

## SIERRA LEONE

### Celebrating the Birth and Life of Fatmata Rosalyn

On my last day in Pendembu to deliver 99 boxes and 5 barrels of medical supplies, clothes, library books and computers that Ms Zain collected on behalf of Amuloma Development Foundation, I asked Ms Zain's Uncle Murray to walk with me from the house built for him and his late sister's family, to see the red house where in 1944 his late mother gave birth to his late sister, Ms Zain's mother, Fatmata Rosalyn.

We walked 200 yards through grass, passing curious tethered goats, from the Paramount Chief's compound to the open market building to the ruins of the red house. It had been bombed by rebels during the 1990-2001 Sierra Leone civil war.

Nine years after the war stopped, the walls of the red house were standing, but the roof has gone. Uncle Murray posed in the front, he told me a shop was on the right, and on the left was a room for guests. The side room, that was where Fatmata Rosalyn was born.

I asked Uncle Murray if he was born there too. No, he was born in 1947 in Nixon Memorial Hospital, some miles away, and for reasons lost in the mists of time, his mother was in the process of giving birth a third time in 1950 when everything went wrong. In the red house, his mother died, and the baby died. Gone in the mists of time are whether the baby was a boy or girl.

Mrs Zainab Wai-Lansana wrote about the death of her grandmother Mrs Mamie Gandor Kallon in childbirth in an article previously published in MJoTA; she told the tragic story of Mrs Kallon's death and the death of Ms Zain's other grandmother Mrs Mabinty Wai in childbirth around the same time. I met Ms Zain at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in March 2009,

**Below, Mrs Zainab Wai-Lansana with an uncle Mr Jabati Wai, in Freetown. Mr Wai is a banker with UBA, a Nigerian bank in Sierra Leone. His mother was a subsequent wife after Ms Zain's grandmother Mrs Mabinty Wai died in childbirth. Right, the red house in Pendembu where Ms Zain's mother Fatmata was born.**



when Mrs Mabinty Wai's son Mr Sidique Wai was being honored for his work in African communities.

More than 60 years ago Mrs Wai and Mrs Kallon died, and even now their relatives are dying in childbirth in Sierra Leone today. Amnesty International, maintains an office in the heart of Freetown, and published a document on maternal mortality in 2009 in which they reported that Sierra Leone is today the country with the highest rate of death of mothers in childbirth.

My trip to Sierra Leone was to answer the question: why? Why are women dying in childbirth? Why is this tragedy continuing, when the day that is meant to be the best day in a woman's life turns into her

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death day, and a lifetime of mourning for her family? The answer is complex, but perhaps can be simplified into a statement: Sierra Leone is a country with little government intervention to improve or maintain quality of life, a large number of investors in natural resources and casinos who see investment as an opportunity to pay workers below-poverty wages, and a collapsed healthcare system destroyed by lack of resources and a willingness of developed countries to import trained professionals away from Sierra Leone. Additionally, a large amount of the infrastructure that had existed in a developing country was destroyed by 11 years of civil war.

Bombed roads are remain unrepaired and gasoline is 20,000 leones a gallon in a country where weekly



salary for heads of household is mostly 50,000 to 100,000 leones a week. Electricity is generated from gasoline generators, so meat is bought as live goats and chickens, and milk comes in powdered milk cans at 30,000 leones a tin. Professionals are badly trained or not trained, clinics are understaffed, underequipped and completely unprepared for emergencies in which lack of a pint of blood could have kept a mother alive and with her children.

In Pendembu Ms Zain's brother Joseph Wright and I stayed in the house built for his mother Fatmata Rosalyn and Uncle Murray.

Fatmata Rosalyn died before the house was built; all 6 houses in the compound of the Paramount Chief were destroyed in the bombing and fighting during the 1999-2001 civil war.

After Mamie died, Mr Kallon married again and moved the family out of the red house 65 miles away to Kenema where his business flourished. Fatmata Rosalyn grew up, beautiful and successive-

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*The donated goods are formally presented to the Paramount Chief. Above, the Paramount Chief, a former school-teacher, tells children to hold their lips to be quiet. Joseph Wright is the tall man in black shirt and blue jeans; the community health officer Dr Sulaimon is on the far left. Below, the 4 committee leaders and helpers take inventory.*



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ly the partner of 3 men who loved her, produced children with her, and moved to America to pursue dreams of journalism, academics and engineering.

One of these men was Usman Wai whose photograph graces the Brooklyn bedroom wall of his daughter Ms Zain, and whose best friend was Okey Ndibe, whose article on his childhood during the Biafran War is soon to be published by MJOA.

Finally, in the 1970s, Fatmata Rosalyn met Mr Willie Wright, a civil engineer from another Sierra Leonean royal family. He had trained in Israel, and he loved her and cherished her during a happy life building

offices and houses and being father to her 2 daughters and son, and the 2 sons and daughter they produced together. Very happy.

In 1998 the war moved to Freetown and the rebels were armed with Ukrainian rockets. One landed in the Wrights' compound, and blew up Fatmata Rosalyn as she ran to see if her neighbors needed help. Shards from the second blast wounded Fatmata's second son, Willie Wright junior, who had run outside to find his mother.

Fatmata's third and youngest son Joseph was 19, he loaded Willie junior, who was sobbing because his mother was dead, a child and an old man into a wheelbarrow and wheeled them into hospital.

The old man survived that night and many more. However, nothing could be done for Willie junior and the child, and they bled to death.

Mourning for Fatmata and Willie jr started that day in 1998 in Freetown, and continues to this day throughout Sierra Leone and in Brooklyn.

The Pendembu house is still red, still looks like a house. The roof is gone, the floors and walls need repairing, people are living in the back building, but it is a house. Joseph has plans to move back to Pendembu, to work with building a reading room, work on a farm, and to help rebuild the red house. He wants to move back with his wife and 3 children. His sons are named Joseph jr and Willie, and his daughter, born in 2006, 62 years after his mother, is named Fatmata Rosalyn.

**By SJ Dodgson BSc(Hons), PhD**



**Above, labor and delivery room in Pendembu clinic. The bed shown is the single piece of equipment. In an emergency, a poorly-equipped hospital is more than 6 hours away. Below, in the Paramount Chief's court room, Dr Dodgson brings greetings and supplies on behalf of Ms Zainab Wai-Lansana and Amuloma Development Foundation. Photos taken by Joseph Wright.**

