

MY AFRO-CANADIAN
CHRONICLE
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Also by Bakar Mansaray:

A Suitcase Full of Dried Fish and other stories

(Sierra Leonean Writers Series, 2016)

Contributing author:

Running the Kilimanjaro

in the anthology Contemporary Fireside Stories

(Sierra Leonean Writers Series, 2017)

An Immigrant's Wings

in the e-book HOME: Stories Connecting Us All

(Connect Us All Working Group, 2017)

MY AFRO-CANADIAN
CHRONICLE
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BAKAR MANSARAY

Mandingo Scrolls Series

MY AFRO-CANADIAN CHRONICLE
An Autobiography

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FOREWORD

My early encounter with autobiographies as prescribed texts for the West African Examination Council was traumatic to say the least. The books then were mostly written by political leaders of emergent African nations with a heavy accent on self-promotion. Those texts surely left a sour taste in my palate that lingers to date. In retrospect, I think that the shortcomings could have been a combination of the following reasons: the burden of memory, the varying pathways to memories, the human instinct for rational order, deliberate alteration of autobiographies to enhance self-portrait, the subjective preference governing selection of materials, and the shifting of emphasis to exaggerate relevance.

In some of the autobiographies, the insatiable quest to feed the self-image starves all other strands of the narrative; the self is enlarged and exaggerated to create the image of a God-sent leader who embodied the dreams and aspiration of his people.

However, Bakar Mansaray's autobiography, *My Afro-Canadian Chronicle*, subverts the plot of self-portrait, rather it narrates the history of an emergent African nation at the crossroad of transition, the nuances of its cultural heritage, societal hierarchy, beliefs and aspirations through the story or stories of his family. The missing link in national narratives has always been the individual touch, the human side of history channelled through beliefs, folklore and oral history. In this book humanity oozes out in shades and slides, almost as if one watches the silver screen of a historical movie set in Sierra Leone of yesteryear. Montage after montage, the contemporary history of Sierra Leone is revealed through the eyes of the author.

From his birth in the dying days of colonial rule, to his educational escapades, and work, the author invites the reader to experience a deeper insight into the life of the Mansaray family— how that family's struggle and aspiration is inextricably woven around the larger national narrative.

The interplay between the mystical and the natural, the surreal and the real gives the feel of reading pages of a Garcia Marquez literature of magical realism. In Bakar's Africa, and Canada, as portrayed in *My Afro-Canadian Chronicle*, reality is both real and magical while science limps along with prosthesis.

For those who have read books of literature, history and anthropology from Sierra Leone and yet harbour the sinking feeling that there had to be a missing link between narratives, Bakar's book provides that missing link to complete the national narrative.

My Afro-Canadian Chronicle is a picturesque portrait of a humble family, a studious boy born into that family who follows knowledge like Ulysses sinking star; to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. This autobiography is a portrait painted on a canvas of memory in vivid and sometimes dark hues, telling a story only a mind as lucid as the author's can tell. Much will be gained from reading this book but much more will be contributed to nation-building if the author's pen print is emulated by others.

Oumar Farouk Sesay

Poet

Freetown, Sierra Leone

July 19, 2017

PREFACE

On January 16, 2001, I left Sierra Leone for Canada via Ghana, Senegal, and the United States of America. After fifteen years working for Sierra Leone Airlines and travelling worldwide, this was my first long-term residency in a foreign country. I couldn't have chosen a more ideal time to reside in North America because it was later that year that immigration rules got stiffer. Secondly, it was the same year that people in Sierra Leone started feeling the true repercussions of the decade-long civil war. Also, it was within that same year that the war in Sierra Leone took a back seat on the global stage. I was on lunch break in a motor tire warehouse in Ingersoll, Ontario, when I heard news of the catastrophe that occurred at the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001. The war against terrorism intensified in 2001.

