained in us with letters being an indispensable medium... [are] being replaced by the modern technology of the mobile phone. Sierra Leoneans used to pride themselves in massively indulging in the art of composing and delivering highly literary speeches, essays and articles, are now more interested internet, phones, nollywood and football.

Pointing to how poorly trained and ill-motivated teachers contribute to this situation, Smith described how:

incompetence and ignorance of the texts they are supposed to teach infect the pupils with their laziness, and antipathy to literature. The real truth is that literature itself has gone out of favour in Sierra Leone given the dire economic situation... Reading is seen as an elitist preoccupation.

Arthur Smith also mentioned “The more relaxing medium of film and music takes away the attention of the masses from the more intellectually demanding literary medium”. A marriage between quality writing and contemporary storylines and themes that are entertaining and educational is needed in Sierra Leone. Such writing would need to be shared through different

media and available to the wider public in order for literature to develop a sense of national ownership.

The reading group members, largely, agreed with the views of the writers given. They all said literature “is dying” or “gradually dying” although the group preferred to listen to the radio and to read and watched less TV than most Freetown residents. In the course of our first session we discussed the reading culture and changing attitudes. They complained of a lack of respect for the book in society as a whole. I recorded the following views:

“even in poda podas [mini buses] people say educated people ruined the country”

“the literate contributed to the suffering of the country – they are the decision makers.”

“People value jeeps and people with jeeps more than professors now”.

IS THERE A WAR LITERATURE?

After the British Council talk I gave in 2006, the artist and owner of Gaga Gallery, Louise Metzger, said “Everyone has a story to tell about the war – even in this room. Where do we draw the line?”

Mohammed Sheriff said that Sierra Leone needs a war literature and that “historical placing includes war”. Moses Kainwo explained he didn’t want war to enslave him. He didn’t feel tied to writing about it but does want to put Sierra Leonean war literature on the map like Biafra. Randoulph Wilson agreed that there needs to be a war literature and SOJ Macauley said we “need to make a record of war but not necessarily to publicise it as memories can bring pain”.

Farouk Sesay believed that Sierra Leone “needs a monument to remember and needs war literature” yet in 2010 he asked the question “*who* defines war literature?” For him “war inevitably comes into writing” simply because “all writers deal with humanity. Most writing

still reflects the war or has something to do with the war. Farouk Sesay talked about how communities in the provinces have had to deal with a younger generation suffering from mental derangement and use of drugs during the war and that now people are reinterpreting it as young people who went mad by going into the sacred bush. He suggested the idea of sacred bush was challenged by rebels who literally “burned the sacred bush and burned the myths. In rebuilding after war no attention has been paid to the restoration of beliefs” Farouk Sesay lamented, “it is the traditional belief systems and secret societies that help hold and cement society”. He also mentioned that “during the war the youth challenged the custodians of culture”. At Birmingham University in May 2009, he explained that he changes which poems he reads for a Sierra Leonean, as compared to a British, audience and that he doesn’t read the war poems when he is back at home. “Sierra Leonean people have a guard around them about the war” Farouk Sesay said. Regarding similarities with Biafran literature, he explained that something parallel is going on in Sierra Leone and people are starting to write about the war.

Raymond De Souza George was adamant that writers “need to keep suffering in view, [we] have to know how much, we don’t want to be haunted but reminded so it never happens again”. There is a “need to have war literature and project it into the future”. However, this is compromised for Raymond as the culture of literature barely exists even amongst the literate. Although “there are eager people there is just no infrastructure”.

AVS Komora claimed the “war created a lack of respect for old systems”. For Talabi Lacan there is too much “going back to the war – no one is getting beyond that. We can’t see Sierra Leone coming out of the war and moving on. Nothing has moved on”. (2006). Tom Caurray, by contrast, claimed he had not tired of literature about the war: “We haven’t even started”. He said he is not tired of writing about misery: “it depends how you write”.

At the 2009 CWAS Conference, Syl Cheney-Coker claimed:

Latin America was not marked by a war literature when the right wing death squads were laying waste to much of that part of the world... [we should] embrace and extol the extraordinary nature of our human compass.

