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A long journey from Sierra Leone to Australia:
A personal story
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Abstract
A journalist from Sierra Leone, the author was forced to flee his country in 1999, due to fear of persecution and possible death. After spending two years in Guinea, where he helped found the Association of Sierra Leonean Journalists in Exile (ASALJIE), and the Sierra Leone Refugee Coordinating Committee (SLRCC) Drama Group, Amadu was finally accepted, with his brother, under Australia’s Special Humanitarian Program in 2001. Facing the usual difficulties in settling in an alien country, the author describes the positive aspects of life in Australia, including the sense of safety, educational opportunities, formation of a local Sierra Leone association, and the help of Australian volunteers who assisted in many ways. To balance some of the more critical findings often reported about refugee settlements in Australia, this paper describes positive aspects of settlement through a personal story.

A flashback on Sierra Leone
It is impossible to fit the history of Sierra Leone into a single paragraph or a page, but one thing is certain — it is a country that has seen a lot of trouble and instability as a result of bad governance for almost three decades. As a result this tiny country has made its way to the international stage, but unfortunately not for the good reasons.

Krio is the language widely spoken in Sierra Leone, especially in the urban areas. It is a combination of the English language and some of the local dialects as a result of the period of English settlement and colonialism between the end of the 18th and mid-20th centuries. In 1787 a group of English ‘humanitarians’ landed on the shores of the present-day Sierra Leone with over 300 black ex-slaves and white prostitutes as part of a broad English resettlement program. A piece of land was bought from a local chief for the settlers and named the ‘Province of Freedom’. This later became Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. A Crown
Colony in 1808, Sierra Leone gained independence 153 years later.

By the time Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961, she was one of only a few countries in Africa that was enjoying multiparty democracy. Many argue that the abundance of resources like diamonds, gold, timber and iron gave her an advantage on the road to prosperity over countries like British Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. Sierra Leone was poised for success but the lack of good governance stood between her and prosperity. Gaining independence and self-governance also brought corruption, nepotism, tribalism, inequality and political decadence.

I grew up in a society deeply divided in almost all aspects of life. Nothing seemed to be playing on a level field. Parents were unable to provide the basic needs for their children: three meals a day, an education and toys. I never had a toy in my childhood because it was not at the top of the family priorities.

I came from a nomadic family where polygamy was the norm. At one time my dad (May his soul rest in peace) had four wives after divorcing the fifth one. He was, until his death in 1992, a highly respected Muslim cleric in the community. I had many brothers and sisters. At age three I was taken to my aunt to be raised by her in the town of Motema in the diamond rich Kono District in the eastern part of Sierra Leone. My aunt and her husband decided to send me to school. It was only years and years later that I came to understand that my aunt and her husband were not my biological parents. In fact my aunt was never blessed with her own child. I was, like many of my cousins raised in the house, given to her by her siblings. It was a cultural thing — this way she was able to claim to have kids even though we were not hers biologically.

My biological parents lived in the Worreh ranch. At one time they say my dad had many cows, but my mother never enjoyed the wealth. Because she came from a background of poverty she never had the attention that a woman desires at a matrimonial home. She was powerless and never happy about the system but stayed ‘for the sake of the children’. Like a cancerous disease the animosity between her and my dad ate its way into the relationship between dad, myself and my siblings.
Going to school was one of the greatest things in my life. I felt good about it but the challenges were enormous. Basics such as exercise books were hard to come by, but I was good at school against the odds. I really liked school and had a belief that I was doing the right thing. I liked drama especially and played characters like Robin Hood, Jim Randolph, the Arabian traveler, etc. I was good at memorizing whatever was given to me and this made me the darling of the drama teacher.

One day I asked my aunt to allow me to visit my mother at the Worreh and my wish was granted. I was happy and looking forward to meeting my family but was shocked at the life my mother was living. She started crying as soon as she saw me and surprisingly ‘blamed’ her sister; i.e. my aunt for allowing me to come and see her. At first I couldn’t understand until she told me that there wasn’t any food in the house and that this had continued for a while. There was never a time when food was in abundance. Ironically perhaps, it was this visit that in a way shaped my life. One night, my mother called out my name from her bed while I was lying on a mat on the floor: ‘Baaba’en (“daddy” because I’m named after her dad), I am happy with my sister and her husband for sending you to school. You are a lucky boy and I want you to do everything to concentrate on your school and never give up, no matter what, please’. I gladly promised her that. It was the advice that sealed my fate.