I have written this autobiography not only to discover my family background and help me to establish a sense of personal identity and self-worth but also to shed light on the devastating effects of underdevelopment on a country that went through one of the most atrocious civil wars in modern history. Also, I hope this book would provide valuable insights to members of my family for generations to come. Similarly, I look forward to making my readers aware of some of the reasons why Sierra Leone is still considered as one of the poorest countries in the world, even though it is endowed with natural resources such as diamonds, gold, rutile, bauxite, fish, timber, cocoa, coffee, and piassava.

The ten chapters of this book talk about my early childhood, school days, teen years, early adulthood, starting and raising a family, earning a living, and retirement.

There is a proverb in Krio, Sierra Leone's lingua franca that says if you can't catch a black goat during the day, you certainly can't catch it at night – *blak got we yu nɔ ebul kech santɛm, yu nɔ go ebul kech am na nɛt*. In essence, the moral is to make hay while the sun shines. Fortunately, even in the midst of hardship, most honest and suc-

cessful Sierra Leoneans have been able to heed the call by catching that proverbial black goat during the day. They made their own way while they could so as not to run the risk of their society ruining it all. They apparently didn't wait on their government that is riddled with corruption, or get hobbled by a society embroiled in tribalism exacerbated by the divide and rule policy of the repressive British colonists and their hypocritical successors.

Sierra Leone, once referred to in colonial days as the "Whiteman's Grave", is my native land. It was known as such because of the high mortality rate of European missionaries in the country, as a result of malaria. According to Henry Seddal's book *The Missionary History of Sierra Leone*, by 1874 there were already scores of graves in burial grounds across Sierra Leone, with the bodies of as many missionaries, or missionaries' wives...sons and daughters of the Church of England, Wesleyan missionaries, the church clergy, catechists, and schoolmasters.

Between the 15th and the 19th century, the transatlantic slave trade became the bedrock of modern capitalism as profits from slave plantations in the Americas fuelled the Industrial Revolution in Europe. During this period, millions of black people were captured in Africa and forcefully shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold as slaves in the Americas. This barbaric act was orchestrated mainly by Europeans and Arabs. Between 1881 and 1914, the European powers partitioned Africa amongst themselves without consulting Africans. In their quest for Africa's natural resources, the Europeans and Arabs didn't only invade, occupy, and divide Africa, they also colonized the continent. The Europeans in particular officially sealed their scramble for Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884-85.

Between the 1950s and 1980s when the European powers reluctantly gave independence to African countries, they established global economic and financial policies that made Africans more dependent upon them than in colonial days. Most of these policies were made in connivance with multinational organizations, and the ruling African governments, thereby perpetuating the chronic underdevelopment of countries like Sierra Leone and many others

in Africa. My people believe that “until lions have their own historians, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunters.”

However, the story of my life and of Sierra Leone and Canada is not just clad in hopelessness. It’s also one that is spiced with joy and happiness. It is a heartfelt story that is a part autobiography and part history. It is a story of what makes Sierra Leone Sierra Leone, Sierra Leoneans Sierra Leoneans and what being Sierra Leonean and Canadian has always meant to me. A story that reminds Sierra Leoneans and Canadians that we are the parents of Sierra Leone and Canada, not vice versa. Therefore, I invite you to explore some of the most amazing intricacies that make up my history and how it intersects with two countries and its people.

I would like to acknowledge the encouragement of all those who have made this publication a reality. Onto chapter one of this book!

Bakar Mansaray

Edmonton, Canada

April 12, 2017

***“Future generations will judge us not by what we say,
but what we do.”***

— *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf,
2011 Nobel Memorial Peace Prize recipient,
World’s first elected Black female president,
First woman ever elected head of state in Africa.*

***“Time, which decays everything else,
gives literature a strange new life.
As we diminish in time, works of literature grow.”***

— *Ben Okri,
Winner: The 1991 Man Booker Prize for Fiction*

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PATHFINDERS

In May 1957, one month after my birth, general elections to elect parliamentary representatives were held in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone People's Party (S.L.P.P.) led by Milton Augustus Margai won the largest number of votes. Other contesting political parties were the United Progressive Party (U.P.P.), which took second place, and the National Council of Sierra Leone (N.C.S.L.), which came in third place. The Labour Party (L.P.) and the Sierra Leone Independence Movement (S.L.I.M.) had the fewest number of votes. (Nohlen, et. al. 1999). Also, that year the old colonial era Legislative Council was replaced by a House of Representatives, the literacy requirement for voters was dropped, (Encyclopedia of Nations, Sierra Leone, History), and the Sierra Leone Society, now called the Sierra Leone Museum, officially opened to the public at the old Cotton Tree railway station. (SierraLeoneHeritage.org).