Fellow panel member Delia Jarrett-Macauley (2010 questionnaire) did not feel she could state whether a Sierra Leonean war literature existed. Nonetheless her novel is consciously based on the war and would fit into a category of Sierra Leone war literature.

Interviews at the Red Cross in 2007 revealed that storytelling, music and theatre have been used to address the reintegration of young combatants into their original communities and into new locations such as Freetown and its outskirts. Freetown apparently offers a 'new identity' for young people who have been uprooted, exposed to war and subsequent criminal activity. This, coupled with increased exposure to satellite TV fosters the desire for western lifestyles, consumer goods and can lead to frustrated aggression. Red Cross staff claimed that as a result of the emphasis on the rights of the child, many young people now feel a sense of empowerment and but without the possibility of action. The youth tend to blame the older generation for the failings of the past and the older generation are horrified at what the youth were capable of unleashing during the war.

Reading group members told me that "wounds still need time to heal" and suggested, as many writers did, that the readers of war writing would most likely be future generations: "These are for the longer term, for people to learn from them". They cannot "open poems about war – it opens wounds".

My experience in schools revealed that many children are unable to read adequately and do not recognise the role that literature can play in learning from other people's lives or, in this case, in learning about war and peace, recent history and the shared culture and sense of

nationhood within Sierra Leone itself. Of course, there are some children (generally in the better schools) who do appreciate literature. Indeed many people I met in Freetown quoted from the novels, plays and poems they had once read in school. One woman I met, for instance, claimed that Mariama Ba's 'So Long a Letter' had made a great impact on her in realising the African woman's condition. However she had never read another novel since completing her education.

Impact of the war on writers: How essential is the personal experience?

Few authors interviewed used the term therapeutic writing although many claimed that writing helped them to express or discipline emotions. Farouk Sesay suggested that "Some people started writing at this period for psychological healing". During the war "our mortality was challenged".

Many writers reported that war gave them a theme and experiences to express and unravel through writing. Mohammed Sheriff said "war stimulates and gives material to write on".

Nevertheless, SOJ wrote outside the realm of politics after the war to get away from it.

Mohammed Sheriff, Arthur Smith, the late Victor Fanshole-Luke and SOJ Macauley recounted their first hand experiences of the conflict in Freetown. For SOJ the time of the January 6th 1999 invasion was characterised by "terrible dark days, you couldn't plan for the next day".

Tom Carray told me that during the civil war he discovered he could write prose and he wrote articles for newspapers every few days. He also decided to write a novel using the subject matter happening around him and he was in the process of writing this when I last met him in 2008. Several authors wanted to track down his work after his death in September

2009 but I am not aware that his novel in progress has been located. Tom agreed that “the shock of war, atrocity and crimes committed has stimulated people” however he warned that there had been an “exploitation of war – using it as a reason for not moving forward”. He also added that “the war was used commercially by those who benefited”.

Raymond also made a CD and 13 page piece of writing titled ‘Peace Don Come’ personifying peace and directly addressing the Sierra Leonean people. The war and resultant situation has “intensified his appetite for a closer relationship with people”. He “wants to know more and find the hidden resources in people” (2006). Questioned on the disturbing nature of some of his war-related writing, Raymond responded that he feels his literature:

cannot report lovely things when there were heinous atrocities –dead babies strapped on backs to hide guns at checkpoints, when keeping company with debris and can’t walk at night, when no electricity and insecurity.

According to Arthur Smith everyone has their own inspirations: “everyone has what he/she wants to write about”. If you want to write about the war”, he said, “you have to find some creative angle, to look at aspects of life that might have led to war and the effects of war on society”. This might include “looking at war as a regeneration of societal values, getting away from the ills which led to war” or exploring “war as expression of the excesses of society” (2010).

WHAT IS THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE WRITER?

