

## PETER AND JANICE CLARK IN SIERRA LEONE

21 March 2010

Besides being a great phrase “An Eye for a Bird”, is also a book title. The reputation of Eric Hosking, as a respected bird photographer, grew dramatically, when, in 1937, he lost an eye whilst photographing a Tawny Owl in Wales. “An Eye for a Bird” became the title of his autobiography, published in 1970.



Forty years later, on the veranda of a house in Freetown, it was more of ‘an ear for a bird’ before dawn, as the noises from a family of Scope Owls could be clearly heard from anywhere in the house. Some of the sounds, including the tschh hiss, mixed evocatively with the call to prayer from the nearby Mosque but it was the din on the zinc roof that had us out of bed so early. The legs of the owls are short, thick and sturdy, and rich yellow in colour. We have watched the owls, especially the two young ones, hop around on the tree branches, as well as being stationary when we see them on the nearby school buildings’ roofs. With no ceiling insulation in our house, the percussion noise on our roof was easily heard and we realised that the loud clumping noises of heavy clawed feet were coming from the abattoir above our heads, with the killing and

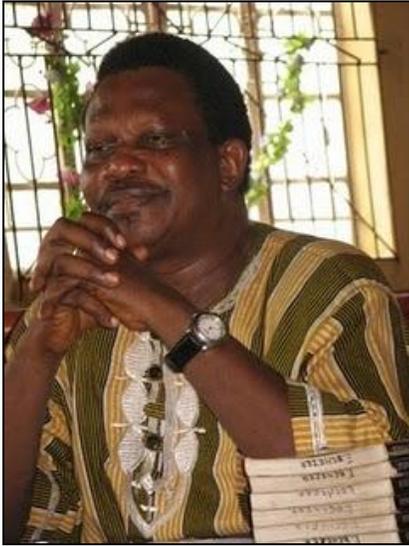
dissecting of frogs and small rodents that had not been presented on the ground as pre-filleted meals.

Working at the theological college requires sharp eyes and ears for cross cultural information that assists communal integration, as it is the small details that frequently cue the nature of an activity and provide a vital element in the living and learning process.

A recent ‘away-day’ event, to a location just west of Freetown, provided us with a generous opportunity to discover more about our colleagues, as ancillary, administrative and academic members (both full time and part time) were expected to attend the day, as made clear by the Principal, Rev Olivia Wesley. It began with the sharing of transport in mini-buses that would have benefited from the U.K’s “scrapage scheme” long before there was talk of a global financial crisis. “There’s always space for one more” is the mini-bus motto, even if the body of that “one” is more out of the bus than in it.



We were heading south along the peninsular to Ebenezer Church, in Goderich village which is really a small town. There are numerous Ebenezer churches and chapels around Freetown and the one in which we were meeting was of the Methodist variety and built originally in 1841. Until the mid 19th century, Goderich was largely a Krio Christian village. Today it is a densely populated Muslim and Christian community, situated on a peninsula that is bordered by both a stunning beach and a mangrove swamp. The subsequent humidity level was therefore a constant reminder of what working at sea level requires of both mind and body, as even sitting on cushioned church pews was demanding.



The previous day had been a national holiday in recognition of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, and it was quite obvious that it had provided the opportunity for a number of the women to be attended to by a hairdresser. And the chosen dress code was, as it is so often, one of, "as smart as possible" by some of the men as well as all of the women. Keeping to the time-table was also very African too, as we adhered to what is commonly referred to as BMT. 'Black Man's Time'. So what if we were two hours behind schedule before we got to "lunchtime"? No one blamed the chair, the retired head-teacher of the Methodist Boys' High School, Nathaniel Pearce, whose skill and energy for indigenous languages involves trying to ensure that a Krio Old Testament will be published later this year.

We are attending one of his classes at college and find it intriguing to see how mature students' oral competency in Krio, is not always easily translated into its written form. It was estimated that some 200 different languages could be found in Freetown in the mid 19th Century and despite English having a major influence in the development of Krio, other languages including Yoruba and Portuguese have had a marked effect too.

The first proverb one we were taught was "okro no ba lon pas in masta". In English, "okra does not grow taller than its master". This refers not only to the physical height of the okra plant, but that it is supple enough to be bent over to be harvested from, and therefore unable to be superior and greater than the one who planted it. The proverb has several interpretations, one being that as many Krios employ housekeepers, caretakers, office messengers, and houseboys, all of which are always subordinate to their master. This proverb could also apply to a young man who has studied overseas to acquire an academic qualification and then after working for some years, returns home with a European wife and much wealth. In the village square he sees the elders gathered in a meeting but, instead of observing the normal decorum that a youth accords elders, he ignores them thinking his wealth and education have made him higher and greater than the inhabitants of his village. He is then approached by an elder in his semi-tattered dress who reminds him of his origin by quoting the proverb "okro no ba lon pas in masta"

It was appropriate that this was the first proverb that we, in this case, as students, were invited to reflect upon, in an institution, which pursues degrees and diplomas in a variety of areas. This was the context for considering such traditional wisdom. The college also offers us a cross culture context in which to consider that, in coming from a British culture where owls are often presented in literature as being wise creatures, who are consulted by others for their counsel, we nevertheless observe the same birds, in a different context and appreciate that for most Saloneans, owls are associated witchcraft and its powers.