My birth was a leap of faith for my mother, Marie Patience Mansaray, née Bundu-Kamara. After spending almost forty-eight hours in labour, she came so close to death, as my mother sent up prayers in the words of an old song: "*My Lord delivered Daniel, why can't you deliver me?*" I ended up being her first and only child, born on April 12, 1957, at 12:40 p.m., at the Connaught Hospital, in the bustling city of Freetown. I was brought home a few days later to number seven Taylor Street in the Fourah Bay community, where my paternal grandparents lived in a small rented mud and bamboo thatched house.

While some people didn't think, it was that unusual for my mother to have given birth to her first child at the mature age of thirty-three, some members of my paternal family thought my father, Mohamed Lamin Mansaray, had married a 'cock'. Consequently,

the pressure was on my father to find another woman who would bear him children. My mother almost gave up, but for her father-in-law, Pa Santigie Moseray Mansaray, a soothsayer, who prophesied that she would one day deliver a baby boy. Although, her fears of infertility were well-founded, she later became a beacon of hope for many women.

My mother was tested on two other occasions. As an infant, I developed a big boil on the left side of my chest, just beside my heart. Unsure about the source of the infection, my mother told me how, in hopelessness and total resignation, she abandoned me with my paternal grand-parents and ran back to her parents thinking that I was bewitched. On another occasion, she almost fell from an old railway bridge, with me strapped on her back. She had decided to take a shortcut home and was about half way down the Fisher Lane Bridge when she was seized by panic. Unable to move, she froze in her tracks and started trembling and crying. Luckily for the both of us, a Good Samaritan came to her aid.

I was born during the month of Ramadan, and by some miracle a mango tree in our compound burst into fruit, enough to serve all the guests at my naming ceremony, called *Kormorjaday* or *Pulnado*. According to tradition, the ceremony was normally held seven days after a child was born. During the event, the Muslim call to prayers was recited into my right ear. It symbolized the importance of prayers, and the goodness of the right-hand side over the left-hand side. I was named after my great grandfather, Abu Bakarr Mansaray. 'Mansa', the first five letters in my family name, 'Mansaray,' actually means 'chief' in our Mandingo language. It reflects my connection to the tribal chieftaincy. During my naming ceremony, a full-grown ram was slaughtered and the meat shared among the guests. As a sign of respect, the throat of the ram went to the man who cut the animal's neck. One hind leg went to my paternal family and the other to my maternal family. The rest was shared among the guests. In an atmosphere filled with sweet-smelling *churai*, a popular West African incense made from amber and musk; songs by Mandingo praise-singers or *Jélébahs*, musicians and dancers, the guests partook of a delicious breakfast of freshly baked loaves, homemade ginger

beer, various *minerals* (soft or fizzy) drinks, Jollof rice, *satea pap* (rice porridge), and *die-ah-mint* (sweets/hard candy).

My mother told me about my childhood fascination with the vulture. She quickly learned that one way to stop me crying was to take me outdoors to watch the birds. Some dislike the vulture because it's seen as a scavenger, but it's revered among my people, as the bird symbolizes intelligence, patience, and resourcefulness.

