

## The Sierra Leonean Writer, Aminatta Forna

# My Father, My Country

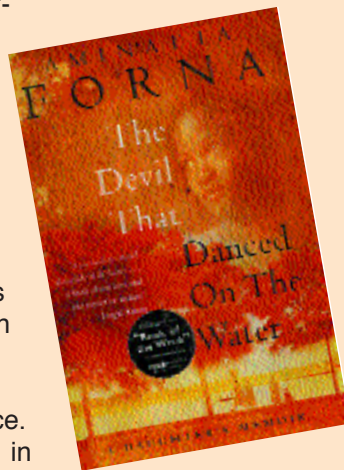
Helen Fallon

**A**minatta Forna was just ten years old when she saw her father Mohammed Sorie Forna for the last time. The following year, 1975, he and seven others were executed in Sierra Leone.

Aminatta, now a London based journalist, returned to her home country in 2000 to try to find the truth behind her father's execution. In her lyrical memoir, *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, she tells of the events that shaped the life of her father, her own upbringing and the development of modern Sierra Leone in a style that is at once harrowing, illuminating and thoughtful. "How fragile life is in a country like this," she writes of her homeland, having recounted the passage from an idyllic childhood surrounded by a large extended family to her return, as an adult, to a place where bands of child soldiers killed their parents and hacked off limbs; part punishment and part warning.

Mohammed Sorie Forna was born in 1936 into the Temne, one of the main ethnic groups of Sierra Leone. His mother Ndora, who died when he was just five, was his father's sixth wife. Mohammed was the only one of his father's twenty-eight sons and nineteen daughters to go to school.

This opportunity came about by chance. A missionary order established a school in a remote part of Sierra Leone where they lived. Viewed with suspicion by the local people, it was initially shunned, the people believing that a white man's education would take their children away from them. The missionaries approached the Paramount Chief who decreed that a child from each family should go to the new school. Because Mohammed had no mother to protect his interests he was chosen from his family! The belief that going to school would take him away from his people proved true. In 1957, Mohammed gained a scholarship to study medicine at St. Andrews University in Aberdeen. This set his life on a radically different course from that of his brothers and sisters.



### POVERTY AND WEALTH

He left Sierra Leone when it was a British colony and returned, with a Scottish wife Maureen and three children, to an independent nation. He set up a rural clinic in Koidu, a remote mining town in the far east of the country where "he spent every day working with people who died of easily preventable diseases, whose life expectancy was well below forty and whose children's stomachs were bloated with malnutrition." In stark contrast, every week the De Beers plane flew another consignment of diamonds out of his home country, whose earth was rich in gold, diamonds and minerals but whose countryside "was littered with the rusting frames of expensive cars, abandoned by dealers who found it easier to replace a Mercedes than go to the bother of repairing it." The diamond merchants' wives flew back and forth to Lebanon on extended shopping trips.

Initially Maureen helped in the clinic and worked in a garage in the town, while bringing up their two daughters and a son. Mohammed's innumerable relatives, in keeping with their strong code of hospitality, called frequently and stayed for long periods. It was very different from her home life in Scotland; in the small house with her dour Presbyterian father and kind but timid mother who kept themselves to themselves. On occasion Maureen did not welcome her husband's relatives and when he heard she had turned them away "without offering them a drink or anything he was incensed. Her behaviour offended his family greatly."

Dismayed by the pervasive poverty in a country of vast natural resources, Mohammed became involved in politics, perhaps seeing this as the best way to help in developing his country. During a period of political unrest Maureen and the children returned to Aberdeen. There they lived in a caravan because landlords wouldn't rent to "foreigners." Their sense of isolation is contrasted with the warmth, the light, the richness and the vibrancy of life in Sierra Leone with its characters such as Santigi, the family servant who

buys himself a bible and changes his name to Simon Peter, and Milik, who sits in the shade cast by the branches of a mango tree and tells the children stories of devils and hunchbacks.

## POLITICS AND EXECUTION

They return to Sierra Leone when Mohammed becomes Minister for Finance in the Government of the moody and unpredictable Siaka Stevens. Motivated by greed and a desire for power, Stevens invests heavily in armoured cars, builds up a personal army and lines his own pockets. Mohammed resigns in protest at this corrupt dictatorship and establishes an opposition party, setting in motion a train of events which end in eight executions including his own.

Earlier, as the economy of Sierra Leone deteriorated so too did Mohammed and Maureen's marriage: "by 1968 their marriage was a bowl patterned by a thousand hairline fractures." They divorced and Aminatta had to adapt to life with a stepmother. After her father was arrested, Aminatta, her stepmother, brother and sister, escaped to England. In 1975, while



**Aminatta Forna saw in her father's story a pattern that has emerged all over Africa and her book unveils post-colonial Africa and all its complexities.**

(photo: Auckland Writers)

she was at boarding school in England, her father was executed.

In the second part of the memoir, Aminatta returns to Sierra Leone, in 2000, seeking to discover why her father was executed. Siaka Stevens is dead and the country is trying to piece itself together after the enormous physical and mental scars of war. Incredibly Aminatta finds her father's trial transcript and persuades the people responsible for his execution to speak to her. They confirm that the charges against him were false.

Before leaving Sierra Leone, she visits the place where her father's remains are said to be buried. Watching a young girl, she remembers herself as a child: "I can see her now, as I write, the little girl who once was me. If I concentrate my will, sometimes I can still summon her. She is there, the girl who believed there was a place somewhere on this earth, a place where a devil came down at dusk to dance alone on the water." ■

Sierra Leone, on the Atlantic coast of West Africa became an independent republic in 1961; Freetown is the capital city. Rice, coffee, cocoa and palm oil are the principal agricultural products. But the country's economy has been heavily dependent on mining; there are rich deposits of diamonds, gold and other minerals.

Unfortunately, the political, social and economic issues noted in Aminatta Forna's memoir have not been satisfactorily resolved thirty years later. An almost continuous civil war from 1991 to 2002 resulted in a devastating deterioration of the economy and the displacement of more than two million people. Many sought refuge in neighbouring countries. The relative stability of the last two years has provided an opportunity to address the considerable challenges of reconstruction and rehabilitation.



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