Alpha Kamara claimed that the role of writing is “to bring back memories of happenings not brought to light. A writer writes what he sees and tells what he believes. He writes to express himself.” Alpha said his 2005 stories on the lives of child miners and suggestions for

government action led to an award. During the war and elections those with the capacity to transmit messages preached non-violence: “people were writing and doing community theatre and songs with messages of peace to change attitudes” Alpha recounted.

Arthur Smith suggested writers should be “sharing the potential of Sierra Leone to one day shine brilliantly. The role for Sierra Leonean creative writing, according to Smith, is:

to etch some kind of identity, try to inspire a nation to worthy acts that will extol the virtues of national pride and tolerance for diversity. Looking at ‘lores’/stories of various groups we can find cooperation in this small country of ours, love and cherish our country and resources and treat each other as people and love our culture (not only ‘culture’ seen through music but dress, food, artwork and the way we preserve and tell stories and record and restore the place of our heroes)... we can use writing to establish national/personal symbols to elevate the potential of the nation (e.g. flag, palm tree, rice farm, rivers, mountains, landscape, weather) leading to dedication, national pride, identity, loyalty.

A self-professed national artist, Charlie Haffner disagrees that writers can affect social change “writers don’t bring challenges to an audience in the way that theatre does – theatre is more active and responsive”. He sees his role as seeking to “instil a sense of beauty and joy in truth... and a thirst for knowledge”.

Mohammed Sheriff confronts social issues through his drama work and overtly aims to effect social change. Winning competitions from the BBC [e.g. Third Prize for ‘Spots of a Leopard’ in BBC’s African Playwriting Competition in 2006 and Highly Commended for ‘Papa’s Head’ in the 2007 BBC International Playwriting Competition] has given Sheriff more status and prestige in Sierra Leone: “international impact gives local respect” he said.

Mohammed writes his children's work primarily for local children then for the wider audience of "African children" and "Third World children" whereas most of his adult theatre work is for "ordinary Sierra Leonean people". He also has an international English audience for his stories and written plays.

For Sheriff, if writers are socially committed as many proclaim (he considered many journalists to be "self seeking"), they "should write about free and fair elections, accountability, and the need for those in power to keep their promises". He believes writing can change behaviour and has witnessed evidence of this through local theatre work e.g. changing behaviour around HIV prevention and raising awareness re the work of the Special Court. "Writers should try to point to hope" he said yet admitted many writers are preoccupied with job demands and don't have time for focusing on their writing especially if they are responsible for extended families.

Mohammed writes a lot of commissions (community theatre and radio plays) and finds that "while it restricts him it also provides a challenge and a framework". When writing freely he focuses on local themes of families in crisis within the social context:

Economics and war have worsened the level of control over the upbringing of children creating more of the delinquents and criminals that Pat Maddy warned about in No Past, No Present, No Future... This worsens with increasing poverty as moral expectations lessen and there is less shame around begging and pregnancies. Even the middle class are struggling to make ends meet especially if you are not corrupt.

Farouk Sesay saw his role as writer "to help project the culture and value system for posterity, it is the conscience of the people. First of all writing is personal and local then it moves beyond to the social". He admitted that in reality he is writing for the elite in Sierra Leone and

one which is reading less and busier than ever. Reading is “almost distinct” he said. Writing increasingly for an overseas readership, Farouk Sesay recognises that reading his work might influence foreign readers to intervene in some way to improve conditions locally. He said although he would love the common man to be his readership he does not think that contemporary writing represents the common man.

In 2010 Farouk Sesay discussed the ongoing difficulties in writing and reading yet suggested there are reasons to be hopeful in new developments amongst the writing community including his own appointment as National Youth Commission Chairman where he can steer an arts agenda and Elvis Hallowell’s appointment as head of the television station, SLBS. Farouk Sesay and fellow writer, Moses Kainwo, were also developing the work of Falui and Farouk Sesay had set up his own publishing house in Sierra Leone. “Most writers are writing the unwritten poems of those who can’t” and “trying to correct the anomalies of society” he said. Farouk Sesay talked about the small yet profound effect of reading poems to an intimate audience: “poetry can *move* people, it can create, uncover a sensitivity, bring us back to our deeper more human and spiritual selves”.

