Hybrid Eyes: Reflections of an African in Europe is a moving and insightful account of the experiences of a young Sierra Leonean graduate who achieves his dream of going to Europe for further studies. As he encounters people and institutions, his idealistic expectations of German society soon give way to the harsh realities of discrimination and other disadvantages foreigners, especially black Africans, face in their host country. But not all Germans discriminate against blacks and blame the problems of their country on foreigners. Hybrid Eyes is compelling reading for everyone. It is a story that young people who aspire to study in Europe should read to help them prepare for adjustment to the demands of their prospective foreign environment. It is also a sound warning to those who wish to explore the greener pastures of Europe that the grass is not as green as they think, or are made to believe. Written in simple, straightforward English, and neatly structured in interwoven episodes, Hybrid Eyes is also highly recommended for schools.

Professor Joe Pemagbi
Freetown, Sierra Leone

"Mallam O.’s Hybrid Eyes is not just another in a catalogue of stories about Africans in Europe, it is a fresh puff of narrative air, and a compelling story of tremendous human interest"

Professor Sheikh Umarr Kamarah
Author of Singing in Exile and the Child of War (SLWS, 2002)

"Hybrid Eyes’ is a brilliant narrative, highly readable. There are many memorable passages. Sankoh’s descriptions of the many strange things he encounters are often matchless in their eloquence."

Dr Lansana Gberie
Author of War, Politics & Justice in West Africa (SLWS, 2015)

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Hybrid Eyes

Reflections of an African in Europe

A Memoir

Osman Alimamy Sankoh
(Mallam O.)

Sierra Leonean Writers Series

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Dedication

To my Secondary School:

Tomlinson High School, Songo, Sierra Leone

****

As with lighted candles
Walking in the dark
We dispel the night into noonday bright
So we Tomlinsonians shed our beaming light
In our work and in our play
Varied talents we display
Come join our rank
Have Faith in God
Come be a Tomlinsonian too

School’s pep song, written by Mrs. Louisa O. Pesima,
second Principal
1. Goodbye Sierra Leone, hello Germany

A thin ray of light squeezed through the window and hit me right on the forehead. I opened my eyes slightly and looked up at the ceiling. Rectangular boards of different colours were neatly joined together to form a beautiful pattern. I thought I was dreaming, because the scene was not familiar to me. The ceiling of my room at Njala University College in Sierra Leone was a whitewashed concrete. I shook my head a bit in order to wake up properly. I turned right and saw someone lying in another bed with a similar thick cover over him. An air-conditioner was on the wall in front of me and I saw a TV and a telephone on the table that stood close to the door. On the floor were two large travel bags with the zips open.

I rose from the bed, having pushed aside the unusually heavy cover, and moved sluggishly to the window. I drew the curtains and looked out. What I saw resembled a model of houses on an architect’s table.

Below and between the row of houses was a clean grey street whose long back was covered with a make-up of bright straight white lines and arrows. The traffic light turned green and I saw a white man taking his children to school.

“Osman, you’re already up? Man, I am so tired!” said my roommate, Hudson Jackson, as he pushed his cover down to his feet. He yawned and stretched his arms wide apart.

“Yes, for a while now,” I said. “I have been trying to figure out where the hell in the world I am.”
Hudson leapt from his bed and yelled, “We’re in Germany!” He looked at his wrist-watch, then at the clock on the wall, and smiled.

“We need to adjust our time, Osman,” he said.
“I adjusted mine on the plane,” I replied but still checked my wrist-watch to be sure. It was the end of August, so German time was two hours ahead of Sierra Leone time.

We were at a hotel in Mannheim, a day after our arrival in Germany. Hudson Jackson, Samuel Yarjah and I had been awarded scholarships by the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst – DAAD) in Bonn. Hudson and Samuel were from Fourah Bay College in Freetown and I was from Njala University College. Although we had heard at the German Embassy that the three of us were the lucky ones that year, we did not meet until the day of our departure at Lungi International Airport.

Our flight was two hours late and as a result, dinner was arranged for the passengers at the Lungi Airport Hotel where we were taken by bus. It was during that dinner that Hudson introduced himself.

“It is a pleasure meeting you, too,” I replied and asked if he knew the third person. Hudson pointed to a hefty young man about our age.
“That guy over there. He’s called Sam.”

Thus began a friendship that has endured. We later checked our award letters and found out that we were all heading first to the language school in Mannheim.

****

Before going down to Freetown from Njala two days prior to my departure, I had stopped at my home in Warima village to see my mother, Ya Mabinty, and my step-mothers. At Warima, prayer sessions were
organised for God’s protection and the whole village came to our house to bid me farewell and participate in the charity event that Ya Mabinty said was necessary. Two goats were slaughtered and cooked and everyone in the village had a share of the food prepared. Ya Mabinty and several other people expressed their good wishes and at the end of the ceremony, the village chief gave a short speech that went something like this:

“My son Osman, as you go to the white man’s country, we all pray that God will be with you and guide you in everything that you do there. Let Him make it possible for the white man to like you. If the white man likes you, it will be good for you and for all of us.”

I thanked them all for their support.

Six vehicles brought twenty of my relatives and friends over to Lungi to bid me farewell. The one hour journey by ferry from Freetown was rowdy as they sang farewell songs and ate and drank and danced. I sensed the genuine emotion behind the wishes they expressed that God should “open up my luck” in Germany so that I would return to Sierra Leone not only with a “book in my head,” but also with “money in my pocket”.

