

MAMMY SESAY

A WOMAN OF MODERN SIERRA LEONE

by Helen Fallon

Mammy Sesay's day begins very early. At about 6:30 a.m. when the sun rises she also rises in the two roomed shack which she shares with her daughter and three grandchildren. The family all sleep in the front room and the back room which is called the parlour is kept for supplies. It is there Mammy Sesay keeps her supply of kerosene. Selling this is her main way of making a living. She buys it in as large a container as she can carry at the Freetown market. Kerosene which is used for cooking and for lighting lamps is a by-product of gas and is often scarce so she must keep alert to what's happening in Freetown to know when to make the four mile trip.

The first task of the day is to go to the tap in the village and fill her buckets with water. She usually carries one grandchild on her back and the other two walk alongside. Soon they too will be able to carry a bucket on their head. This is not a society which allows children the pleasure of being children. From the age of eight onwards many of them are working particularly in trading (selling small items such as individual cigarettes). Towards the end of the dry season which runs from October until May the tap in the village is no longer of use as the reservoir higher up in the mountains has dried up. Then Mammy Sesay will have to take her buckets and her grandchildren and go to a stream some distance from her house. I don't know if she understands that the water from the stream is often contaminated and should not be drunk unless it is boiled. Even if she did understand it would not help as the firewood to boil the water would be too expensive for her to buy. Knowledge is not power when you are poor.

THE WORK OF THE DAY

After bringing back the water and possibly having a drink of coffee for

breakfast Mammy Sesay leaves for her patch of garden. Like many other women and some men she rents a small patch nearby and grows yams, cassava and tomatoes. She sells some of these to help buy other items or sometimes she exchanges items with other people in the village. She always sings as she works in the field with a baby on her back. These songs she has from childhood, when she grew up in Northern Sierra Leone as part of the Themne tribe. She learnt these songs at night when the elderly people came together to have a sing-song and also during her early teens when she went into the bush to be fully initiated into the Themne society. Her society is called Bondo or Bundu and might be the closest thing to formal schooling Mammy Sesay has known. She would have learnt songs, proverbs and customs of her society and after this period she would be considered ready for marriage. Here, outside Freetown, she is a long way from her family home, but of course there are other Themne people in our village with whom she can share her customs and rituals of her background.

Before it gets very hot Mammy Sesay will return to her home with her crops and her children. They are really her grandchildren but in Sierra Leonean society grandmothers often play an almost superior role to the mother. Mammy Sesay's eighteen year old daughter Marie, the mother of the three children is unmarried and often goes to Freetown to sell vegetables so the day-to-day minding of the children falls to the grandmother. The children are all under four years of age. I don't know if they will attend school. With an 85% illiteracy in Sierra Leone and the fact that people have to pay to go to school it is quite likely that they will not attend school, and if they do manage to grow up in a country where the infant mortality rate

under five is 35% maybe they will not know a better life than that of Mammy Sesay.

During the hottest part of the day Mammy Sesay will lay the clothes, which she has washed in the stream, out to dry. I am always amazed at how clean these clothes turn out with cold water and a bar of blue soap. Then it is time to think about chop (food). Although Mammy Sesay sells kerosene she cannot afford to buy or run a kerosene stove. She cooks on a three stone fire which is exactly what the name implies. Like all the villagers around she has been cutting away at trees. I think she would laugh and give me a big hug in her wonderful warm African way if I were to tell her about the hole in the ozone layer and the Greenhouse Effect.

COMMUNAL LIVING

Through necessity and also because of the communal nature of the society one fire is used by a few families. This fire is lit in a communal cooking area near the houses. Everybody cooks their rice and what they call "sauce" to go with it. The sauce might be cassava leaves, a spinach like mixture which is cooked in palm oil with chilli peppers. Once or twice a year Mammy Sesay might be able to afford meat. Like many Sierra Leoneans I met, Mammy Sesay does not know anything about nutrition. Even if she did what is the point in knowing that meat, eggs, fish and milk are good for your children when you cannot afford these things. The source of protein in their diet would be groundnuts (peanuts) which are grown in abundance in Sierra Leone. Groundnut stew or soup would sometimes be on her menu.

While the rice is cooking Mammy Sesay might use the fire to heat a few pieces of charcoal to put in her iron to iron the clothes. Clothes which have



Standing for a photo with friends: Mammy Sesay holding her granddaughter Adama, Helen Fallon, Science Librarian at Dublin City University, Ireland, with another granddaughter Kadita and to her right, Akibo Betts, a grandson, and two other children from Leicester Village. Helen lectured in Librarianship at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, between 1989 and 1991.

been lying on the ground drying are often infested with tumbu fly. This fly can then transfer to the wearer and cause great discomfort, thus the need to iron everything before wearing as ironing removes it.

Everybody eats together and indeed many people often share the same bowl. On my way home from work I sometimes pass them sitting outside eating. I am often invited to partake. Sierra Leoneans have a tremendous sense of hospitality.

In the evening Mammy Sesay, her family and neighbours sit outside and chat. One of the neighbours Musa plaits the hair of all the local women. I sometimes avail of her skills and the inability to get my totally straight hair to do the things their hair will do causes great amusement. Many of the women use henna in their hair, but none have blonde highlights like me!! Solitary hens and the odd cat amble by while we enjoy the coolness of the evening.

There is no twilight. The African night, mentioned by so many travel writers, falls quickly. A few miles from the city in the unpolluted environment what seems like thousands of stars dot the

sky and during the time of the full moon the night is so bright and alive with all the sounds of the many birds and creatures of the night. Amidst this sound there is perfect tranquillity. ☐

MARCH 1993 RESULTS

COLOUR COMPETITION

Winner: Gavin Gallagher, Meenderry, Falcarragh, Co. Donegal.
Runners-up: Aidan Conboy, Kilbeg, Claremorris, Co. Mayo; Kady Leather, Arley Road, Warrington, Cheshire, England; Yvonne Finn, Casement Park, Clonakilty, Co. Cork; Rachel Walmsley, Manor Park, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, England; Chris O'Kane, Tartnakelly Road, Limavady, Co. Derry.

ESSAY COMPETITION

Winner: Tony Watters, Bawnavrona, Mullinahone, Thurles, Co. Tipperary.
Runners-up: Olivia Murray, Killina N.S., Elphin, Co. Roscommon; Miriam Young, Upper Rathduff, Grenagh, Co. Cork; Caitriona Feeney, Big Ballivor, Ballivor, Co. Meath; Elizabeth McNamara, Moynoe, Scariff, Co. Clare; Maria Jordan, Sarsfield Road, Ballinasloe, Co. Galway.