After finishing primary school I had to move away from my aunt to the provincial town of Sefadu to start my secondary schooling. All the difficulties I encountered during my primary life now looked like child’s play. It was hard to even get a relative who was willing to take me in. I wasn’t a bad boy but people were not just ready to accept me. I became confused and even suspected my mother may have been a wicked woman hated by everyone. However, my mother earned the respect of many people: poverty was probably the main reason for my problems. People just didn’t want to take in other people’s children, especially those from equal or lower status. My dad, on the other hand, failed to take up his responsibility, but I am not bitter with him.

I had a tough time growing up in my native country. My life mirrored that of many other people. My generation is considered to be the “unfortunate” generation in the history of Sierra Leone — unfortunate because it was around this time that the architects of
present day Sierra Leone were busy at work, and they were laying the foundations for a decadent nation. Many people weren’t surprised when the war broke out. The rebels never had problems recruiting people to join their ranks. What must have shaped the minds of people willing to commit the type of atrocities that took place in what used to be peaceful Sierra Leone?

Anyway, after what seemed like an eternal struggle to climb the education ladder, I finally sat my Ordinary and Advanced Levels certificates in 1992 and 1994 respectively. I was also making preparations for university but the odds staring me in the face were too powerful. The war was already into its third year and life was bleak.

I started talking to people and looking for assistance in order to continue my education but nothing was going well. One day I decided to visit a cousin who happened to be the Acting Managing Director of the Sierra Leone News Agency (SLENA), the late Mr. Abdul Karim Jalloh. Bingo! Mr. Jalloh suggested I join the fourth estate as a curb reporter with one of the local newspapers. He added that it could be an opportunity to reach university. I was asked to come back the following day.

When I came back, arrangements had already been made with the editor of the Eastern Post newspaper. This is how I got into journalism. I can still remember my first assignment as a curb reporter. It was to cover a cheque donation made by Canada’s non-governmental organisation, ‘Cause Canada’, to a local organisation campaigning for the promotion of democracy and good governance. This was in late 1995 during the first half of the war. I continued working as a journalist till my flight in 1999. Between 1995 and 1999 I worked for various newspapers including the Eastern Post, Expo Times and finally the Democrat. I also worked briefly with another newspaper, the Afro Times.

In 1998 after the reinstatement of the current Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) government, the newspaper I was working for, the Expo Times, was banned from publication. The authorities falsely accused it of being a pro-junta/rebel (Armed Forces Ruling Council/Revolutionary United Front - AFRC/RUF) propaganda machine. I later joined the Democrat and was assigned to covering the treason trials involving the rebel leader Corporal Foday Saybanah Sankoh, ex-President Joseph Momoh and the Military Court-Martial involving former AFRC members. Many were
executed by firing squad in 1998 for their role with the junta that ousted the elected government of President Ahmad Kabbah. I was also involved in other activities outside my journalism work. I became involved with the Youth for Environmental Protection (YEP) Media Wing and was also an actor with the Flamingo Players theatre group.

The war years were not the best time for journalists. Journalism then, and regrettably still now, is a very dangerous path to tread in Sierra Leone. The only difference between the 1990s and the current situation is that journalists are now fearful only of the government; before it was government on the one side and the rebels/sobels (a ‘sobel’ is a soldier-turned-rebel) on the other. Both the government and rebels were hostile towards journalists reporting on their actions. As a journalist one was literally caught between a rock and a hard place. I authored several articles that did not go down well with either of the warring factions. With the contacts I had within the security apparatus I was able to get first-hand information on the dynamics of the war. This enabled me to report on what the Government and AFRC/RUF considered to be sensitive information and they were not happy about it. Sometimes when I interviewed government officials about a certain issue, for instance about an attack by the sobels, I would get misleading information. So in most cases one’s own sources of information would provide a more objective analysis of the reality on the ground. I wrote articles on military conflicts, massacres, trials and other sensitive topics. My stories had a lot of publicity and this was, unsurprisingly, putting my life and that of similarly objective-minded journalists at great risk. I was harassed by government, the rebels and members of the military. I had trouble with the government mostly during my stay with the Expo Times press for writing stories about rebel invasions and the capture of towns and villages and killing of soldiers. The government was very uneasy about these reports and started to come down hard on the reporters.

