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AW FOH DU? A RHETORICAL QUESTION

Martha McMillen

Almost every afternoon of the dry season the pulse of Bo-town slows to a lull and Bo assumes a dream-like presence allowing the alchemy of sun and heat to cast its spell of quiescence.

Brief, but necessary, it lends one resilience to confront another day in the glare of tropical West Africa.

The concrete-block buildings stand stark naked in blinding pink, white, and green, unprotected by the clothing of shade trees.

If you half-close your eyes you can visualize Bo as it once thrived — at the beginning of the century — in colorful tribal array, the center of trade in this Southern province of Sierra Leone.

The clatter of calls in Krio, Mende, Timne, and English — replete with seventeen other languages — crowd the air with greetings and laughter.

The smells of produce, fufu, tobacco, poio, and the fish, fresh from Freetown, all blend in a potion of excitement and promise. There is a bustle among the vividly colored figures, promising growth and abundance as the business of trade occupies young and old in happy collusion.
But that was long ago, in the early days at the beginning of the century, when rails brought people and their products from all over Sierra Leone to Bo-town, the place that became my adopted home.

Things are quite different now. The rails are gone and so, most of the trade and the promises with them. Aw foh du — what can one do?

There is a surrealistic atmosphere in Bo-town now, which astounds me and won't let me loose. People move slowly and patiently about, clicking away the minutes on an internal-time clock of their own that prohibits any hurrying or wasteful action. The circle of trading has narrowed to the local villages, where certain unobtainable items have to be brought in by lorry from Freetown.

No British uniforms mingle among the market women in the tin-roofed stalls. Tattered children — begging or selling — carefully, curiously touching white skin, call out to the pumwis for ten cents.

Now, the people in Bo-town undertake their affairs with an air of unreality that masks their concerns about eccentric, inflationary practices, massive health problems, food shortages, the educational void, and governmental deficits. They have not yet heard of the third world.

In spite of, and because of these issues, there is an attitude that keeps the tempo slow and easy and is reflected in the proverb, "aw foh du." The philosophical stance of this seemingly simple thought is that whatever is preordained will happen, regardless of human effort. If one is to believe this powerful mandate, and many do, further struggle becomes quite inappropriate.

Fortunately, there are some who struggle and survive in spite of it.

Samuel, however, is not one of them. Samuel, the gatekeeper, believes in aw foh du. Last month his young wife and tiny infant-son died. The fever that struck them both was not responsive to the first line of defense, street drugs. As their condition worsened, the family was consulted, and infant and mother were hospitalized as a last resort. By then, it was too late. Samuel accepted his loss with pain and grace. "Aw foh du," he said to me, "God has willed it. What can one do?" Soon Samuel married his wife's sister, as was his duty, and the cycle repeats.

Medical care is out of reach for the Samuels of this "unreal" world.

Veronica, the chakra woman, is blatantly, irrevocably mad. When I first met her she was a willowy scarecrow-figure, standing by the roadside with a cardboard box, containing her only belongings. She called, "Sister!" and began a slow-circle dance around me, chanting, all the while, her recitative of pain. She told of respected relatives whose concern led them to anoint her head with fire...
in an effort to banish her illness, and of her child who was spirited away. She sang of the man who abandoned her. I was stunned. I couldn’t move. She began a desperate fantasy about coming home with me. “Me? I’m going back to America soon, Veronica, and I can’t take you there.” I copped out.

“Sister!” she cried out, “Wait for me!”

I left her there by the roadside. I know some of the things that have happened, and will happen, to her. I know that no help will be offered her because it is God’s will that Veronica is mad.

Some will know the feeling of what it is like on the edge of insanity. Fortunately, Veronica has gone over. Aw foh du.

Mohammed, the younger, is another matter. Mohammed is about six, or seven, or eight; no one knows. His large brown wet eyes are constantly watching everything, searching. If he saw that I had bread he nagged until he got it all. If I was writing he wanted to attempt it. If I took out my garbage he found it and took it home. Unfortunately, he also took home my watch, which changed his life. I suggested that since he had this skill down rather well that he might learn other useful things, should he try going to school. The fees and books, supplies and uniforms are beyond the reach of most village families. But Mohammed is bright and inquisitive, and school became a reality for him. But soon, because of a rote learning system, which is mired in tradition, Mohammed will be just one of the voices in a mass recitation. Aw foh du.

But among those who struggle and don’t accept this paralyzing proverb, I know a doctor who runs a pediatric clinic. Often he does it without medicine, electricity, or proper equipment. Yet he has skill and stamina, and he tries. Sometimes he succeeds. He doesn’t make money doing this work. His reward is exultation.

I know a midwife who goes into the bush any hour of the day or night to prevent those who would bring death with their unwashed hands from doing so. She has compassion and drive and is rewarded with new life.

I know a minister who runs a church and community center with no modern equipment, a broken-down reed organ, and a few hymn books left by the British. He has love and tenacity and is rewarded by being loved.

I know a woman in Bo-town with four daughters who believes that in spite of the fact that they are only girls, they are worthy of being educated and having a better life than she. She sells fruit in the streets and farms for their schooling. She has vision. I don’t know if she will ever be gratified, but Agnes believes in trying.

What will become of my friends in this world who believe that, of their own free will, they can change things and survive?

Forget the deadly legacy of aw foh du and remember that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.