My mother was a beautiful housewife, about 5 feet tall with a jet-black complexion. She was born in 1924 in Kono Town, otherwise known as Seven Mile, in the Newton area of rural Freetown, Sierra Leone. She grew up in Kono Town with her mother, Morrow Peters, and later with her elder sister Memuna in Bauya, a provincial railway station town. My mother told me stories of how as a young girl, she used to baby-sit Conteh, the son of Memuna. She said that she once carried Conteh on her right-hand side for so long that she strained her muscle on the left-hand. My mother detested the idea of carrying Conteh all day long instead of going to school. Memuna was also the mother of Conteh's younger sister, Yamakoro. Yamakoro grew into a beautiful young woman. She was light skinned and quite a socialite. Just the kind of woman who made men's eyes light up. Conteh grew up to become a soldier in the Sierra Leone Armed Forces. For reason best known to him, he used to call me Dede.

As a child, like most African girls of her age in the late 1930s, my mother's daily chores were arduous. They consisted of fetching water from a stream, chopping or collecting firewood in the forest, washing dishes, sweeping, and preparing meals. Her schooling was pursued infrequently. It was only when she joined her parents in Freetown that she was able to attend classes regularly at the Methodist Girls High School. This was an exceptional accomplishment during that time, particularly for a girl. She was an athlete during her school days, winning many track and field contests.

Marie Patience stayed with my father at Masanke, an oil-palm growing town in the Moyamba District, while he was serving as a prison officer. They tied the knot sometime in the 1950s and renewed their marriage vows again in 1964; the year Sierra Leone replaced the British West African pound with Leones and Cents.

Marie Patience was a dedicated house-wife, a seamstress, and a petty trader who sold hot food and pancakes. After developing vitiligo, locally called *Gbèneh*, she became reclusive and partially isolated herself for decades. At age of 69, she suffered a heart attack and passed away in August 1993.

My mother was a great custodian of folklore and a gifted moonlight storyteller. In the evenings, especially when it was raining and we couldn't go outdoors, she would tell us intriguing stories laced with fascinating and passionate descriptions of people and places. Some of her stories were so electrifying, they seemed to light up the savannah. The stories that attracted me most of all were those about the value of frugality, and not despairing in difficult situations. One tale that made a lasting impression on me was a true love story of a young couple that lived in the *Agorsheke* area of the Fourah Bay community. The word *Agorsheke* is of Yoruba origin meaning 'house of gossip'. The two young lovers had an unwavering commitment to each other.

I will try to recount the story of the couple here. Let us call the young woman Abbe and the young man Amadu. Abbe's father, Musa, was working in the same Sierra Leone Railway office as Amadu. Both of them were clerks. Abbe was so madly in love with Amadu that she told him to put a letter inside the inner band of her father Musa's hat whenever he left his hat in the office unattended. Amadu graciously agreed. So, whenever Musa left his hat hanging on the office's hat rack, Amadu would quickly write a letter and place it inside the inner band of Musa's hat. When Musa got home, Abbe would retrieve the letter from her father's hat without his knowledge. Then, she would read the letter, reply to it, and put her reply inside the hat for Musa to take to work the next day. For months, Musa was the unwitting mail carrier for the two lovers. As fate would have it, one bright sunny day, Musa was cleaning his hat when he found a letter. He was so shocked that he summoned the elders of the community. Musa's request to the elders was simple. Bring these two lovers together in marriage.

Another tale my mother told us taught me about gratefulness. It is the story of the Leopard and the Deer. One night, as it was

raining cats and dogs, my mother told us how a pregnant leopard fell into a deep trench and was unable to climb out. She languished there for days, without food and water. Fortunately for her, a passing deer heard her cries and rescued her. Once the leopard was out, she told Deer that because she was hungry she would have to eat him. Just then, along came a rabbit, the cunning one, who proposed to settle the argument. In mock astonishment, Rabbit said that she couldn't understand how Leopard, could have fallen into such a trench. Leopard was angry at not being believed. "Show me then," urged Rabbit. Overcome by pride, back into the trench went Leopard. Rabbit and Deer looked at each other, shook their heads in disbelief, and went their way. As my mother finished her tale, there was a sudden flash of lightning followed by a clap of thunder, as if in agreement with the moral of her story, and as a signal for bedtime.