Things became unbearable after I reported two stories, one about a defection by several soldiers to join ranks with rebels and another for which the source was one of the commanding officers of the AFRC/RUF rebel invasion in 1999. I learnt from the former army sergeant that he went to the republic of Burkina Faso along with several of his colleagues to undergo commando training for
During the invasion of Freetown in 1999 my name was among other journalists on the hit list of the joint AFRC and the rebel RUF invaders. “In 1999, Sierra Leone became the world’s most
dangerous country for journalists, with a total of 10 journalists killed in the line of duty”, CPJ reported at that time\(^1\). I knew I was going to die if I was identified and decided to go underground to avoid possible execution by the bandits. Because the bandits couldn’t lay their hands or machetes on me, they burned down the house I was living in. It was evident that I was going to be killed if I chose to stay. Also, I had dreams I wanted to fulfill. I was constantly thinking about my poor family in the bush. I lived a life that was under constant death threats.

Out of fear for my life I clandestinely left the shores of my native country on the evening of 1 June 1999 for the neighboring Guinean capital of Conakry, arriving there the following day. I traveled on a Greek-owned boat called Nikolas. I don’t want to mention how I got on the boat. All I can say is that it wasn’t the legitimate way. It was my first trip via sea, the Atlantic Ocean. The trip was very long and there were many other passengers on board. Still, I was happy that this opportunity to escape had finally arrived and prayed for a safe journey. I carried bread and sardine tins with me and some cash that I believed would keep me going for at least a week if I could get free accommodation upon arrival at my destination. I met many other people on board including Sierra Leoneans, Guineans and Liberians. The discussion was about nothing other than the January 6 AFRC/RUF invasion, the war in the region and the misery it continued to yield.

At night fall I went with some of the passengers on the top deck. We found ourselves convenient locations to rest our backs. I never liked the stench of the cabin below. I was getting seasick but I really enjoyed the view and fresh air on the deck. The sky was beautifully lit with stars. It was the perfect place to contemplate the future and the millennium fever gripping the world. I thought about a guy who asked me whether it was true that come 31 December 1999, white people would have run out of ideas!

An hour after we lost sight of Freetown, we saw the skies above the Guinean capital Conakry illuminating. We were told that the red skies are directly above Conakry and that the illumination is the only reliable form of navigation for captains on dug-out canoes plying the dangerous high seas to Guinea for business. The canoes are a cheap form of transportation and ideal for the contraband trade. It is also a route free of roadblocks. Not surprisingly, hundreds of lives of mostly petty traders going to
Guinea on business, and families fearful of the danger on the land route, have perished on this route.

We arrived in Conakry in the early hours of the following day but had to anchor at sea and wait for daybreak before we could get to the port and get a chance to disembark. Rumors were rife about Guinean security harassment of new arrivals; people were searched and forced to pay bribes before they could get off their boats, or molested and stripped of their belongings if they refused to pay. Around 6am a Guinean military patrol boat came close to our boat and their men climbed onboard. They didn’t look polite and didn’t pay any courtesy to us before they asked for our captain. One of them went with the captain to his cabin. After a while both men came up and the security guys left. We waited for another hour before we bathed at the port. The Greek captain asked me to stay onboard until it looked like everyone else had left. I did as he wanted. After what seemed like an eternity he finally gave me the green light and I tried as best as I could to fit comfortably with the locals at the port where everyone is looking for someone. From the boat to the ‘gates to freedom’ I kept my ears and eyes open for intruders. As I got to the gates a voice called out ‘Diplo’. This didn’t scare me at all as it isn’t a name that many people know me by. ‘Diplomatic’ was a nickname given to me by a secondary school friend when I was about 10–11 years old and my friends. While I try to locate the source of the voice it continued “Diplo, nar mi Umar!” (“Diplo, it’s me Umar”). His nickname is Bobby and I knew him, as they say, ‘inside-out’. He seemed to have developed large shoulders and a muscular frame. Anyway, Bobby grabbed my bag and asked me where I was going and about life back home...

