

Village life is interesting anywhere. **Helen Fallon**, a Science Librarian at Dublin City University, Ireland, made friends with special people during the two years she spent in Sierra Leone near Leicester:

## AN AFRICAN VILLAGE

**Y**ou hear the whirring of the old sewing machine night after night in the drab, tiny galvanise house in which the village tailor lives and works. Even by the light of the kerosene lamp, his garments in vibrant African shades are beautiful. The fabric he uses, known as Gara, is made from tying and then dyeing white cotton. He buys it in lengths, called lappas, in Freetown market, four miles away. Abdullai, the tailor, does not use patterns but copies a picture or an item.

He pauses only to sell a few spoons of coffee, a cup of sugar, or possibly some sweets to a child who is lucky enough to have a few leones. Sometimes he works until two or three in the morning, but he will always be open and selling bread by 8 a.m. Abdullai goes to a supermarket in Freetown once a week to buy enough supplies to fill his carrier bag. He sells sardines and beans back in the village for an inflated price. The packages of sugar and coffee he sells by the cup or spoonful.

Abdullai's sharp, dark distinctive features set him apart from the native Sierra Leoneans. He is from neighbouring Guinea and belongs to the Muslim Fulani tribe. His ready smile belies an astute business acumen and like his fellow countrymen, he is extremely industrious. The Fulani tribe produce quite a number of tailors, a profession more associated with men than women in Sierra Leone.

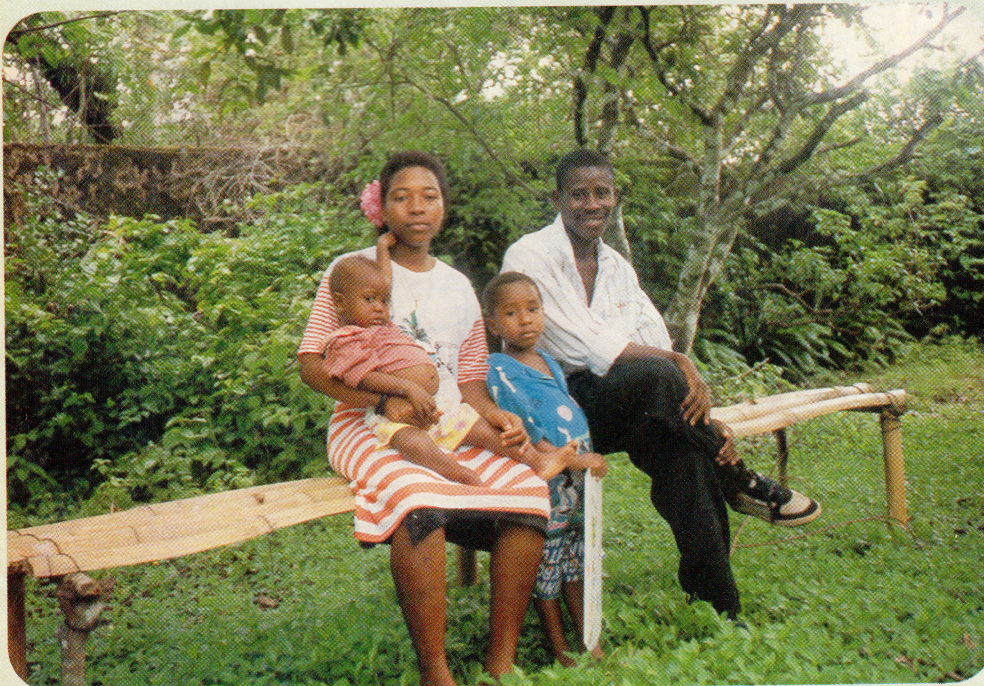
His wife, Isatu, is also from Guinea. After her first child was born she went back to her family in Guinea for a holiday and stayed for more than a year. Her long absence with the new baby was not considered unusual. She returned with her niece, Bella, who will now live as part of Abdullai's family and she may not return to Guinea until she is grown up.