The Rabbit and the Snail was another tale my sweet mother told us. It reflected a lesson found in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes 9:11, which says: "*I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.*" My mother's story went as follows. Once upon a time in a dense savannah in Africa, the Snail challenged the Rabbit to a race. They agreed to meet at the home of Snail, under a baobab tree. When Rabbit arrived for the rendezvous, Snail was nowhere to be seen, so he waited a while for him. "Hahaha, poor Snail has backed out," he concluded. Suddenly, Snail emerged from out of the blue, saying, "We can start the race." Rabbit sprinted ahead, and then stopped to look back. Snail was nowhere in sight. "I could give him a whole day and he would never catch up with me," Rabbit boasted, as he hopped off to find his girlfriend. Both lovers had a good time, and then went to a nearby stream to take a bath. Then Rabbit went to visit his relatives where they had a feast, gossiped and laughed over Snail's stupidity. Soon after, Rabbit arrived at the agreed spot. As he sat down, he heard Snail saying: "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you all day long." Most of my mother's stories went along with sad songs, moments of sorrow, and regret. I was never short of bedtime stories that sometimes

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THE SIEGE

During the first week of 1999, there were already rumours of an imminent rebel invasion. From afar, east of the capital, we heard persistent sounds of heavy artillery shelling. Moreover, we saw hundreds of people of all ages, carrying their bundled belongings on their heads and backs, fleeing from attacks by rebels. They told us stories of burning and looting, rape and abduction, summary killings, intimidation, and mass amputations of limbs. Unlike my wife and some close relatives, I was convinced that it was just a matter of time before we too become victims of a campaign of terror.

We heard that villages and towns about two to three dozen kilometres east of Freetown had already been overrun by the A.F.R.C./R.U.F. fighters. People started dying from starvation as food and water supplies became scarce. By the fourth and fifth of January 1999, we were extremely afraid to leave our homes. I was scared out of my wits, as I frequently found myself staring ahead without seeing anything. People stood by their houses in small groups, listening to their radios. A repeated radio statement broadcasted over FM 98.1, the government's propaganda mouth-piece, warned people to stay indoors. Like the bleating of a stolen goat, the government continued to assure us that the Nigerian-led West African peace-keeping force (E.C.O.M.O.G.) was in charge of the situation.

It was on Wednesday, January 6, 1999, a pivotal day in the history of Sierra Leone when A.F.R.C. /R.U.F. fighters invaded Freetown. On that fateful day, as the town was turning on its side, trying to wake up from its deep slumber, the fighters were struggling to seize power from the civilian government of President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. On that Armageddon-like day, it was as if all the clocks were frozen.

Every man, woman, and child held their breath. It was said that even the *jinnis* had never seen such a day.

At about five o'clock in the morning, just as I was about to say my prayers, I heard sporadic gunshots in the neighbourhood. I woke my wife up from sleep.

"We're under rebel attack," I managed to utter.

"I don't think so," she groaned sleepily. "Those gunshots maybe from the peace-keeping E.C.O.M.O.G. soldiers," she said with weak conviction.

In order to satisfy our curiosity, we peeped through the steel and glass window of our bedroom for a glimpse up Mount Aureol from where we heard the gunshots. To our surprise, we saw in an uneven line numerous flashes of what appeared to be flash lights being carried by people descending the mountain. At about 05:45 hours, we realized that those flashes were coming from the flash lights of rebel fighters. By then, it was too late for us to run away. The rebels had penetrated what we thought was E.C.O.M.O.G.'s impregnable protective wall around Freetown.

In the coolness of dawn, a little wind was blowing in from the mountain bringing with it the sounds of gunshots, bombs, and voices of people calling for help. Apart from those sounds, the area was as quiet as a grave yard. Not a single cock-crow could be heard, neither the barking of dogs or the rousing chants of the muezzin calling Muslims to prayer. My attitude changed from incredulity to fear. Within an hour, the A.F.R.C. /R.U.F. fighters had completely surrounded our Ginger Hall neighbourhood. We were virtually under siege.