A refugee in Guinea

I arrived in Guinea worried, hungry, dehydrated, tired and very sick. Guinea is a strange place: you can be a friend one minute and a state adversary the next. There is a story of a refugee in a Conakry restaurant asking to be served what the locals call “Café Police” (white tea or coffee). White tea/coffee is served to customers who couldn’t afford one with milk. Unfortunately, a police officer was at the restaurant and overheard the order. The furious officer walked straight to the refugee and demanded to
know what ‘Café Police’ looked like. Unsurprisingly, the frightened refugee used his wits to save himself. “Café Police”, he said, “is rich coffee/tea served with omelet, sandwich, a bottle of soda and cold water”. Every one at the restaurant burst into laughter.

I was taken to a colleague from the same Worre background, Mohamed Alieu. ‘Med Lee’ as he was fondly called, is currently stranded in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He played a good host and I loved every moment with him. We shared his bedroom and I sometimes accompanied him to his business errands in the heart of the city. A few months later, the landlord asked that we leave his place and, dissatisfied with the whole system, Med Lee left not only Conakry but Guinea, only to become stranded in the DRC. I was left on my own and had to start all over again. Food, shelter and medication were really hard to come by, not to mention clothing. There were times when I couldn’t afford even a cake of soap to bathe with. One day I cried bitterly in the bathroom because of this and was left with no option but to dump my underwear into the latrine pit. The pressure was on but I was determined to fight and to survive. I kept telling myself that if I survived my refugeedom, life would be fine one day. My desire was to live and see that beautiful day. Despite the odds, I became very strong inside.

I knew Guinea was not going to be the ideal place for me to stay and this made me think hard and move fast. It was a matter of survival with little or no room for self-pity. While in the Guinean capital Conakry, I worked with my journalist colleagues, leading to the birth of the Association of Sierra Leonean Journalists in Exile (ASALJIE). I became an executive member (assistant secretary) with Marvin James and Karim Kamara as Chairman and secretary, respectively. Unfortunately, Karim Kamara and many more of our colleagues are still languishing, to this day, in Guinea with their families. One day a representative of the Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) visited us in Conakry to get first-hand information on the situation. The RSF representative also gave us an emergency cash package. We also came into contact with representatives of the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First). The assistance we got from RSF greatly helped improved our situation. In fact it became the cornerstone for us working together.
As an organisation we fiercely and successfully lobbied the United Nations and other diplomatic, human rights and refugee agencies to consider our plight and provide resettlement for us in an English-speaking country. Guinea was a dangerous place to live in, especially for refugees, because it was ‘too close to home’ – literally. The Guinean government is notorious for sending refugees back to Sierra Leone, many of whom are killed upon their return. Some soldiers, for example, were found guilty by court-martial and executed in 1998 by the current SLPP-led Kabbah government. The Guinean government was also hostile to refugees, especially journalists who they considered spies. In September 2000 President Lansana Conte openly declared all refugees in the country to be either rebels or rebel collaborators and warned Guinean citizens against helping refugees. The outcome was an unprecedented attack on a defenseless population: lynching, rape, vandalism, robbery and threats by angry Guinean mobs and the security apparatus. I was asked by the landlord to vacate the property I was sharing with some Sierra Leonean amputees, victims of the AFRC/RUF brutality. The only option I was left with was to move to the refugee camp in Forecariah where I joined about 25,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia. According to Human Rights Watch (1999) at this time the total refugee population in Guinea was estimated at about 430,000 people. As an organization, ASALJIE submitted applications through the Protection Officer of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Branch Office in Guinea. One of our supporters, the Guinean Organisation for the Defense of Human Rights (OGDH) President Dr. Thierno Madjou Sowe and his staff worked tirelessly to help us lodge the forms. Dr Sowe’s team provided us with office space in their building to operate from. They also provided the moral support we desperately needed. Their role as referees, together with the help of the then Dutch Protection Officer and his assistant, Hans Lunshoff and Senai Tereffe, respectively played an important part in the majority of our cases. Also of assistance was another staff member Mamabdou Dian Balde. Mr. Balde enjoyed the relationship because of the English language. He loved speaking English and I was happy to engage him in a conversation. Nearly 90 per cent of ASALJIE membership were successful in their initial applications and were resettled in Australia with their families.
Unfortunately, Australian Immigration refused some of our colleagues’ applications. Because of the continuous persecution of journalists back home, they decided to stay in Guinea rather than risk their lives or that of their families upon repatriation. Many more continued to flee Sierra Leone. It was only last year that a journalist, the acting editor of the popular For Di People newspaper Harry Yansaneh, was beaten by a mob on the alleged orders of a sitting member of parliament for the ruling SLPP, Fatmata Hassan Komeh, on 10 May 2005. On 28 July 2005, more than two months after henchmen savagely beat him up, Harry died. Harry’s case was taken up by local and international media watchdogs who called on the government to ensure justice is served. ASALJIE is certain that this tragic incident was not an isolated one. We are therefore calling on the Australian government and people to consider the plight of our colleagues stranded in Guinea and resettle them here in Australia. They have a lot to offer Australia if given the opportunity.