Self-published author of ‘The Land that we Love’, a ‘novelette’ which visits the past generation to examine issues today (Wilson, 2004), Joyce Wilson said “our literature is only just evolving”. She believes writers should seek to promote social change by “tackling issues plaguing society, by using simple language, targeting young, literate students and translating popular works into the vernacular.” For Joyce “a truly Sierra Leonean writer should be a patriot who aims to use writing to effect change” [2006].

Raymond De Souza George suggested the role of a writer is to “objectively view issues and confront authorities”. He sees himself as a “catalyst” trying to “sows seeds for reading” and

“resurrect” the tradition. By contrast, he admits that he has never read much and feels he ought to read more as it might improve his writing. Raymond talked about Kargbo’s play ‘Poyo Ton Wahala’ as an example of political writing and explained that theatre groups met to sign a letter protesting censorship during this period. Smith also said this play highlighted “corruption, poverty, deprivation and misgovernance” and described how audiences became incensed on realising how they were being marginalised. De Souza George’s own play, ‘Boboh Lef’, he claims “was prophetic concerning youth confrontation with older people and their community” but he is now tackling issues through poetry now as he is “frustrated with group commitment issues in theatre”.

SOJ Macauley also named the play ‘Poyo Ton Wahala’ as political writing which forced the playwright, Kargbo, in exile. Citing the novelist and playwright Pat Maddy as outspoken and someone who “wrote for the masses”, SOJ explained “we have not had such serious plays where artists were persecuted”. In his own writing he seeks to “promote Sierra Leonean culture yet recognises there are seventeen tribes in the country and three religions including traditional religion which is at odds with Christian beliefs” which makes this “a formidable challenge”.

Tom Caurray talked of playwrights becoming “theatre messengers” switching from writing to represent the masses to selling messages to masses. “Authorial authority is gone” he complained. “People must be suspicious of theatre. Entertainment has become about education and likewise education has become entertainment”.

As a full time teacher, Sydnella writes for school events and promotes literature and writing as part of her wider teaching agenda yet bemoans the lack of literature and the chronic lack of training, commitment and resources in many schools. Sydnella Shooter thought that “poetry

brings awareness, it is a corrective measure, and it educates and entertains. It is a history”.

She wants people:

to find a poetry that is not removed from society, that is for everyone. In this way, children will know they can read poetry and relate to it rather than only read poetry that is difficult and far-fetched [May 2008].

Sydnella said that teachers believe “literature provides a moral lesson but children don’t know this. They read for exams only”. For Sydnella, literature “helps to develop one’s intellect and it is also an outlet, a way to express deep thoughts and communicate experience”. She was ambivalent about assigning messages to literature on the one hand saying “It is good to write to transmit a message” and on the other saying “people like to read things that amuse them more than those that transmit messages”.

According to SOJ Macauley “Reading maketh man. It helps people to know the culture and what’s happening, it entertains, educates and promotes learning”. Literature serves to “inform, educate and entertain”. He talked about the proliferation of theatre in Krio in the late 70s and early 80s and suggested this was writing for mass audiences whereas the elite people had the British Council. When asked what he thought the story of Sierra Leone would be in 2025 he said “if she fails [depends on fortunes and whether there is a dedicated leader] her only hope for survival is divine grace”. (Such a recall to divinity and grace was commonplace in interviews. It should also be noted that most interviewees regularly attended either church or mosque).

Reading group members had not attributed a social role to Sierra Leonean writers as little was known of their existence at the beginning of our sessions. However, in discovering the work of local poets they all felt that Sierra Leonean poetry could help foster a sense of national pride and forge a shared sense of culture and would be influential in the longer term if

incorporated into the school curriculum. Readers enjoyed the poems about day to day life and descriptive pieces (such as poems about PZ and the Cotton tree in Freetown, about African women and Rain) which did not focus on suffering or war but which captured something distinctive about their shared experience of living in Sierra Leone. Having been exposed to other African writers, mainly Nigerian, they were visibly excited to recognise distinctly Sierra Leonean landmarks, dress and food in printed, published poems. After two to three weeks, readers started to bring in their own poems about Freetown. They realised that poetry was accessible and felt empowered to write. The play we read together was less well received but almost entirely due to the lack of reading in advance for our meetings. The immediacy of reading and then discussing poems worked better in the group context.