When the plane finally arrived and was set for takeoff, I walked on the tarmac to board it and, on my way, put down my hand luggage to return the waves of those who were calling out: “Farewell! Farewell! Goodbye! Safe Journey!” I wished them well and thought about the arduous return journey home that awaited them, especially if they missed the ferry.

Several hours into the flight, the expectations of my people about what I would become after my studies in Germany fully dawned on me. They had seen others return to Sierra Leone with cars and money. Will I be able to accomplish as much as those people? I asked myself. I tried to relax by reminding myself that I was going to study and not to work. Then
thought slipped into my mind that my wife’s Aunt Fatmatta, would be waiting for me at Frankfurt Airport. That made me smile. Somehow, I dozed off.

*****

Unlike Hudson and Samuel who were appropriately dressed for the European weather, I had put on a light African suit and a pair of shoes more appropriate for Sierra Leone. It was 12°C at the airport in Paris and I certainly felt the huge difference in temperature when we disembarked from the plane, to take a bus to the transit lounge and await the flight to Germany.

As the plane started its descent into Frankfurt Airport my heart palpitated at the thought of the golden opportunity I had been given. Then I thought about the many other Sierra Leoneans who would have loved to come out and experience life overseas and thanked my lucky stars. I had worked hard at college and my efforts had been rewarded by the German organisation’s willingness to sponsor my tertiary education in their country.

I looked out of the window and saw a beautiful landscape below, like the pictures I had seen in geography textbooks. I saw the land covered by trees and buildings. I saw rivers slithering all over the place, as if to protest against the straight lines of roadways that opened their arms in circles at exits and intersections. It was a wonderful sight and I wished the pockets of clouds we flew over would stop interrupting my view.

When the plane landed, I breathed a sigh of relief. Frankfurt Airport, one of the major airports in Europe, seemed vast enough to swallow Lungi Airport more than twenty times. Hudson and I (Samuel had been on an earlier flight from Paris) struggled to the Baggage Claim section with our heavy hand-luggage to wait for our suitcases. They had not arrived but we
were informed that they would be delivered later in the day, so we proceeded to the immigration section. I saw white people walking past the immigration officers with little or no control, so I followed them.

“Paß, bitte!” an immigration officer ordered. Well, I interpreted that to mean ‘go ahead’, so I did just that. Seconds later, I felt a heavy hand on my right shoulder.

“I said, your passport!”

That was the very first German word I learned – passport. I staggered backwards and produced my passport. The immigration officer leafed through its pages, looked at me, then tapped the keyboard of a computer which was out of sight. After a few minutes, he gave me back the passport and said, “Welcome to Germany!”

I moved aside to wait for Hudson as he handed over his own passport. The officer saw that we had similar visas and did not spend much time checking.

I met Aunt Fatmatta and her Liberian friend, Oretha, for the first time. To my pleasant surprise, I also saw two old friends and former college mates, Alpha Kamara and Alimamy Conteh, who had also come to meet me. They had arrived in Germany a year earlier on similar award.

As we drove to Mannheim, I had my first experience of the famous German motorway called the autobahn. It made me realise that Sierra Leoneans would have to make proper use of the revenue from the country’s natural resources if they are ever to be able to construct such highways. It was late in the evening. We were on an almost 2 km straight course and so it was possible to see far ahead. I was attracted by the sea of cars with their red lights on all three lanes moving towards Mannheim and the sea of cars with white lights on all three lanes on the other side of the autobahn, moving towards Frankfurt. It was impossible to count the number of cars, just as it was impossible to count the different types of car models.
that passed us. I had arrived in a country that produced cars.
2. Getting to know the language and people of Germany

The language school – the Goethe Institute – had closed for the weekend when we arrived in Mannheim, which was why Hudson and I had had to go to a hotel. We were later allocated a room close to the main gate of the same student hostel in the city centre, where Samuel had already secured a room. It had a toilet, a bathroom and a kitchenette where we did our cooking because we thought that food was too expensive at the student canteen and at the several public houses around. The problem was that each time we wanted to buy anything, we calculated the equivalence in Leones – the Sierra Leonean currency. When we considered later that we were now living in Germany and not in Sierra Leone, we mentally adjusted to a different economy.

On leaving the hotel for the hostel with our travel bags in tow, we walked to the train station to pick up a taxi to the language school. We were stunned to see a fleet of yellow Mercedes Benz cars among the queue of taxis parked outside.

“You mean they are taxis?” I asked foolishly.

“Osman, you can see that clearly written on the cars, can’t you?” Hudson replied. “This is the home of Mercedes Benz, remember?”

We hurried towards one of them but were told we should go to the first taxi in the queue. Since that taxi was not a Mercedes, we opted to wait for the next one. As the driver drove us smoothly to the language school, I thought about the rich Sierra Leoneans and the politicians all over the world who drive such cars. Here, they were used as taxis! However, when the
driver asked us to pay twenty-five deutsch marks for the short drive, we realised that one should only take taxis when absolutely necessary.

