

MICHAEL JACKSON

In Sierra Leone

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To the Memory of

SEWA BOCKARIE (“S. B.”) MARAH 1934–2003

and NOAH BOCKARIE MARAH 1942–2003

“that the path not die”



A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. — Walter Benjamin,

*Theses on the Philosophy of History*



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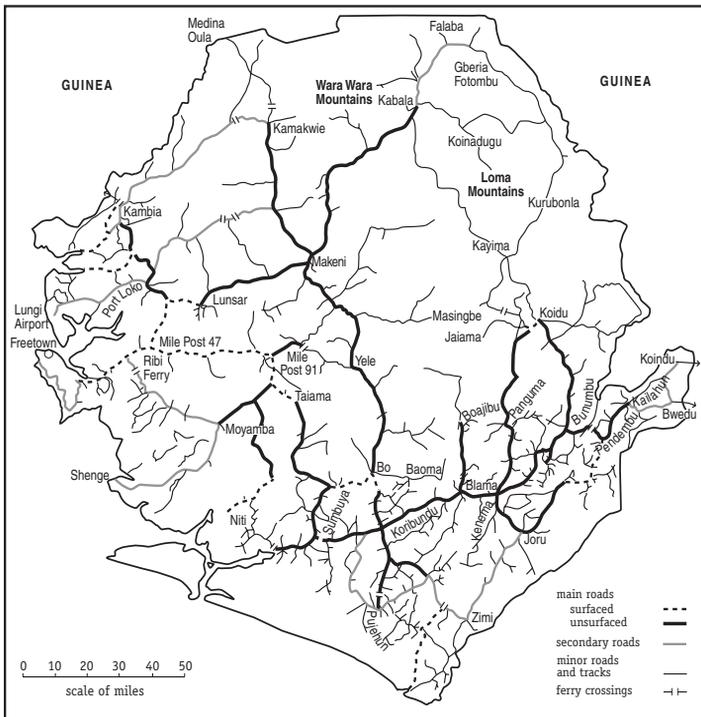
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Sierra Leone



Roads in Sierra Leone

## 1 Night Flight to Freetown

In the late 1960s, the English writer Graham Greene, expressing his fondness for the West African country where he had spent time during the Second World War, referred to Sierra Leone as “sopsweet land.” When I first went to Sierra Leone in 1969 to do ethnographic fieldwork for my Ph.D., Greene’s affectionate comments and famous signature were still in the guest book at Fourah Bay College, where Pauline (my first wife) and I stayed for a while before going north. Before long, the ebullience and piquancy of life in Sierra Leone captivated me, and though the ominous shadows of a corrupt regime and bankrupt economy were increasingly evident in ordinary people’s complaints, frustrations, and fears, it was still easy for a stranger like myself, living up-country in a remote town or village, to imagine that life would go on as it always had, despite the hardships. Then, in 1991, fighting in Liberia spilled over into eastern Sierra Leone, fomenting a rebellion that quickly gathered force. In the years that followed, the Revolutionary United Front laid waste to the country whose soul it had purportedly set out to save, killing, raping, and maiming tens of thousands of innocent people. In the West, media images of amputations and atrocities committed on civilians by “child soldiers” toting AK-47s reinforced, in many minds, a view of Africa as a place of incorrigible savagery. After the intervention of, first, a Nigerian-led military force, then the UN, the rebellion was finally crushed. And in January 2002, as Sierra Leone prepared to announce the end of the war, I went back to the “sopsweet land” to

find out what fate had befallen the people with whom I had once worked and lived, and to see how their stories might be fitted into the broken mosaic of the decade through which, as the Mande say, God slept.

During the years I had been away, my friend Sewa Bockarie Marah had been urging me to help him write his autobiography. After a political career spanning the four decades since Sierra Leone's independence in 1961, and interrupted by two stints in prison as a political detainee and ten months of exile during the war, S. B. was now one of the president's right-hand men, and had, no doubt, an intriguing story to tell. But was I the best person to assist him in this task? Though I knew something of his illustrious Kuranko heritage and his political constituency in the north, and had long been fascinated by Hannah Arendt's notion of the political as a power relationship between private and public realms,<sup>1</sup> I balked at the prospect of venturing into the vexed and often duplicitous world of Sierra Leone politics. Besides, unlike his younger brother Noah, who had been my close companion and field assistant for many years, and had introduced me to S. B. in 1970 when he was managing the Alitalia agency in Freetown (during a five-year break from politics, following his party's electoral defeat in 1967), S. B. had always been a somewhat remote and enigmatic figure to me. And I did not want to compromise myself by writing hagiography. Yet, as I made ready to leave for Sierra Leone, none of these misgivings seemed to matter.

