

One Nation under God – What can Sierra Leone borrow from the American Dream?

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." With these words, the founding fathers of America declared their independence over two hundred years ago. America is admired not because of the height of its skyscrapers, or the power of her military, or the size of its economy, but more so because it stands as a beacon of freedom and opportunity. I am not trying to imply that it is a land of perfection, but the country that is ranked last in the United Nations Human Development Index can certainly learn a thing or two from the most developed country in the world. What is the American dream and how can it help Sierra Leone get over its nightmare?

Forget Collin Powell, the US Secretary of State, let us take Barack Obama, a rising star in the US Democratic Party, Senator, Illinois State, Senate. Barack Obama's father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya and while studying in America, his father met his mother, an American lady who was born in Kansas. He was given an African name, Barack, meaning "blessed" in arabic, believing that in a tolerant America one's name is no barrier to success. They imagined him going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America one doesn't have to be rich to achieve his potential. Today, Barack Obama is poised to win a seat in the US Senate and he is considered one of the rising stars in the Democratic Party. Barack's story, probably like other Sierra Leoneans that now live in the US, is part of the larger American story. What hope or what opportunity can we attribute to a young boy born today, say in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Freetown? Do we have a system designed to ensure Sierra Leonean citizens realize their full potential and develop their natural abilities? We are now enjoying a resurgence in Sierra Leonean music thanks to people like the recording artist, Jimmy B. Sierra Leonean music which is now enjoyed passionately by its citizens all over the world, which is a great positive in these challenging times.

The true genius of America is its faith in the simple dreams of its people, the insistence on small miracles; that you can tuck your children at night and know they are fed and clothed and safe from harm. That you can say what you think; write what you think, without hearing a sudden knock on the door. Or that you can have an idea and start your own business without paying a bribe or hiring somebody's son. With it's ocean of diversity, there is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there is the United States of America. Without attempting to suggest that the USA is a model of perfection, I do believe Sierra Leone as a nation can borrow a thing or two from the values and commitments, which makes America great.

The author does not aim to compare Sierra Leone to America, because that will be like comparing Apples to Oranges. The author aims to highlight how we as Sierra Leoneans can copy from the ideals and values that shape this great country called the USA.

In post civil war Sierra Leone, very little seems to have changed in terms of the values and commitments of its politicians and its politics. The politics of tribalism, placation, divide and rule still prevails and is still practiced by government and opposition alike. Public officials who have

a consistent record of poor performance or one can say, served the people of Sierra Leone poorly are still being called upon to serve in Sierra Leonean public life. The rural poor who make up a large percentage of our population and our traditional rulers are still being used as pawns in our politician's sick game of musical chairs. Wealthy and sometimes educated politicians continue to use poverty and illiteracy as a weapon of control over our rural populace. Institutions are created, for example, the Anti Corruption Commission, but are sometimes undermined because of the lack of political will, and are therefore doomed to fail. Making personal attacks against Sierra Leonean politicians is a waste of time and effort, because they themselves are victims of a political system they have no control over, and that some manipulate or perpetuate to their own advantage. However we can still criticize them for their lack of will and courage to change the system.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Index Report for 2004 ranked Sierra Leone, for the seventh time, as the least developed country in the world. Sierra Leone is also the country with the highest infant mortality rate in the world, the least life expectancy rate in the world, the country where the most women die giving birth to a child, and the country with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. This is the hard reality of our situation in 2004 and this is how we measure up, to the rest of the world. This is not time to argue about the validity of statistical data, this is about the legacy of politicians and public officials who have served our National entity called Sierra Leone very poorly for the last 40 years, and the promise of future generations of Sierra Leoneans. The present plight of Sierra Leone is not even a matter of politics or of partisanship; it is a matter of concern for all Sierra Leoneans, wherever they may be. A politician is focused on the next elections but a true Nationalist thinks more about the next generation. We are all in this together. We have a lot of work to do. We have more to do for the thousands of unemployed young people in Sierra Leone, those adversely affected by the civil war. We have more to do for the thousands of our brothers and sisters who go to bed hungry, for the thousands of young people with the grades, the drive and the will, but no money to go to college.

The National entity called Sierra Leone has been starved of support, and it has been consistently undermined for a very long time. People will rather support sectionalism, nepotism and tribalism instead of our national entity called Sierra Leone. I believe the last time we stood as one, was when we wanted independence from our Colonial masters, Great Britain. It is time to support and promote Sierra Leonean Nationalism again. Let us make it fashionable and cool once more to be nationalistic. We should change from the obsession with self enrichment, to the fundamental belief that - I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper – this is what makes America work. This is what will allow Sierra Leoneans to pursue their individual dreams, yet still come together as a single family. "E pluribus unum." Out of many, one. It is about time we celebrate our cultural diversity, but still hold the values of equality liberty, justice, hope and opportunity for all, in order to build a better Sierra Leone. Instead of appointing People to public offices on the basis of how enthusiastically they campaigned or supported a political leader in an election, let integrity, and competence become a key factor once again for appointment to public office. We should make a die hard commitment to attracting the brightest and the best Sierra Leoneans to serve in Sierra Leonean public life, irrespective of their political affiliation, as long as they choose to serve with total independence and stay non-partisan. We should strive for

Independence in our Civil Service and keep traditional rulers far away from party politics. Partisanship and politics has greatly undermined the institution of Chieftaincy in Sierra Leone.

I am optimistic that there are better days ahead for Sierra Leone. I believe we can give our young people especially, hope and opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across Sierra Leone from violence and despair, prostitution, and drug abuse and dependency. I believe that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face us.

Today, if you feel the same energy, the same urgency, the same passion, the same hopefulness - if we do what we must do, then I have no doubt that all across the world, from Bo, Kenema, Makeni, Kono, Freetown, London, from Washington to Bali, Sierra Leoneans will unite and start working towards the resurgence and rebirth of our potentially great country. Sierra Leone will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come. Do something for the Sierra Leone renaissance today.

Amara Omar Kuyateh

8/21/04