During my stay in Guinea, I was also active in the field of drama. As a trained dramatist with one of Sierra Leone’s most popular theatre groups, the Flamingo Players, in Conakry I was reunited with my directors who like many others fled persecution in Sierra Leone. We later formed the Sierra Leone Refugee Coordinating Committee (SLRCC) drama group. We came up with several plays most of which portrayed life back home. One of the most successful plays was one titled Wi wan peace (We want peace) which was shown at the grounds of Sierra Leone Embassy in Conakry. The play was even broadcast on the BBC’s Network Africa program.

Life in Forecariah Refugee camp

To say that life in a refugee camp is tough is nothing short of an understatement. I had to do things that I hadn’t imagined before just to survive. I became a sewage cleaner for the Red Cross who were responsible for the maintenance of health and hygiene in the camp. This was a job similar to the ‘work for the dole’ program, which enabled me to have enough food to keep me going beyond the few days the original UN supplies lasted. Life at the camp was quiet and sometimes I thought people had become resigned to their fate and that there was nothing they could do to improve the
situation. Ironically, the camp boasted facilities, such as clean water and a toilet system, as a result of the good efforts made by the UNHCR, which were the envy of the Guinean locals from nearby villages. But, can a man live on water and toilets alone? The camp also had schools, and trees were planted everywhere — one was planted by the UN boss himself, Kofi Annan.

Accommodation, as you can imagine, was not at all perfect. Everyone was living in tents and every rain caused havoc. Some refugees like myself made beds made out of tree branches, grass, ropes and nails. It wasn’t only because of the rains that I opted for such a bed but I was scared of the thought of snakes and crawling insects.

Drugs and alcohol, especially marijuana and liquor, were rife in the camp. Men and women were forced into the habit as a form of escapism from the terrible situation they found themselves in. I became involved in a Muslim organisation with some of the Muslim members in the camp including a Murray Kanneh and his family. Murray and his family now live in Sydney, NSW. We later constructed a mosque made of wood, thatch and grass that we cut from the nearby bushes, and had our own executive of which Sheikh Hassan was our Imam, Murray Kanneh a chairman, and myself a secretary. One important thing happened in the camp during my stay. Of course every refugee was either starving or sick and wanted nothing but food and medication to help improve their situation. Ironically, an Arab or Kuwaiti organisation was busy constructing a grand mosque for the refugees. I couldn’t understand the reason behind such an adventure. There were even rumours of the initiative angering the locals who wanted the mosque built on their own turf. A night before the opening of the mosque, we were invited to read some verses from the Holy Qur’an. After we finished reading, which was around 3am, I was asked by the Imam of our own mosque to lead the prayer. It was the first time that I had to lead a congregation of that nature at a mosque.

Later, I was appointed as registrar and head of the drama department, but this was unfortunately short-lived. Just after the appointment and before we could work on any project there was an AFRC/RUF cross boarder raid deep inside Guinean territory and not far from the camp. Along with many other refugees I was forced to flee the camp. I had arrived back in Forecariah from one
of my weekly trips to Conakry and found the town in total panic. Security officers and civilians were moving helter-skelter. I hurriedly joined the same vehicle and returned to Conakry to avoid being trapped in Forecairiah. As fate would have it, as soon as we left the town the Guinean security put up barricades on the roads barring all refugees from leaving the camp. It was evident that refugees were going to bear the brunt of reprisals from an already hostile Guinean security apparatus and its civilian population. Refugees were beaten, raped, tortured, looted and even killed. It was the worst period during my stay in Guinea.

