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THE JULIUS CAESAR PROJECT – FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

It has been nearly three months since I first glimpsed, from the rusty deck of the airport ferry, an evening Freetown, sparsely lit by the generators of more privileged houses (these, for their roar, are locally called "Kabbah Tigers," after the president whose refusal to turn on the power has made them a necessity.) As stated in my proposal to the Class of 1978, my purpose during my two months in Sierra Leone was primarily to teach, although I found myself more often the recipient of the lesson. I will attempt to relate a few of my observations; however, my enormous debt of experience to the place and its people makes me anxious not to cheapen either. I hope both you and they will pardon me if I feebly impart their great gift.

The place, then: High, green hills scored with dusty veins, charged each morning with a mist that siphons off in the noonday sun, lobes of land seeping into the sea. And between the hills and the sea, the city. Although much of Freetown is little more than knots of concrete and corrugated tin and a tangle of ruddy, pock-marked roads (and is strikingly beautiful as such,) there are several landmarks that seem oddly gargantuan in the small city. Among them is the recently-built, $60 million American embassy which sits above, a small sun frozen on the crest of the highest hill, casting its orange rays on the hovels below. Fashioned entirely from Italian granite, its stones tell the familiarly fraught story of post-conflict development—that stability and progress come only in the form of imported materials, be they tangible or ideological.

Since the 1990s, there have been hundreds of NGOs and aid organizations in Sierra Leone. There have been many successes, particularly during wartime emergencies (UNHCR camps in neighboring Guinea fed and educated thousands of refugees;) but in the slow grind of post-conflict reconstruction, when the solutions become far more complex, it seems that many produce only marginally helpful, often misguided projects.

During my time in Sierra Leone, I traveled to different parts of the country to conduct interviews with local leaders about the needs of their communities. In the infamous diamond district of Kono, I filmed an interview with the regional director of one of the largest NGOs operating in Sierra Leone, in which he cited "child labour" as their primary focus. Although he admitted that in Sierra Leone, the concept of child labour differs significantly from the image of sweatshops and assembly lines that the phrase typically evokes. To begin with, the virtual absence of industry means there is nothing to manufacture in Sierra Leone; child labour is more typically manifested in children selling groundnuts and fry-fry alongside their parents. In this and many other West African countries it is a social norm that children must help their families and earn the money needed for attending school; childhood idleness is seen as a western luxury. Many Sierra Leonean families simply cannot afford to send their children to school and therefore there is little to do but bring them along to market. I certainly do not mean to undermine the importance of protecting the rights of children but rather point out that despite the fact that the organization labels the problem as 'child labour,' they admit that the underlying issue that must be addressed is the cost of education. The official stated

that their solution is to "interview the children, perform psychosocial sensitization[1] in their communities and pay their school fees." Because it is quantifiable—i.e. the number of children interviewed, the sum of fees paid and the total communities 'sensitized' can be listed neatly in a grant application—the solution is appealing on paper; however, flaws remain under the surface. For example, the NGO cannot afford to relocate the children so they remain with the families that put them to work in the first place. As well, it is often not enough to pay tuition because the additional expenses like books, test grades, and uniforms (a colonial relic complete with wool beret) still discourage parents from enrolling their children in school. Worse still, the country's chronically underpaid teachers do not teach the whole curriculum, so that passing the Basic Education Certification Exam (BECE) or the West Africa Secondary School Certification Exam (WASSCE) becomes impossible without extra lessons (which, of course, cost dearly.) Although it would likely be more cost-effective for the organization to establish its own school where it could control the price and quality of education, the truth is, "child labour" tugs more urgently at the heart- and the purse-strings. NGOs and aid organizations constantly encounter the dilemma of having to appeal to donors at the expense of the efficacy of their programs.