Because of my knowledge of English, I did not find German difficult. It was interesting to learn the alphabet again and I liked the peculiar construction of sentences and the exceptions in the grammar. What my tongue found difficult to adjust to were the special German vowels ä(ae), ö(oe), and ü(ue) and I was irritated by the reluctance of Germans to accommodate a foreigner’s pronunciation. As far as they were concerned, German words had to be pronounced the German way. For example, one day, I went to a shop to buy a spoon and called it Löffel. The shop assistant seemed not to understand what I wanted, not until I used sign language. Then, she pronounced the word as Löffel (like loeffel). I could not hear any great difference between the two words in terms of the sounds.

Anyway, after six months of the language course, Hudson, Samuel and I passed the university entrance examination and were ready for the next step.

********

One evening, Hudson and I had just returned from the language school and were chatting with Samuel in our room when we heard the doorbell. As I opened the door, two black men about our age entered the room, greeting us in Krio, Sierra Leone’s lingua franca. I say ‘black men’ and not ‘Africans’ because there are African-Americans in Mannheim and there are also black people who are German citizens! We were delighted to meet Sierra Leoneans who lived in Mannheim. They explained to us that there had been Sierra Leoneans in the hostel the previous year, so they expected others to come to
Germany. They had been able to tell that we were Sierra Leoneans from our names on the door.

One of our visitors had an earring on. This shocked me because at home, earrings are only for women. I was so curious that after we became better acquainted, I asked him why he was putting on an earring. He wanted to look like some African-American soldiers stationed in Mannheim, he said, explaining that many German girls liked the African-Americans. It was easier to ‘get them’ if one posed as an American.

Talking about a man with an earring takes me to the topic of homosexuality in Germany and in western countries in general, though, as in the case I have mentioned, not all men with earrings are homosexuals. In fact, the wearing of earrings by men has developed into an accepted and popular culture. Western societies are not only highly industrialised, they have also reached a level where homosexual men and women, known as gays and lesbians, have successfully demonstrated for equal rights. As a result, nowadays men can marry men, and women can marry women. Yes, homosexuals are fast becoming part of mainstream society. I can imagine what a scandal it would cause in Freetown if two men or two women start kissing each other in public or talk about their love on television! But the world is changing and people have a right to their lifestyles.

I used to spend my weekends with Aunt Fatmatta in a town called Aachen. I avoided taking the train since it was very expensive and I had learned about the Mitfahrzentrale, an office that co-ordinated lifts. Car owners who did not want to travel alone informed the office about the date and time of their journeys. Travellers registered at the office and with some amount of luck, it was possible to get a driver for one’s destination on a convenient day and time of travel.
It was during one of my trips to Aachen that I met Markus Vorpeil. We were in the same car from Aachen one Sunday evening as he was going to Heidelberg, a city close to Mannheim. The driver had taken him to the train station in Mannheim before bringing me to my hostel and we noticed that Markus had forgotten something in the car. Fortunately he had an address slip on it so it was possible for me to contact him. I called and informed him about it. He was delighted and we agreed to meet three weeks later in Heidelberg.

I arrived late on a Saturday evening. Markus picked me up from the train station. We drove to a restaurant and talked over dinner. He could understand English but we agreed to talk in German so that I could practise. Speaking quietly and slowly he asked,

“Gefällt dir Deutschland?”, inquiring whether I liked Germany.

I responded in the small amount of the language I had learnt, that for the almost eight weeks I had been in Germany, things were okay. He ordered some light salad and I ordered cooked fish.

I was glad that Markus did not ask the usual questions: Don’t you find Germany very beautiful?; Would you like to stay in our country?; and Do you have plans to return to your country?. I had heard those questions so many times that I used to guess which one was going to be asked as soon I entered into any conversation.

Something seemed different about this young German who was interested in my welfare and in my language course; yet I still hesitated to open up to him at first because someone had advised me not to trust Germans, saying that most of them were the ‘secret eyes’ of their country, especially when it came to dealing with foreigners. Markus later became one of the few friends I made in Germany. He was tall and well built. I would have said he was about my age but found out that he was several years younger than me.
Through my weekend trips to Aachen, I also met a wonderful lady, Andrea Katzer, who was living in Mannheim. She introduced me to her friends. Through her, I was able to get to know Mannheim better, its people and some aspects of their culture. I also met Andreas Hix. He had visited Sierra Leone twice and had some business interests there. At his home, I saw pictures of towns he had visited in Sierra Leone; places I had never visited myself. Andreas seemed to know my country better than I did.

On the whole, I found Mannheim a lively place and I did not want to leave it, as I had to, after the language course.
3. German ways

Once, I stepped out to catch a bus and met an old woman standing at the bus stop with her dog. She said something to me but it barely registered because I had noticed a handicapped man passing by on the other side of the street in a battery-powered wheelchair. Seeing him had made me remember Amadu, a boy in the village of Magbla, about 5 km away from my own village. Amadu used to crawl on his hands and feet and on sand and stones to come to Warima to shop, and everyone looked down on him and treated him as a misfit. The majority of handicapped people in Sierra Leone end up begging in the streets, so when I saw this man in a comfortable wheelchair, passing by whistling a happy tune, I realised what difference a person’s place of birth makes in this world. In developed countries like Germany, even dogs and cats seem to be more fortunate than many people in Africa. I was mentally commending the Germans for the concern they show for their disabled citizens, when the old woman’s voice finally broke into my thoughts.

