

We have been seeing far too much of the petrol pump of late, as we have gone a week without national electricity and needed to resort to frequent use of a small generator. Systems of public safety are not overly visible in Salone, so it was instructive to be told



to wait a few minutes on the forecourt of the filling station, as a delivery of fuel was being taken from a tanker. One of the male attendants indicated to his female colleague that Peter was wearing a ring on the third finger of his left hand. This led to a discussion that began with the young woman insisting that a Salonean marriage only involved the exchange of cola nuts and not rings. This progressed as to why Peter's wedding ring (like Janice's) is silver and not gold. In the mid 1970s neither of us were keen to support South Africa's *Apartheid* gold industry and opted for more ethically acceptable soft silver. The original designs were created using "silver" chewing gum paper and the actual rings were made by colleague friend at Middlesbrough College of Art.

That same day, we read an article in the British press indicating that the UK's reputation as the divorce capital of Europe was under threat. This arose from the high court ruling on Katrin Radmacher and her French ex-husband, Nicolas Granatino, 38, a former investment banker, who had signed a prenuptial agreement before their wedding in London in 1998, in which it had been stipulated that neither party would benefit financially if the marriage ended. By a majority of eight to one, the Supreme Court justices dismissed Granatino's appeal, saying that after their ruling "it will be natural to infer that parties entering into agreements will intend that effect be given to them".



Marriage and the ending of it contrasted with the invitation we were given to witness a Krio engagement ceremony the following Sunday evening in the home of one of our students, a short distance away, in Wilberforce village.

Our awareness of this rite of passage had begun in our Krio classes in the first half of this year and in addition to studying how the language operates, we were looking at some of the cultural and traditional practices of the Krios.

Sierra Leonean Krios are an ethnic group whose history dates back to the time of the



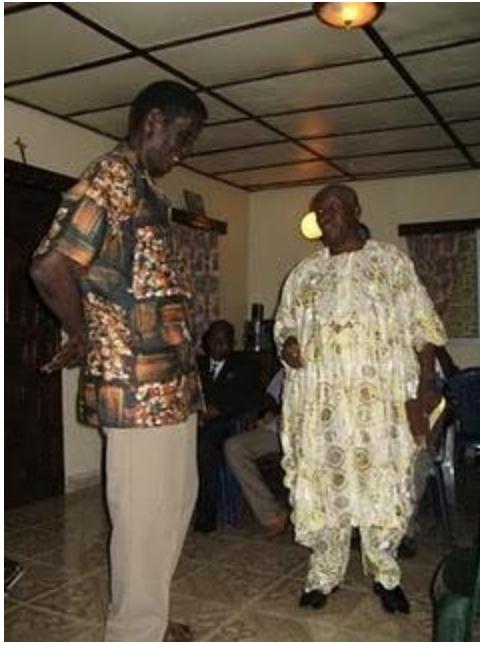
Trans Atlantic slavery. Their ancestors had been captured and shipped to the Americas or Europe as slaves, and following the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1804, and a result of slaves having fought for America during its civil war, a number of them were granted their freedom, and to cut a long story short, with great difficulty returned to West Africa. The ancestors of the new



arrivals could have come from any of dozens of West African countries where slaves had been taken from. Established as a colony to those given their freedom, Freetown and the Krio language, traditions and customs of those freed, developed and drew upon a variety of West African practices, particularly the Yoruba of Nigeria. Other influences include the practices, belief and rituals of Christianity that had been experienced and appropriated on the other side of the Atlantic.

One such custom that is still practised among Krios today is that of the announcement of an engagement prior to marriage, which takes place in the home of the bride to be. Our invitation to such an event came from Ronald, a student at College, as we were giving him a lift home one night. We eagerly accepted. Having heard the theory, in our Krio classes, now we could now see the experience the ritual.

The Dunbar family live in Wilberforce, a large, well established community, set up on high ground by wealthy Krios, and which features a recently installed statue of William Wilberforce. We arrived just before 7pm, and were introduced to Mr Conteh the spokesperson for the Dunbar family, who was sitting close to the door. A number of friends and relatives of the family were already seated in what is commonly referred to as the parlour.



Soon after 7pm, there was a knock at the door. Mr Conteh responded, but did not open the door. A long conversation took place with those outside. Mr Conteh interrogated the people outside. "Why they had come, why and should they be allowed to come into the home?" Represented by an emissary, they had come to find a young woman who had been seen looking out from the veranda of the house, and they had a special message to give to her. Further questions were asked, through the door, about this event, and eventually the spokesperson felt sufficiently confident to let the people in.