I had chosen to work in a local organization instead of at a foreign NGO because I firmly believe that it is the members of the community who are best equipped to assess its needs. Unfortunately, I soon learned that the dilemma of appeal and applicability afflicts even locally-run projects. The organization publicly defines its mission as the rehabilitation of war-affected youth, yet rehabilitation is not among its actual functions. Quite simply, the needs of the youth have changed since the civil war ended. Virtually

[1] An entire generation has been weaned on such NGO jargon, words whose sophistication belies meaninglessness. Neither the NGOs who use (nor Sierra Leoneans who repeat) words like "sensitize" and "empower" make any effort to specify their meaning; their ambiguity conceals ineffectiveness and excuses inaction.

everyone in the country is ‘war-affected,’ yet Sierra Leoneans haven’t the leisure to be incapacitated by trauma. Life has continued, despite the memory of suffering. To use the rhetoric of rehabilitation when the practice of it is unsuitable exploits that memory and undermines the legitimacy of the youth’s present needs. The drive to attract donors governs the way that many development projects are managed—too often, local pertinence is sacrificed for global appeal. Examples such as this one discredit all aid organizations and discourage investors from contributing to development projects at all for fear that their funds are not effectively helping the people that they mean to help.

Miriam Mason, the founder and headmistress of EducAid, tackles this frustration constantly. She has lived there for seven years, is married to a Sierra Leonean, speaks the language fluently and operates three secondary schools on an annual sum of £100,000 (a small fraction of the UN travel budget.) I will probably fall short of effectively capturing either Miriam or EducAid and I apologise for this fault (one never lacks the vocabulary for unmasking the bad, but words always seem a sad rag for dressing the good.) EducAid operates the only genuinely free schools in Sierra Leone. Since its inception, it has given hundreds of students an opportunity for education that would otherwise have been a dream.

Although I chose to continue teaching at that organization despite my frustrations, the final phase of my project was completed in partnership with EducAid. My objective was to teach literature not as a means of passing an exam but as a means of living. While I was there, Sierra Leone was approaching its first democratic elections since the end of the civil war. Although politics became the subject of many a long, crowded *poda-poda* ride into town, these discussions rarely dealt with party ideologies, the qualifications of the candidates, or their plans to improve Sierra Leone. The parties themselves rarely expounded upon these topics but instead issued forth empty, rabble-rousing rhetoric. In the absence of real issues, the

majority of the population would vote—as it has done since the country's independence—along tribal lines. As with many cases where democracy is transplanted into a society to which it hasn't come naturally, abuse of the process has been widespread. The ruling Sierra Leone People's Party candidate refused to attend the presidential debates and is currently demanding that the National Electoral Commission (NEC) cease to publish runoff results.

My time in Sierra Leone has demonstrated that if democracy is to remain the international community's priority in the developing world, education must become its instrument. The *Julius Caesar* Project returned to the origins of literature and drama where the central purpose of Greek tragedy was to educate the citizens of the young Athenian democracy. Accordingly, I used literature as a tool for cultivating skills of inquiry and critical analysis, especially with regards to political rhetoric.

My project presented students with different approaches to literature. Through Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (which every student reads for the BECE) I trained my students to dissect arguments, gather evidence, and support their opinions. In Act III.i, after Caesar falls, Cassius cries "*How many ages hence/ shall this our lofty scene be acted over/ In states unborn and accents yet unknown?*" This line became a constant theme as we discussed Sierra Leone's own civil war, the many problems that arose in peacetime, and the importance of asking the question that lies at the heart of *Caesar*: What makes a good leader?

After we finished a month of line-by-line analysis, the team of students and I began to translate the play into the local language, Krio. They patiently confronted the challenges of translation and complied with my demands for accuracy. Despite certain trouble spots, (for example, for the lines "*O world, thou wast the forest to this hart; And this, indeed, O world, the heart of thee*" became "O wol, yu don bi di forest fo dis bush-cow," which somehow misses the mark…) together we produced a complete Krio text that, like any translation, sacrifices certain elements but also enriches the original in a way that reveals much about Sierra Leonean society; for example, at one point I asked my students to list words that are used to speak of the future; "*Tumara*," they responded, (there is no other word for it in Krio.)