“Jungermann, I am sure you’re accustomed to this kind of weather,” she said again. The truth is, I was not expecting her to say anything to me because it is unusual for a German to be the first to speak to a black person. I asked her, without much interest, what she meant and she said she was talking about the hot weather. Obviously she thought it was always hot in Africa, so I asked her whether she had ever been there.

“Nein, but I have heard that Africa is very hot.”
She then asked whether my people had dark skins to protect them from the heat of the sun.
I asked her whether it was because of the cold that her skin was so fair.
“Nicht wirklich (not really),” she said. She went on to say with all seriousness that she did not understand the reason for this difference and I realised that this woman, who had probably spent the whole day alone, only wanted to talk to me. I became friendlier and decided to joke a bit with her.
“How can you tell that I am an African?” I asked and she said it was because I was black. I could see that she was cheered by my changed attitude towards her, so I then asked her whether all blacks were Africans.
“Es ist egal, wo die Schwarzen sind,” she replied, saying that it did not matter where blacks lived. Whether they were in America or in Australia, their roots were in Africa. She told me she had read about that ten years ago. According to her, that was why blacks in America now called themselves African-Americans instead of black Americans. It was in order to indicate that they were originally from Africa.
“Okay, ich stimme Ihnen zu,” I said, agreeing with her. She drew her dog closer.
To digress a little, in Germany, people treat dogs and other pets like human beings. It is reported that there are five million pets in German homes; some old people find company only with their pets. There are even special cemeteries for dogs and cats. In Dortmund, where I later lived, there is such a graveyard in Dortmund-Kley. Dog-mothers and dog-fathers, I mean owners, pay a yearly rent of about DM 200 for a cemetery plot which is decorated with flowers and visited regularly. Some of the cemeteries have epitaph stones that cost up to DM 2,000! The majority of dog owners weep as much for their dead dogs as they would for a lost relative. In supermarkets,
there is a variety of food available for dogs and cats. There are schools where dog owners are trained how to take care of their dogs and there is even a law that they must walk their dogs every day. In Sierra Leone dogs are largely used to protect homes from intruders or, in villages, for hunting purposes. They are virtually left to fend for themselves since the nourishment they get from people’s leftover meals is usually inadequate.

When the bus arrived, she happily boarded it, stroking her dog on the way.

A German friend once asked me whether or not he was doing the wrong thing by trying to talk to black people on trains and in public places. I responded that since it was not a common occurrence, most blacks would be surprised and suspicious at first. It is only when they realise that an individual German means well that blacks are willing to talk freely. The problem is stereotyping on both sides. Most blacks do not trust Germans who approach them in a friendly way because of their experience of negative German attitudes. Over the years, I observed that this type of stereotyping was extended to German women who often smiled at African women with kids. Usually, the African women did not smile back because, believing that German society was hostile to them, to their children, and to their husbands, they viewed such gestures as hypocritical. Too often, their children came from school complaining that German children called them “chocolate”, or “nigger” and their husbands came from work complaining about discrimination.

An African participant at a meeting with policemen in Dortmund seized the opportunity to describe a bitter experience he had had with certain police officers. He had been arrested one afternoon, by police officers called to a theft in a crowded business street because he happened to be there by chance. The police officers had handcuffed him and taken him to the station. He had been terrified because he did not know what crime he had
committed. The police officers released him when they realised that they had the wrong person, but without any apology. It is true that some blacks have been caught in criminal acts, but this is not a reason to think all blacks are crooks. In Germany, like the hungry and starving Africans shown on television, any black man is also generally perceived to be poor. I sometimes felt like wearing a label day in day out informing people that I was a student and not an economic refugee.

However, blacks have gained recognition in German sports, especially soccer. There are black players in many of the first and second division soccer teams in the country, notably Borussia Dortmund and Bayern Munich. This is a step in the right direction since there are enough Germans who are extremely good at soccer to fill the teams. Once, a Ghanaian footballer with Borussia Dortmund scored a goal and many of his German team mates crowded around and embraced him joyously. I was touched by that scene and said to myself, *if only that attitude could be extended to areas other than sports!*
4. Settling down in Dortmund

Hudson, Samuel and I separated after six months of living together. I moved from Mannheim to Dortmund to register for my studies at the University of Dortmund. We left the student hostel to catch our trains, having sent our luggage to our future destinations in advance. After handing over our room keys to the janitor at the gate, we walked briskly to catch a street tram to the railway station. Hudson’s train to Darmstadt was leaving at 3:30 p.m.; Samuel’s train to Siegen was leaving at 4:00 p.m.; my train to Dortmund was leaving at 4:05 p.m. All the trains were to arrive at different platforms but it was possible for us to talk to each other across the platforms. Our mood had been joyous as we left the student hostel, but as the time approached 3:15 p.m., we began to realise what our separation would mean. This was the start of another uncertain future.

However, with the knowledge that all of us had excellent degrees from the University of Sierra Leone where we had also worked as research/teaching assistants, and that we had been awarded scholarships to come to Germany based on our qualifications, we calculated that in at most three years, we would complete our Diplom studies. A Diplom in Germany is not the same as a diploma in the English educational system; it is, in fact, a Masters degree, so our speculation was based on the knowledge that a Masters degree in Britain normally takes one year and in the US, two years to complete. Our calculation proved to be wrong.