Perhaps the reasons for this change of heart could be divined in my dreams, or lay in the impasse I had reached in my writing, for in the days before I left Copenhagen, its public squares half-covered with dirty, frozen snow, and the air misty and dank, my mind was crowded with images of renewal.<sup>2</sup> There are times when we need to break with routine, to get away from it all, and start over. But how can such fantasies of a new beginning be reconciled with the reality of the world of which one is already and inescapably a part? And how can the quest for renewal avoid the destructiveness of revolution?<sup>3</sup>

Daybreak was still three hours away when the night flight from Gatwick landed at Lungi, and I followed the other disembarking passengers across the tarmac to the dismal hangar that served as an arrivals hall. "Under Rehabilitation," read the sign on the wall. "Sorry for all Inconvenience and Discomfort."

Under dim fluorescent lights, I waited as baggage was manhandled from a trailer, and everybody jostled around the low tables on

which it was dumped. After retrieving my bag, I let myself be pushed along by the crowd to where helicopter tickets to the city were being sold. Then I made my way to the north end of the old airport building where people were waiting for the first helicopter. British soldiers in mufti. Aid workers. NGO personnel. Businessmen from Russia, Eastern Europe, and Lebanon. Returning Sierra Leoneans. A few minutes later it began to rain, unusual for January, and as the first helicopter settled awkwardly onto the tarmac its spotlights rendered the rain visible, like scratch marks on glass.

Since I was scheduled to take the second helicopter I passed the time talking to a young man from Lungi village who worked part-time for the helicopter company, loading and unloading baggage. When I asked Isa how the war had affected his life, he told me that his brother had been abducted by rebels while traveling from Kenema to visit their father in 1996. Though he managed to escape, he came home with a bullet in his knee, which now caused him great pain and prevented him from working. “During the war, everyone was alone,” Isa said. “Everyone had to fend for himself. There was no order.”

It was still pitch dark and raining heavily when the dilapidated helicopter crossed the broad expanse of the Sierra Leone river, with me a nervous passenger, and followed the coast southward towards Lumley. When we landed, I breathed a sigh of relief, and clambered quickly out. The helicopter’s spotlights illuminated the wet sea grass battered by the downdraft from the rotor blades.

I had taken no more than a few steps when a young man with a broad smile walked up to me and introduced himself as S. B.’s nephew and namesake. Small S. B.’s instructions were to drive me directly to my hotel. “Uncle says you are to get some sleep, eat breakfast, and then call him,” he said. “Then I will come back and drive you to the house.”

After two hours’ shallow sleep, I went to the hotel dining room for a breakfast of dry bread and jam, instant coffee, and a plate of sliced papaya and pineapple. Then I phoned S. B. and returned to my room to wait, only to find myself besieged by memories, as unspecific as they were unassuageable—the smell of the woodwork, a curious mingling of varnish and mildew . . . the frangipani and bougainvillea outside my window . . . the long stretch of Lumley beach, its ochre and buff sands scoured by the unceasing tides.

S. B.’s house was in the hills, overlooking the west side of the city and the sea. When I entered the parlor, Sewa rose from the chair in



which he was sitting, heavier than I remembered him, and moving with difficulty, but essentially unchanged. The same odd mixture of charismatic self-confidence and acute sensitivity.

We shook hands, and he asked me about my flight, and whether the hotel accommodation he had arranged was to my liking. Although I said I was happy with the arrangement, I had been mystified when he phoned the night before I left Copenhagen to say he had booked me into a hotel in order that I should have “peace and quiet,” for in the past I had always stayed with Sewa and Rose, and peace and quiet had never been an issue.

When I told S. B. I was looking forward to collaborating on his biography, he said that he already had the title for the book. “Within These Four Walls. I have had it in mind for many years. But I am tied up today. We have a crisis in Parliament. One of our senior ministers has resigned.” And he abruptly called for small S. B. to come, and for one of the houseboys to bring him a cap. “But don’t worry,” he said,



as he walked toward the door, adjusting his cap on his head. “We will be going north the day after tomorrow and we will have plenty of time to discuss our business then.”

Within minutes of S. B’s departure, Rose entered the room. Fuller in the face and figure than when I last saw her, she was still stunningly beautiful. We embraced with tears in our eyes, marveling at how swiftly the years of separation were annulled, as if no time at all had passed since we were last together. I then showed Rose several photos of Heidi, my daughter, and of my wife Francine and our two children building a snowman with Heidi in a churchyard near Sankt Hans Torv on Christmas day. As for Rose’s children, they were now, like Heidi, young adults, and all living in London where they had taken refuge from the war.

“But you know,” Rose said, “I was expecting that you would be staying here as you always do. I had prepared your room. Then S. B. told me that you would be staying in the Cape Sierra hotel. But this is your home, Mike; you must come and eat here whenever you like.”

I asked Rose about S. B’s younger brother Noah, with whom I had done my fieldwork during the 1970s and 80s. How could I get in touch with him?

It had already been arranged. Noah was aware I was arriving today and he would come to the house that afternoon.

Of all my reunions, this was the most overwhelming. When Noah walked into the room, I did not recognize him at first because of the