Right through January 6, 1999, and the following twenty-one days, different groups of fighters and civilians shot their way into the premises of people. They wore a combination of army fatigues and civilian clothing. Some of them sported wigs, helmets, gas masks, and sunglasses. Others were half-naked, with belts of bullets criss-crossing their torsos. As they gave each other exuberant high fives, they shouted slogans like "One Love", "Operation No Living Thing."

Most of the rebels carried AK47 and G3 assault rifles or rocket-propelled grenade (R.P.G.) launchers. They opened fire at everything

even inanimate objects; killing innocent people, and animals. As the onslaught continued, I learned that the rebels had a death list. The fighters were looking for certain people. Among those were government supporters, rich people, educated ones, Nigerian nationals, and journalists in general. Interestingly enough, these fighters had a distaste for people with pot-belly, bald head, and gray hair. Their logic was that such people were the ones who destroyed the country.

I saw many frightened-looking people from the far eastern part of Freetown, where the invasion started. Some were women carrying babies on their backs, and others had bundles on their heads. Most people had gunshot wounds, others had their arms amputated. Blood became a common sight. Little or no information was officially released by the government about the scheme of things but much had been whispered, gossiped, and maligned. Rumours abound regarding the onslaught. Whenever information was released over the government radio, they would blend vivid storytelling with unmatched skills of propaganda to falsify captivating news of sensational pretension and purview.

From my house located on the foothills of Mount Aureol, I could see couple of kilometres away the Fourah Bay community where numerous houses were set ablaze by rebels. We had word that the rebels were bitter against the Aku Mohammedan people in that community because in 1997, those people allegedly murdered one of their own sons, a Muslim cleric who played a mediatory role in the country's peace process. His name was Sheik Mustaba. He was a fully bearded robust fellow known to be an ardent mobilizer of the youths. The handsome-looking and humble Sheik Mustaba was against some of the cultural practices of his Aku Mohammedan people, especially those related to secret societies, which he branded as unreligious.

In our neighbourhood, we were warned by the rebels not to accommodate people fleeing from their burning houses in the Fourah Bay community. As such, we were unable to lodge a group of relatives from that area whose house was on fire. It was a pathetic sight to see them leave our house that evening without any knowledge of their next destination. Worst of all, nightfall was horrific. There was no

electricity, no lights, and no telephone network. The only lights were those from the headlamps of vehicles commandeered by the rebels.

Like most people, I was not only sleepless, but mentally and physically exhausted. People were forced by the rebels to serve as human shields from attacks by government soldiers. We were also forced to chant, "We want peace!" "We want peace!" clap our hands, and dance. I remembered quite vividly that my adolescent son, Ibrahim, was so excited about it all that he chanted and clapped most enthusiastically while I was finding places to hide, like a wounded beast.

By then my house was rented to quite responsible tenants. My father-in-law with whom we were staying thought I was the most cowardly person he had ever met. This was largely because he couldn't allay my fear of losing my life at the hands of rebels. The rebels were looking to capture university graduates like me, the gainfully employed, and outwardly successful people. As a result, I emptied my book shelf and threw away my books. I had recently sold a vehicle. So I placed the money from the sales in a plastic bag and hid it in a pile of sand on our compound.

One night, I was so scared of losing my life that I left the family home and spent the night in a nearby mosque among a large group of refugees seeking sanctuary. We all sat on the floor; men, women, and children. There was no light in the mosque. In the partial darkness, I realized that I had just made one of my worst moves in life. The mere thought of it gave me nightmares even long after the war. The rebels came to the mosque that night; drugged, drunk and aggressive. A volley of bullets was fired into the air. Who among us would be able to placate these crazed rebels? They pointed their flash lights at us, apparently trying to see if they could recognize any one. A couple of them shouted: "Are there any government soldiers or *Kamajor* militias among you?" In unison, we all shouted back: "No!" The question was repeated and the answer was the same. One of them warned us that if they find any enemy fighter among us, they will slaughter us all like pigs. They pointed out that they didn't care if we were taking sanctuary in a mosque or a church.

One of the rebels came so close to me that I almost urinated in my pants, wishing that I was a ghost orchid. In the partial dark-

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