When I arrived in Dortmund, Blanche Gooding, a Sierra Leonean woman, was at the train station to
welcome me. I was very glad to see her for I now felt confident that there would be someone to help me settle down. Blanche lived in Dortmund with her two children and her husband, Donald, who was a postgraduate student at the university. I collected my luggage at the station and she drove me to the home of another Sierra Leonean family, Morie and Janet Bunduka who lived in Dortmund-Dorstfeld, close to the university.

As we drove through the streets of Dortmund towards Dorstfeld, stopping at one traffic light and the other, my mind drifted to the streets of Freetown where I had not seen many women driving cars. Those who did so were usually the wives of well-to-do men in private businesses or in other occupations where they earned good money. The other female drivers were the few who had become successful themselves, either professionally or in business. I imagined Blanche driving from Wilkinson Road in the west end of Freetown to Kissy Road in the east end of the city. I could imagine an increase in both human and motor traffic as we drove along. Here in Dortmund, there were few people walking on the streets but there were many cars. Far too many! We arrived in Dorstfeld and Blanche drove to the car park of a massive building that resembled a huge anthill on an upland farm in Sierra Leone. We staggered up to the Bunduka family’s apartment with my heavy luggage.

It had not been possible for me to secure a room at the university hostels in Dortmund before my arrival, a situation for which I criticised DAAD, for I fully expected my sponsors to have organised something for me. How, I asked myself, could anybody expect a foreign student, in Germany for the first time, to look for accommodation himself? I thought it was inconsiderate and unfair of a large federal organisation such as DAAD. Perhaps I expected too much, but as the severity of the problem
of finding accommodation became clearer to me I felt more and more disgruntled. Nobody in Sierra Leone would believe it if I informed them that I was struggling to find accommodation in this rich land, so I did not bother to tell them. Fortunately, the Bunduka family agreed to host me while I looked for an apartment. Morie also had to help me look, for even though I had passed the university language entrance examination, I still lacked confidence when it came to speaking German.

I still appreciate the assistance which the Vorpeil family also gave me in this regard. Markus’s mother was concerned for a young man in a foreign land. She contacted an old friend in Dortmund to help me search for a room, and in preparation for my stay in the city, bought me household items. I was deeply touched by this motherly attention from a German and this impression still lingers in my mind. It was the amount of support I received from the Vorpeil family that made me start rejecting many of the negative opinions I had heard about Germans and their attitude to foreigners.

One month after I moved to Dortmund, I succeeded in obtaining a 34 square meter apartment close to the university. It was self-contained with a bathroom, toilet and kitchenette, separated from my living room/bedroom by a small door. Fortunately, the room was large enough for a medium-sized bed and a black and white wardrobe cum general cupboard which matched the small centre table. The curtains Mrs. Vorpeil had packed for me fitted the two large windows as if they had been made to measure. A three-seater couch on a small red-brown carpet completed the furnishings.
While I was looking for an apartment in Dortmund, I had to deal with another problem – my registration at the university. I went to the Foreign Students Office to register for what I felt should be the Masters programme in statistics. There were many students at the office, but after about an hour, it was my turn to see Mr. Schmidt, the registrar. I had practised the German for all the questions I wanted to ask, as well as the answers to the questions I expected, so I pushed the heavy door open and walked confidently towards Mr. Schmidt.

I saw a small man sitting behind a huge desk, surrounded by shelves packed full of books and files. As I approached him, he stood up, shook my hand firmly and offered me a seat. I felt at ease and was able to get out my practised sentences though I had to make adjustments here and there. Mr. Schmidt seemed to have experience with newcomers like me, for he reacted very comfortably to my German.

He looked at the originals of my degree certificates and transcripts, as well as my passport, filled out several forms and asked me to sign them. The problem started when he asked me whether I had already talked to the examinations office of my department about my registration.

“Was ist das denn?” Baffled, I asked him what he meant and he explained that I needed to talk to the professors in the Department of Statistics concerning the semester for which I should register. Still somewhat in the dark, I left his office with an armful of papers and made my way to the Statistics Department on the seventh floor of the ten-storey
Osman Alimamy Sankoh (Mallam O.)

Mathematics Building. There were five other people in the lift. I greeted them when I entered but nobody responded. Didn’t they hear me? I asked myself, though I was sure that I had spoken loudly enough. I concentrated on the numbers as they changed from floor to floor, imagining what it would have been like in the lift at the Electricity House on Siaka Stevens Street in Freetown, or the larger ones at the Youyi Building. I would have heard greetings all the way up. I realised once again that I was in a completely different culture.

As I stepped out from the lift and entered the hallway of the statistics floor, I saw names on the doors, but I had no idea to whom I should speak. Fortunately, a lady stopped to talk to me, having noticed my lost look. I showed her my papers and she understood what I needed. Though she did not belong to that department, she went to get someone to help me locate the examinations office.

My mind drifted to what my mother had always told me.

“Osman, it is always nice to help others,” she would say. “If you help people, God will always make it possible for others to help you when you need help”.

Today when I needed help, someone had just come out of the blue to help me. I thanked God for that.

As I entered the office of the person responsible for examination affairs, I was wondering what this was all about. Was I not here to pursue a Masters degree? I decided to remain calm until I had spoken to the man who was to decide my fate. He was still typing something on a keyboard when I entered. He must be trying to complete inputting information about the last person that was here, I thought. He waved me to a seat without looking at me, and hit another key. Seconds later, a printer, which stood on a table close to the window, emitted a hissing sound. He raised himself from the
chair behind the computer table, picked up the printed document and filed it.