Interest in the project spread and we were invited to speak about the project twice on national radio. During the interview, my students eloquently explained the complexities of the project and read samples from the translation. After our program, we

received a flood of call-in responses from listeners around the country who were intrigued by our efforts.

The last step was to actually *live* the text through performance. A cast of twenty-four students worked tremendously hard, giving up long hours of draughts-playing to study their lines by candlelight. G-Mike listened to Murellus' speech several times during auditions and knew it by heart after the third. Ibrahim Conteh fought hard against a stutter to deliver Messala's lines. Figo, who stepped into the part of Cassius at 10am the morning of the performance, had the entire first act memorized by the evening. The production itself gave the audience the opportunity to watch something entirely in their own language, which, for many, marked the first time they had ever had the chance to experience Shakespeare in not only a modern but a *living* context.

As I reflect upon the students' accomplishment, I am convinced that the western hierarchy of needs (that so often tacitly dominates our understanding of "development") is entirely artificial. Although basic necessities are certainly important, this does not mean that intellectual and artistic endeavors cannot flourish in a society whose food is not as bountiful, whose water is not as clean, or whose democracy is not as mature as ours.

I sincerely want to thank the Class of 1978 because your generous support has made this experience possible. Following your class' example of service, I will continue to look for new ways to marry humanitarian work with my love for literature, both in my graduate study and throughout my life.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS BELOW

Freetown

Mrs. Sia Mary Musa, Mayoress of Koidu

Children in Makeni

A mother and child in Lumley

Children from an orphanage in Marjay Town

A diamond mine in Kono

A woman in Koidu

Woman pouring palm wine

Yusef

EducAid

Carpenters at EducAid

EducAid students

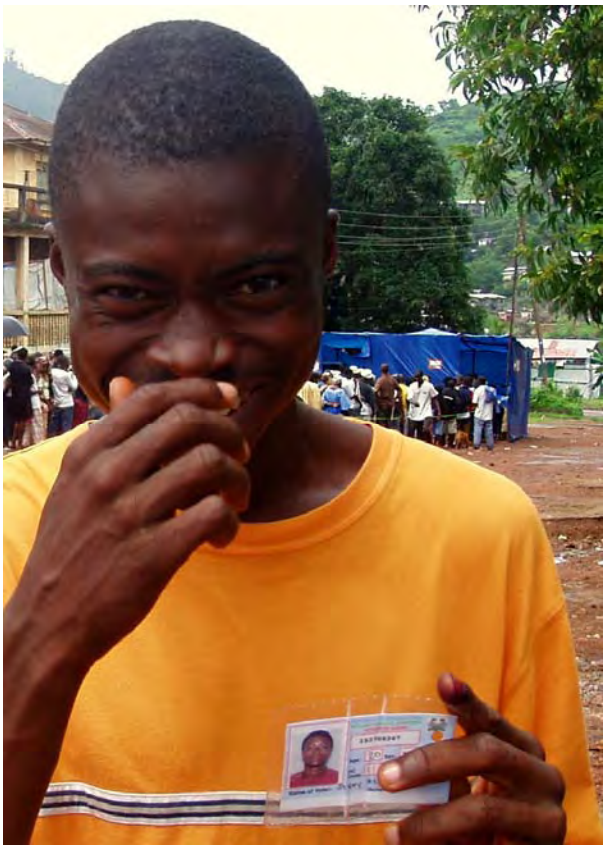
Fatmata

Classroom at EducAid

Students (L-R): Aminatta, Ibrahim, T,G-Mike, Pires, Caesar, Alpha, Issa, Baibundu, and Issa Kamara

A fishing boat

Polling station on election day



BH shows his voter ID card and purple finger

Listening to election results on the radio