Over the last 40 years, Syl Cheney-Coker suggested there has been more publishing from outside Sierra Leone while in Sierra Leone “poets are at the border post”. There is too much “sensationalism about war as outsiders and commentators are obsessed with violence” and meanwhile there is a “dumbing down of culture in Sierra Leone”. Many countries have wars he said as if suggesting that commentators and authors too, assign it too much significance when it is a facet of human existence shared by all. Despite this comment, his 2009 poetry collection focuses on his response to the conflict in Sierra Leone.

In a later questionnaire Cheney-Coker stated he “would not consider commissions, creative writing is not a command performance”. Instead he thinks “literature should tackle the big themes – love, death, passion, hope, despair, identities etc.” For Cheney-Coker, the role of the writer is:

to say the unsayable plus hopefully to be swept by the remarkable beauty and challenge in finding something beautiful however threadbare and flitting in our troubled world. In a larger

sense, to throw my arms around those who can be reached by the magic of literature [2009 questionnaire]

Explaining that “the engaged writer is the only true role I consider valid” Syl also responded by stating “there must be a role for writers otherwise why would a nation exist?”

Delia Jarret-Macauley wrote:

I don’t think it is for others to ascribe roles to writers in the way they do with politicians. As I wrote above, writers can contribute to social change and development; many African born writers do that, but it should be a personal choice. [Delia JM, 2011]

LITERATURE AND PEACE

In 2007 Raymond De Souza George said that writers can:

shape the ideas and dreams of a country. They certainly have the privilege – ability, intention and responsibility to do so. How positively this is done in Sa. Leone is another matter considering the quality of the writers and the level of literacy (readership).

Writing can undermine the culture of war which developed in people’s minds, war laid foundations for lawlessness, destroyed the view of the family. Literature can help to recapture that either fictional or documentary. Need to go back to capture. Literature should inform, entertain and educate. In such a way it establishes the culture of a nation. It should give people a vision for themselves and a root. [Raymond De Souza George, 2008]

In 2010, Smith claimed literature can play a large role in familiarising people with cultures and people who might be different from them. This might be achieved “through schools and harnessing the homes and libraries” and via TV and reading programmes. We discussed how reading can help people to imagine themselves in the position of others which is one of the

fundamental practices of conflict resolution, mediation and peace education. Arthur Smith gave the example of how reading about the Nigerian sacrifices suffered by people during the Biafran war showed how wars are often to satisfy greed and vanity and may facilitate a more realistic understanding of war amongst readers.

Charlie Haffner talked about 'edutainment': theatre's changing role as it shifts "from entertainment and ritual to a tool to inform, sensitise and change". Now Haffner is increasingly 'making' plays rather than writing them. For instance he will typically select ten people including drummers, gymnasts, performers, storytellers, praise singers and go to the location to live with them and develop a theme (which will be documented by a mobile film unit). After theatres were shut down in the 1980s theatre was taken to people Haffner explained and it has "taken up the tribal role of Yeleba (griots/praise singers)". Modern community theatre he suggested can be seen as an adaptation of the role of praise singers as actors learn to be praise when they want to show that something is going well and "bash" when something has gone badly.

Mohammed Sheriff said that "writers should try to point to hope. There is suffering but also the ability to bounce back... and zest for life against the odds." He felt things will get better even if he "can't practicalise it"... "This is the spirit of Sierra Leone. There should be some hope. Even now there is freedom of expression and relatively fair elections. Corruption and poverty are here but there is hope". For Sheriff, the primary purpose of literature is to entertain (for pleasure) and he recounted how his mother told stories. Later "discovering stories in books was like finding a gold mine – I wanted to tell stories in books." Within this primary objective of entertainment he says you can "bring out other issues". However "Literature can't reach the audience that community theatre does, using dance etc. can capture audiences and you can have a dialogue on issues".