“Mr. ...?” he asked after removing his reading glasses. He stretched his hand towards me.

“Sankoh,” I replied, with a firm handshake.

“Ja, Herr Sankoh, was kann ich für Sie tun?” He was asking politely what he could do for me as he glanced at my bundle of papers, yet I saw him attempt a smile, as if to say he knew why I was there.

I had not, practised any sentences for this man and my six-month knowledge of German seemed to desert me when I needed it most. Trying to calm myself, I thought the best thing I should do was to put all the papers on his table and wait for him to sort them out. He must have done this several times already. He concluded rightly that I was new and that I wanted to register. He opened up some of the papers and asked me for the originals of my degree certificates and transcripts. He looked through them very carefully. He seemed to have mastered moving his eyes from one end of the table to the other without moving his head. Or, was he contemplating what to tell me, I wondered.

“Note eins mit Auszeichnung!” Division one with distinction! He was confirming that I had an excellent degree. In spite of this, however, he told me without looking me in the eye that he would advise me to start in the second semester, because most foreign students still had problems with their courses. He then put a stamp on the form and signed it again.

When he finally raised his head, I looked at him blankly because I did not understand the implication of what he had said. Was I placed in the second semester of the Masters programme? I simply could not believe that this man, who had expressed satisfaction with my previous qualification, was telling me to pursue another Bachelors degree before proceeding to the Masters programme. I realised that I
was in trouble when he handed back the forms, saying that he had only signed them tentatively so that I would not miss the registration deadline, and that I would be invited to talk to a committee of professors for my correct placement. Mr Schmidt asked me to contact the Dean’s secretary for an appointment and I was given a date before I returned to his office to complete my registration.

I decided to end that troubling day and return to my new apartment. As I walked down to the S-Bahn station, I kept shaking my head as if something was wrong with me. Well, yes, something was indeed the matter because I had found myself in an uncertain situation. However, as I stamped my ticket in the automatic machine and stood on the electric steps that took me down to the tunnel, I remained hopeful that things would be settled quickly. The train came on time and in another minute, I alighted and walked home.

Instead of opening the heavy house door, I found myself counting the names on the side wall of the ten-storey building. When I saw mine, I smiled and pressed the bell, as if expecting my wife to be home. I decided to call her immediately to explain my problems. Well, I do not need to worry, I thought. Now that I have an apartment, I will put in an application for her to join me. This encouraging thought lifted my spirits as I took the lift to the seventh floor. When I opened the door of my apartment, I noticed I had left the heater on high. I rushed to reduce it and opened the window. I threw my bag on the bed and gulped a very cold drink. Somehow, I dozed off and when I woke up, it was 4:00 a.m. What a deep sleep I had had! I picked up my electric clock and set the time for 7:00 a.m.
6. A major setback

There were more than thirty letter boxes in the house in which I had secured an apartment, so I had problems locating mine. When I identified it, I found there was a letter inside. Evidently, the mail carrier had not pushed it in properly. I was so curious that instead of opening the letter box, I peeped through, trying to see where the letter came from. There were several others in the box, so I opened it hurriedly. I decided to take the lift back to my room to read my letters.

I pressed the button to call the lift and waited impatiently, humming a favourite tune. The lift finally came and the door opened. A white woman already inside looked frightened when she looked up and saw me. She put her hand on the left side of her chest as if to prevent her heart from falling out.

“Es tut mir leid.” She immediately apologised, adding that she was simply frightened.

I did not bother to ask her why since people have different reasons to be frightened. In fact, in my eagerness to go up and read my letters, I did not even look at her. I pressed ‘7’ and the lift took me to my floor.

Among the letters were two from friends in London and Iowa in the US, and one from the Department of Statistics at the University of Dortmund. I opened the letter from the Department of Statistics first. It was a confirmation of the date I was to meet a committee of three professors. As if they had planned it, both my friends had written to inform me that they had started their Masters programmes without problems. I had also secured admission to the same universities but had chosen to
come to Germany. After reading their letters, I took out the acceptance letters and kissed them. Was I regretting something? I could not tell.

I eventually met the committee of professors. Once again, I took along the originals of my degree certificates, my transcripts, description of courses I attended back home, my letter of appointment as a research and teaching assistant at the University of Sierra Leone, as well as my letters of acceptance to other Western universities. I just felt that I needed to prove something.

The placement colloquium was scheduled for a room on the statistics floor. Dressed in a pair of blue Wrangler jeans and a white T-shirt, I took careful steps to the professor’s door since my shoes were making as loud a noise as a lady in stiletto heels walking on a tiled floor. As I raised my hand to knock on the door, I saw my name boldly written on a paper that was hung on it. My heart beat a bit faster, but the note was only to inform me about a change of room.

I found the new room and tiptoed in. It was similar to Mr. Schmidt’s at the Foreign Students Office, but this one had what seemed to be a library of statistics books as well as files packed neatly on the shelves. Was this a departmental library? I asked myself. It turned out to be the professor’s private library. Three men were seated around a square table facing the entrance. They all rose to shake hands with me which I thought very polite of them. The one who appeared the eldest among them introduced himself and then the others.