As it happened, the attack on the refugee camp also coincided with faster processing of our Australian resettlement visas. This was not going to be a smooth sailing process, though. On one occasion in February 2001 I was asked by the then UNHCR Deputy Protection Officer to bring my dependant brother to sign some forms in his office. When I arrived, however, I was refused entry at the gates of the UNHCR building by the security who demanded tips before they let me in. The reality was that I couldn't even afford a meal a day let alone tips. I also considered the act illegal and pushed myself forward against the guards after they insisted. As a consequence, I was attacked and beaten but still refused to budge. Within minutes reinforcement was called in and a van full of police arrived on the scene. I was arrested and whisked away to Conakry's notorious Seretè prison where I spent three nights and four days before the UN secured my release.

Not long after the incident at the UN our (ASALJIE) Australian visas started to arrive including departure dates for some. I became worried over the short period listed on our visa for our initial entry (20/03/01 – 04/07/01) and the fact that we didn't have our departure date determined. At one time it seemed like everyone was going to Australia except for me and my poor little brother Abdulai. We later learnt about our departure for Australia less than 24 hours before take-off. We had no time to even say goodbye to our refugee and Guinean friends. We left Conakry bound for Perth on 20 June 2001 and arrived at our destination two days later. The flight took us through Accra, Ghana, and then a connecting flight to Johannesburg, South Africa. Johannesburg looked elegant and beautiful, though we were only in the airport for 12 hours. I wished I could get out and say hello to the iconic Nelson Mandela and visit the African National Congress (ANC)
head office which I have seen many times on TV and on the covers of magazines and newspapers. I felt so proud and happy for the opportunity to go through South Africa — yet, I saw so little of it. I took photographs with some of my colleagues at the airport.

From there, a Qantas flight took us to Sydney and then back to Perth. The journey across the great Indian Ocean for Australia was long but filled with great expectations. The Qantas flight was different from any other flight I had seen thus far: it had video entertainment and also passengers could see the direction of the flight through the video screen. For Muslims, the compulsory daily prayers should be performed even if he or she is on their death bed, on a flight and at war. The situation you find yourself in determines the way to perform your prayer. On board a plane, there is no way you can perform your prayer the normal way, so you pray sitting down. An Australian lady was looking at me while I was praying and as soon as I finished she asked what I was doing. I explained and her remarks were very positive. She said Australia is pleased to have young and religious men like me. She went on to say that she was very happy for me and welcomed me to her country.

After September 11, I keep asking myself whether this woman onboard the flight would still have the same thoughts about young religious men especially those from the Islamic faith. Another thing happened on board the flight. At dawn the flight attendants distributed warm face towels. I only discovered that it wasn't a white sausage roll after an attempt to bite into it. I looked around to see if someone was watching, and was happy that no one seemed to.

**The buck stops here**

When we arrived at the Perth airport we were picked up by the staff from the Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre (then the Northern Suburbs Migrant Resource Centre). Things outside the airport looked totally different from my past. We arrived in Australia delighted and grateful for the opportunity granted us. Among our certainties for a better life was the fact that there would always be food on the table and that we were safe. I was conscious of the fact that I could have hardly got a better deal on where to start a new life and I started to mentally make myself feel at home and
plan for the future. Language is one of the greatest barriers to the full integration of a migrant community into the Australian way of life. People just don’t know if something is not communicated to them. Society is too complex to be understood intuitively. I considered myself very fortunate that communication was not a major problem for me as it was for my brother and the majority of other refugees. I told my brother about this and he said he was willing to go to school and enrolled at the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP). He is a fast learner and hard worker. My immediate plan was to go back to school. I have always wanted to pursue my education onto the tertiary level and here I am afforded an opportunity to fulfill my mother’s wish and my promise to her. The difficult part was to get to know the type of courses available. I wanted to study anything other than science and accounting because these were areas that I had hardly been in contact with before. I wanted to gain a ‘marketable’ degree. My priorities were a double degree in journalism and international relations.

I went to Central TAFE on the day the second semester 2001 started and presented my visa to the receptionist. I think my heavy accent made it impossible for her to comprehend what I was saying. To make matters worse, I wasn’t sure myself what I was looking for. She ended up referring me to the office dealing with international student enrolment. After producing my visa to the lady at the international enrolment section, she scribbled a note saying I was a ‘local student’. When I took the note back to the receptionist I saw relief on her face. She said she now understood my plight.