A lot of Isatu's day is taken up with going to the well and preparing the one daily meal. She lights a three stone fire outside, using charcoal and sticks and the distinctive smell of palm oil pervades the air as she cooks a groundnut stew or jollof rice.

Soribenta is Abdullai's only daughter. When his first son was born there was great jubilation. He killed a goat and invited all his Fulani friends from all over to stay. The Fulani tribe are very ambitious and although Abdullai can read and write only a little and Isatu cannot, he will ensure his children get a good education.

### THE RAT CATCHER

At the junction, a little further down the road from Abdullai, lives Malagi, the rat catcher. He does not have the support of a large community like Abdullai so he relies on his wits and initiative to survive in a country where the life expectancy is 42 years. Malagi earns the equivalent of £15 (\$21) per month as a library porter at the University — pitifully little when a tin of powdered milk costs the equivalent of £2. He is glad to be called on for any odd jobs.



**Leicester's Pied Piper, Malagi, the rat catcher, relies on his wits and initiative to survive. He has a strong sense of loyalty to his family and wants only the best for his children, Abdul Karim and Ishmael. Nafat, their mother, shares his dreams.**

(photos: H. Fallon)

He makes a little extra setting rat traps and has a reputation for being very adept at this. It's a useful skill as rats are common. Up country they skin and cook the larger bush rats, but not here. Malagi is *au fait* with what will lure them — a piece of dried salted bonga (fish) nearly always works.

He rents a small plot where he grows lettuce, spring onions and tomatoes. He complains of the cost of seeds and was delighted to get some English varieties to experiment with.

Malagi's father died when he was young. In keeping with Muslim custom here, his mother married his father's brother. He left her when she sank into a deep depression ten years ago. She has not spoken in all that time. Malagi and his relatives took her to a witch doctor up country but were disappointed when she made no progress. Like all Sierra Leoneans, Malagi takes seriously his duty to look after his mother and treats her with great respect. A strong sense of loyalty to his family and friends is one of his hallmarks.

Nafat, the mother of his two children, sells his produce in Freetown. They are not married because he has no home to offer her. Besides, he says it is very expensive to get married. So she stays with their children and her extended family in a nearby village and he sees them a few times a week.

Because he had to leave school at an early age, Malagi is all the more determined that his children will get a good education. The eldest, Abdul Karim, goes to a local school even though it is difficult to afford the compulsory uniform, the first pair of shoes and the fees, not to mention books, pencils, etc. Malagi plans ahead and has asked me if I can help his children go to university in Ireland when they grow up!

When Malagi had to have his appendix out there was no free medical service. Getting money for accommodation

in hospital, the operation and his drugs, involved substantial hardship. I was amused when he told me he had managed to bargain with the doctor and got the cost of the operation down from £20 to £12!

## THE PROFESSOR

Five minutes walk from Malagi, but a world away, lives Professor Jones who may well be the only Sierra Leonean to have graduated from Oxford University, England. His grandmother was a Quin from Limerick, Ireland. She may be one of the white people who came out with the early group of ex-slaves. They call their home "Orchard Quin" in honour of this Irish connection.

Professor Jones is a retired Principal of the University. Despite being completely blind, he lives a very full life, relying heavily on his wife Marjorie, a woman of great energy. He is regarded as the doyen of West African literary critics. He is still very active and edits the British based journal "African Literature Today" from his home in Leicester. For many years he was chairman of the Noma Award, which might be regarded as Africa's Booker prize. Winners, such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Owning a generator means the Jones' have electricity which affords them a number of the comforts of modern living rare in Sierra Leone. I made occasional visits to their comfortable home and we sipped wine and talked of our favourite African writers many of whom he knows personally. It was nice to meet someone

who loves books even more than I do.

I would wave to Abdullai on leaving my home in the grounds of the Professor's house and sometimes meet Malagi and together we would walk the red laterite road. They left me pondering the interesting diversity of Leicester, this tropical African village. ■



**Tropical boardwalk: Isatu (left) in one of her husband's creations. Her little daughter, Soribenta, her niece, Bella, with Isatu's friend and Helen Fallon in Leicester, Sierra Leone, West Africa.**