It was agreed that we would hold the discussion in English and since the professors seemed equally comfortable doing that, I felt relaxed until the reason for the meeting was explained and I realised that the quality of my degree was in doubt. I was so taken aback that I began to feel hot inside. I showed the ‘academic judges’ my certificates again, as well as the letters of acceptance to other Western universities, but
they only informed me that a letter would be sent to me. Why could they not simply share their ‘foregone judgement’ with me? I asked myself.

It was already three weeks since I had registered and lectures had started, but my fate was still being decided. When the letter finally arrived, it ‘advised’ me to attend many courses including ‘Descriptive Statistics’ which I had taught to first year students at Njala University College. It seemed that my four-year course, division one degree with distinction, plus two years of teaching and research experience meant little here. I was being equated to a student fresh from a German ‘gymnasium’ where one graduated with the equivalent of A-levels, and I had first to pursue another undergraduate programme. I would have understood if they had accepted me into the *Hauptdiplom* (graduate programme) advising that I attend a few courses in the *Vordiplom* (undergraduate programme) for which they thought I might not have been sufficiently prepared at my university in Sierra Leone. This insulting decision meant I would need a lot more time to study in Germany than I had expected. It also meant losing money because students in the *Hauptdiplom* received a higher stipend than those in the *Vordiplom*. I was also concerned that I might lose my job at the University of Sierra Leone whose authorities would find it difficult to understand why one of their top students must spend such a long time doing a Masters degree in Germany.

I wrote to my sponsors informing them about the decision of the Department of Statistics and stating my concerns about its consequences. Their response expressed regret about the decision but told me there was nothing they could do since Universities in Germany are autonomous institutions. Well aware of the difficulties of securing another scholarship in Sierra Leone, I accepted the decision and felt better about it since my sponsors were prepared to pay my allowance during the extra years. In the end, I had
nothing to worry about. However, when I found out that in Germany, a black man is generally assumed to be intellectually inferior until he proves himself, my anxiety returned. I simply had to prove to those sceptical professors that I was as sound as my degree from Sierra Leone indicated.

Applications for German scholarships go through a rigorous selection process. They are made through the German embassy, then they are sent to the DAAD office in Bonn where a committee of professors selects scholarship winners based on the applicants’ qualifications, so I am still baffled that professors at German universities cause such problems for DAAD scholarship winners from Africa.
7. Stooping to conquer

After my placement saga ended, I started to attend lectures and tutorials. In my first statistics lecture, I moved down the auditorium and took a seat in the middle of the room. Many students stampeded in ten minutes later and occupied their seats. The professor walked slowly down the steps with a pad of lecture notes in his hand. A balding, middle-aged man of average height, he greeted the class in a low voice. After briefly recapping what he had covered in the last class which I had missed, he turned to the green chalkboard and started writing. He read aloud as he wrote, and paused only briefly to explain what he felt needed further clarification. I understood what he was writing but there was very little I understood from his explanations. Does this man not realise that there is a student in his class who has just six months of German language? I asked myself and answered my own question. Of course he didn’t. However, the mathematics symbols and expressions on the board were familiar. In fact they were so familiar that I started muttering the next step I expected him to take. Thinking I could be heard, I glanced around to see whether I was disturbing any students sitting near me and discovered that all the seats around me were empty although the class was crowded. I did not believe my eyes and looked around again, then felt embarrassed because most of the students had turned their faces toward me as if they had found out what was going on in my head. I cleared my throat deliberately and fixed my gaze at the professor who was struggling to get the chalkboard to move upward. It appeared that the
hydraulic mechanism was too slow for him. He stamped his feet several times, as if that would help.

As he walked to the water basin to soak the sponge in order to clean the chalkboard, he said something that must have been a joke because I heard many of the German students laughing loud. The professor himself attempted a broad smile. If his mind had directed his eyes to me, he would have seen that I was not laughing at all since I did not understand what he said. My German was simply not good enough to catch the joke and I advised myself to occupy a seat in the front row in future.

As the semester rolled on, I attended a number of lectures. It was a big struggle to get hold of the notes for the topics I had missed before register for the course. Then I became acquainted with a young German lady called Carola Deppe to whom I owe much. Carola was sympathetic to my problem and helped me to get the notes. She could speak some English, but advised me to speak German to her. The smile with which she greeted me each time she saw me, gave me the confidence to use my broken German. She would correct me gently, especially when I had dropped a dangerous language bomb.

In a tutorial on descriptive statistics one evening, the professor’s assistant had noticed that I was the only one who was able to solve a specific problem. He therefore asked me to work it out on the board for the others. Without the solution in my hand, I picked up the chalk and started working out the problem again, explaining every step. I asked the class to excuse my German, but it appeared that it was not necessary for me to apologise because, either out of curiosity or out of disbelief at the way I was solving the problem, the whole class, including the assistant himself, seemed hypnotised. These people don’t know that I was a teacher for many years before coming here, I said to myself as I returned to my seat.
“Wo hast du das gelernt?” A sweet voice over my shoulder was asking where I had learnt to do that.

I turned around to make sure that the young lady was talking to me. She had very long blond hair and as I looked at her, she fluttered her eyelashes and gave me a smile that revealed a wonderful set of teeth.

She repeated her question in a low voice and asked whether I had done something like that before.

“Yes,” I answered.
I became acquainted with a German student who came to mean a lot to me during my stay in his country.