She took the note to the course director who then came out to see me. The course director informed me that almost all the courses are full except for Electronic Commerce (EC) and asked if I wanted to take it. Without even knowing what EC was about and without any hesitation I accepted the offer. We went inside her office to do the enrolment. When finished she asked if I wanted to start my studies on that day or the next. Without a second thought I went for the former. It was afternoon and I’d already missed out on the morning lectures. That was how I started doing Electronic Commerce (EC) degree without any computer background.

Taking up the Electronic Commerce course was a big ask for me but I was ready. Everything revolved around computers but I had to hand-write my assignments during the first term of my
Diploma course. Also the language used in the course was very alien. It took me weeks to engrave EFTPOS – Electronic Funds Transfer Point-Of-Sale – into my brain. I was fortunate in the fact that I got assistance from colleagues, especially those from Africa: Samson N’ganga, Julie Njeru and Gilbert M’waura and one from Israel, Uzi Samorali. For me Uzi acted like a big brother figure. He was always there to help. Samson helped me set up my first email account. He got me thinking when he said during the process to type an email account name and password. “Just type anything that you’ll remember without telling me”. I typed jinjimma2001@yahoo.com for my email account — ‘jinjimma’ is the name of the village my grandparents originated from in West Africa and 2001 was the year I arrived in Australia.

The second term of my course proved challenging especially after one of our lecturers asked me not to hand-write my assignment any more. He said I was doing the opposite of my course requirements. Julie and Gilbert stepped in to assist with the typing. I was always the last person to leave the library. One day I asked the librarian friend if they could allow me to stay at the library even after closing hours. I never knew that this facility existed outside the College library when I asked for the favour. The library also provided some computer training.

There were also other challenges for me, a recent arrival, including gaining employment without any Australian experience, getting a driver’s license, buying a car and supporting members of my family who were still living in the refugee camps in southern Guinea. I was also trying to form an organisation that could help serve the interests of my community in WA, and balancing these issues with my determination to study. I started employment with the chicken industry after joining Staff Link, a Job Network agency in Kewdale. First I was with Prestige Poultry in Wangara but had to quit due to lack of transportation. Later I joined Ingham and then Barter Steggles Enterprises in Osborne Park. At these companies the routines were the same — gutting and cleaning chickens, and cleaning crates section. Once I worked two consecutive shifts for a fortnight. The team leaders were shocked and advised me to do one shift only after my pay slip arrived.

I spent over a year with the company before I quit. My stay at the company greatly affected my studies. During this time I was very busy with family responsibilities. I married on 23 October
2003 to the best woman I have ever met. After the arrival of more members of my family my schedule became overloaded. I used to think that I was the busiest man in Australia. However, I wanted to work because I never wanted my first child to be born in Australia while I am on the dole. I paid heavily for my judgment with my studies but with no regrets.

With the community development in full swing, I became the first elected Secretary of our organisation, the Sierra Leonean Organisation in WA (SLOWA) Inc. I was also working on sponsoring family members to join me in Australia. I lodged five ‘main applicant’ applications for a total of 22 members. Three groups (16 members in total) were successful in their applications. The largest group of six comprised my mother and my wife-to-be who arrived on 23 July 2003. They arrived on the day Saddam Hussein’s sons Uday and Qusay were gunned down in Iraq. On 6 February 2004 my elder brother, his pregnant wife and three children arrived. His wife gave birth two months after their arrival and they named their son after me, Amadu Wurie Barrie. I have nicknamed him ‘Black Swan’. In May 2004 my second brother, his wife and three kids arrived. One week later, my daughter Fanta Barrie was born. I can’t complain, mate!

Outcomes …

I feel I achieved quite a lot since my arrival in 2001 and will continue to work hard. I have always believed in myself and that if given an opportunity I could make a change. This is what Australia is giving me everyday. This is a society that rewards positive effort, an ideal place for progress. My achievements cannot only be attributed to my own efforts. Some great Australian people, mostly volunteers, have always been there for me, my family and my community. These people helped me with the provision of almost all my needs including interest-free loans to meet the costs of medicals and air fares for my family, loans for the purchase of text books, assistance in finding suitable housing, buying cars and insurance policies, personal references for employment, support letters to DIMA and other agencies.

While at university, I joined professional organisations like the Project Management Institute (PMI) of WA and the Australian Computer Society (ACS). I later became secretary of the ACS
Young Information Technology (YIT) Committee WA Branch. Joining the ACS really helped shape my knowledge of the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) industry. I am greatly indebted to the ACS and the YIT WA Committee for their educative programs; monthly forums, networking, mock interviews, and local and interstate ICT conferences.