There was a delegation of some 12 or more people, all with the intent of meeting the



young woman, but only the emissary spoke. Dressed in an elaborate West African outfit, he traded dry, humorous exchanges as to whether there was such a young woman in the house, who had been spotted, as she looked out over the veranda. Eventually, one woman was brought out from an adjoining room. No, she was certainly not the person who had been seen. After further questioning, a second young woman was presented. Aged about 2 years old, she was obviously far too young to have been looking over the veranda. Another attractive young

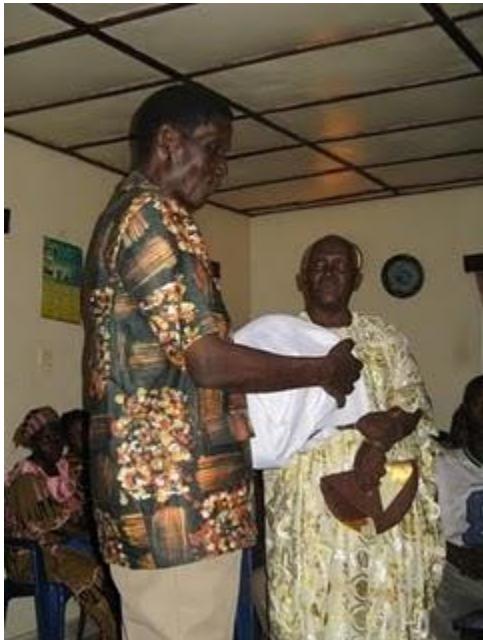


woman came out, and much was made of her beauty, contours and breasts all of which invited admiration. The reply was polite and simple "all that glitters is not gold" as they were not identical to the shape of the woman seen on the veranda. Doubt was beginning to set in. Had the messenger made a mistake, was he at the right house? He was adamant. Surely there was another room that had women in it? The spokesman said that there was and he would go and make enquiries. After a while he came back, with a young woman who had looked out of one of the windows of the house. She was greeted with eagerness and respect, and yes, she did have lovely curves and beautiful facial features, but she had been looking out of the window and not over the veranda. So back she went.

While all this was going on, a sudden storm of wind and rain had got up, which caused a power cut. The family had a generator, which was started up on numerous occasions, but was not able to keep going. So it was necessary to resort to candles. To assist the inspection of the young women, torches on mobile phones came into play, to make sure that the right person was found.

After further wait, another young woman was brought out and presented. Immediately there was recognition, that she had been the one looking over the veranda. Then the discussion started as to why the messenger was so eager to find this woman. He had come to request her hand in marriage for a family member, and as a sign of the intention, had brought gifts for the family.

A calabash covered in a white cloth, was presented to the bride,



which had kola nuts, (to cement the friendship, solidarity and generosity between the two families), needle and thread, (encouragement for the bride to be a good seamstress), bible, (for faith, prayer and Christianity), and a ring (symbol of the betrothal). Also in the calabash were envelopes with money inside, which were given to the bride's parents, family members, and important supporters such as the local minister or pastor.

Then the messenger indicated that he had other more valuable gifts, non alcoholic whisky – With Honour I Seek to Kiss you/ Watch How I Sincerely Kiss You; that there would be a trip to Italy – I Truly Adore and Love You, and Holland was to be another destination– Hope Our Love Lasts And Never Dies.

The bride-to-be was called Ronty , from the names of her parents, Ronald and Betty. After the ring was placed on her finger, she proudly went round the room, to show her ring to everyone who eagerly waited to see it.

Up until this point in the proceedings the groom had not appeared, and wouldn't for quite some time. His father, Mr Roby spoke of how Ronty would be welcomed into their family, and acknowledged the importance of both families being followers of Christian beliefs and practices. He then expressed his joy by breaking out into a chorus, which was received with much appreciation.

The time had come for light refreshments, which initially were pieces of cake and locally brewed ginger beer, but this was quickly followed with plates of bulgar wheat, kebabs, fish balls, and bread and butter, with a choice of "colas" or beers.

We chatted to the young man sitting to the right of Janice, to discover that he was a friend of the groom, William Charles and that through text messages he was keeping him informed of what was happening, but Ronty said that it was too early for him to

come in. We discussed whether a similar tradition was kept by other ethnic groups such as the Mendes or Tembes, and were told that their practices and rituals differed, but for both groups, one essential requirement was as to whether the potential bride could satisfy the man's sexual needs. We tried to ascertain whether proof of fertility would be necessary before marriage, and this could be so. The young man was called away by William but each time he returned kept us up to date as to what was happening.



Once people had eaten, they started to depart and eventually William appeared. Ronald introduced us to him, and for us it was then time to withdraw. The account that our Krio teacher had given had been replicated, and we felt honoured to have been witnesses to the drama. Unfortunately we will not be in Freetown on the day of the wedding. What a pity!

(Names have been altered and the "happy couple" have requested that their photos are not included.)

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Posted By Peter and Janice to [ClarkServInSalone](#) at 11/04/2010 09:37:00 AM