In 2010, Sheriff said “I can’t think of any literature influencing social change. Some writing can raise awareness like Pat Maddy and Kargbo”. He discussed how writers are stuck without readership or publishing and their readers are limited to each other and international readers. Mohammed lamented the decline in storytelling and the increasing marginalisation of the older generation. Writers do have a social duty he claimed and “even when commissioned, writers and journalists have to bring out the need for peace and reconciliation”.

In 2010 Farouk Sesay said that literature in Sierra Leone is parallel to that of Biafra: “writing on the war has just started”. He also stated the function of literature was to create a “commonality of culture and to keep culture alive.” Sierra Leonean writers are few and form a small elite and “there is no dissemination of their discourse – it is limited to the same circle of writers. The only form of literature that makes an impact on the wider public is theatre and music”. Nonetheless, Farouk Sesay talked about the fact that some Freetown writers were gaining more prominent positions to influence arts and cultural agendas and that confrontation does not exist between writers and other political elites although he admitted writers have been marginalised in the past and cited Sarif Easmon. In fact, Farouk Sesay went as far to say the “political elite probably don’t even understand the literature”.

Farouk Sesay also talked about the difficulty he was encountering in trying to persuade the Education ministry to adopt new Sierra Leonean literature materials. He suggested this was not so much due to curriculum issues rather due to lack of reading and commitment amongst the ministry officials and also due to existing business deals with other publishers.

Journalist and writer Randoulph Wilson believes that “poetry enlightens people especially students of literature, it reduces tension and corrects bad behaviour”. Fellow journalist Alpha suggested that “journalism can make the greatest impact if important people read”.

Literature teacher trainer, Arnold Jones, had not considered how literature could be harnessed to promote discussion about social issues, help readers imagine themselves in other lives and promote cohesion but he found these ideas interesting. He admitted there is a “very limited teaching of literature – learning texts for exams”. Learning a basic level in English helps students comprehend what they study in other subjects, helps them to read magazines and listen to news broadcasts in English. Arnold said that “literature can remind us of the past” and suggested some good war poems could be sent to schools. In the first year of teacher training, he explained the trainees read *Animal Farm* but this was the only political aspect of literature he was aware of at their college.

Students at FBC thought literature should aim to promote social change or should be for posterity and/or for pleasure. Arthur Smith thought that poetry was emerging as the primary form of writing that has the potential to promote change. It is also “a medium to express suffering more than other forms”. He also highlighted the changes taking place in Sierra Leone with so many people texting and using the internet and no longer writing letters and using formal English.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley described her novel as “overtly political in dealing with civil war, the use of child soldiers, governance, freedom and democracy in a variety of ways”. Ambivalent regarding the aim of promoting social change she replied:

writers should promote social change if they wish to. Many, many writers of African origin or descent produce work which promotes social and political change simply because their societies’ weaknesses when contrasted with first world, developed countries, are so evident and poignant... I don’t think it is for others to ascribe roles to writers in the way they do with politicians.

Nonetheless, she felt her work had contributed in certain ways:

I have contributed to post war rebuilding through my writing, by giving aid to charities, by working with NGOs operating in Sierra Leone, by speaking in public and by discussing issues in private with decision makers. None of this constrains my freedom in writing; in fact, it compliments it.

APPENDIX 4:

KEY POEMS

THE COTTON TREE

In the heart of the city paramount
History stands on this tree
Men have come and men have gone
But like a colossus it still stands
Commanding everything around

City and tree inseparable partners
Like Siamese twins,
The city's landmark,
This aged but ageless tree

With uses innumerable
Like the feet of a millipede
Home of paupers
Lunatic Asylum
Stations and mini parks
And nests of all degrees

Like the feathers of a peacock
It becomes the city's pride
With its shedding of the leaves
And cotton as white as the inside of a
coconut
It becomes a meteorological station.

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