Since June 2001, my family has swelled from two to twenty-two; with sixteen still living in pretty Perth while six have relocated to Canberra. Sixteen of the family were resettled through sponsorship as part of the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and four were born in Australia. We hope and pray that by the end of the year five would have been born here.

The man with the heavy accent completed his undergraduate course from the School of Management Information Systems (MIS) at Edith Cowan University in July 2006. Shortly after that, I have been fortunate to be part of Centrelink’s mid-year Information Technology (IT) graduate intake and commenced employment on 21 August 2006. What better place to start your employment!

In conclusion, I can say I have resettled well in Australia with my family. It did not prove to be a daunting and difficult task for me as it may have been be for others. I believe I was really blessed to be here and to be able to fulfill most of my cherished dreams. I remember one day talking to an immigration official that I met at an African function in Perth. He was talking about Australia’s multiculturalism, ignorance and racism. The DIMA man was commenting on the multicultural display of African dress, food, language and culture. It was multiculturalism at play. He said Australia draws it strength from her multicultural society. The fact that we are different in terms of language, culture, creed and religion and share one identity as Australians makes us strong and powerful. He was quick to point out that not everyone is receptive of this policy for various reasons. He said that some are paranoid and ignorant thinking that migrants coming in to the country will take their facilities away from them while others just simply hate it out of racism. The DIMA man went on to say that because these people exist in our society it doesn’t mean that what they say or do reflects government policies. His discussion was educative. I felt greatly honoured to have had the opportunity to chat with him. What I gained from this discussion prepared me for whenever I come across such individuals. Fortunately, it has only happened
on very rare occasions. Ignorant people may be racist because they think it serves their selfish and shortsighted needs. In Krio they say, ‘If u know know usai u commot, u no go know usai u dae go’ meaning ‘you have to know where you come from before you can know where you want to go’. Like many positive and forward thinking Australians, I know myself and know where I come from.

As I reflect back on my experience in life through turbulent as well as normal times, different things always seem to happen — some sad and unfortunate, some good, others worrying, frightening and confusing. But they all have one thing in common: they are man-made.

At the local level I cannot help thinking about the intriguing and mystifying relationship between the central government and the Aborigines. Can someone please tell me why it is so hard to say ‘sorry’ to our own brethren so that we as a nation can put this sad history behind us? I want the spirit of Advance Australia Fair to rule and if a simple word like S-O-R-R-Y can take us there why not? I am a symbol of Australia’s generosity and want to share that with every Australians. I don’t want to be better than other Australians but to live happily together.

Going back to what I learned from the DIMA discussion, Australia is a nation deeply rooted in multiculturalism, tolerant, respectful to one another, and to the rule of law which guarantees us freedom and liberty. This is the Aussie way of life, it is our culture as a nation and that is what makes us different. It doesn’t matter where you come from or from what religion, as long as you are either born here or readily took that oath to become an Australian, you are an Australian and deserve a fair go. As a Muslim Australian I see myself as an Australian and nothing else. Negative comments especially on sensitive issue like religion are dangerous — they make you feel isolated. Politicians who want to capitalize on the ignorance of some sectors of the society will succeed only in dividing us as a nation.

In conclusion, I have grave concern for the poor Aussie battler — especially the youth and the growing number of suicides. It’s hard to fathom the reasons that drive people, let alone our young ones, to such a tragic end to life. My heart goes to the families and loved ones of these young lost souls. Sometimes it makes you wonder whether the youth are aware of the opportunities they have and how lucky it is to become an
Australian. Though life can be hard or difficult at times, for me there is a thousand-and-one means to make it as interesting, fun and loving experience as it can be. It is true that obstacles can come from different quarters; either from peer or family pressure or both, from drugs, alcohol and other social ills. It is also not untrue that every malaise can be managed and a positive outcome achieved. From personal experience, the manner in which you handle a difficult situation greatly reflects your personality. Reflecting on an already won obstacle can in most cases be a source of pride, humility and inspiration for you and for those around you. I salute all those who strive towards making life for our youth better, full of hope and joy. Living is always better!

Let the honey continue to flow and long live Australia and her people.

References