About five years younger, with a long nose and long hair, he occupied a seat close to me on the left. At some point in the lecture, there was a word on the board that I could not see properly and I turned to him and asked about it. As he looked through his notes, I was intrigued to see that he had on a short-sleeved ‘rappel’ shirt with a familiar zigzag style on the neck.

“Wo kommst du her?” he said, asking where I was from.

“Sierra Leone in West Africa,” I responded. I mentioned West Africa straightaway because I did not want him to start asking me where in South America that was.

“Oh yeah!” he exclaimed. His eyes flew wide open, and he seemed to want to embrace me.

He had just come from Freetown, he said and was so delighted to meet me that right there and then he wanted to tell me all about his Sierra Leone experience.


Klaus Langohr could not describe his experiences in Sierra Leone that day because I had to rush to the south campus for my next lecture. We agreed to meet later on to talk.
The *H-Bahn*, the suspended train that connects the two campuses had left a few seconds before I arrived, so I had five minutes to wait for the next one. It stopped and the doors opened. I went in and seconds later, I heard a whistling tone which signified that the doors were about to close. The train jerked a bit and set itself in motion. It was completely empty and as it rolled away I wondered, yet again, how it functioned without a driver. I said to myself: *These Germans have nothing to worry about where Africans are concerned. Most African countries are hundreds of years behind them and the few Africans living in this country will not create any economic problems for them. Look at this high-tech suspended train here just to connect two campuses!*  
I remembered the plight of agriculture students on the Njala campus in Sierra Leone. The departments of agricultural engineering and agronomy were roughly a kilometre apart and I could never understand why, those who prepared the timetable did not allow enough time for students to move from one lecture to the other, knowing fully well that there was no means of transport. In order not to be late, students sometimes had to run, sweating their way on foot between the two departments.

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In the Department of Spatial Planning I was required to participate in a research project before I could start the programme for statistics majors. Here again, I had something to grapple with.  
Students who were studying spatial planning as a major subject had already organised themselves into groups of friends, so it was very difficult for me to join a group. I was able to register in a group only because it was the last one that had space for two more students.

I had similar problems with the statistics students whenever it came to building up groups for the
advanced practical lessons. I would stand there alone and almost have to beg others to accept me in their group. I always felt so belittled and wished that the professors themselves would build the groups. An African with dark skin needs to force friendly relationships with Germans otherwise hardly anybody cares.

For the research project, we were required to first investigate a concept. This was done through weekly meetings and discussions with group members. Here again, I ran into problems at first because during discussions the other students spoke rapid German, their mother tongue, and before I could compose a sentence in my mind, the group had already jumped to another topic. In order to prove to them that I was not stupid, I developed the habit of discussing my suggestions with a few members of the group after the formal sessions. I gradually became more comfortable with my studies as my German improved.

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At the University of Sierra Leone, which follows the British university system, there is usually a colourful convocation ceremony every year when new graduates have their degrees conferred. This ceremony is attended by the Chancellor of the university and other university authorities, local dignitaries, as well as families and friends of the graduands who wear academic gowns and feel important. The national TV, radio and newspaper journalists cover the occasion so the following day, graduates, as well as their families and friends enjoy seeing themselves on television or seeing their names in newspapers. At Dortmund, it was completely different for there was no publicity. After the final examinations, the certificates were prepared by the examinations office in the department and graduates collected them from the secretary. That was all.
But I did enjoy moments of glory. My determination to prove my academic proficiency paid off and I graduated with the highest possible general assessment. The same professors who once looked down on my degree from Sierra Leone nominated me for the 1996 DAAD prize for excellent academic performance and extraordinary social engagements by a foreign student. I won this prestigious prize in 1998 during my doctoral studies, and was the first African at the University of Dortmund to do so. The prize was awarded in the presence of the Mayor of Dortmund, the Prime Minister of the Federal State of North Rhine Westfalia, university authorities and many distinguished invited guests including representatives from the Sierra Leone Embassy in Bonn. In my acceptance speech, I seized the opportunity to appeal to German professors not to base their decisions regarding their foreign students on stereotypes they had about African countries, but to consider individual cases on their own merit. I also called for more tolerance and acceptance of foreign students in the country.
9. A taste of German bureaucracy

When I collected my Masters degree certificate at last, it was only like receiving a proof of attendance and not a recognition of academic accomplishment. I put the papers in my bag and went home to meet my family. Yes, back at home, several kilometres from the university, a celebration was being prepared for me by my wife and children who had joined me from Sierra Leone by that time. I received innumerable kisses and was told not to do anything for the rest of the day. I should act like a king, they said. Whenever I requested anything, my three ladies fell over themselves to make it available. I was so thankful to have them with me in Germany.

How they got there was a saga in itself. Since acquiring the furnished thirty-four square meter apartment I described earlier, I decided to inquire at the Foreign Office about the possibility of my wife joining me. Given the problems I had faced in registering at the university, I thought that life would be a lot easier for me if my wife was around to give me moral support. From my perspective, the apartment was big enough for a married couple.

I woke up very early in order to be among the first to be attended to when the Foreign Office opened. I needed enough time to dress warmly against the hostile weather outside. It was 5°C. As I stepped out of the house, I saw an old woman walking slowly past, taking all the time in the world. She seemed to be in her mid-fifties. The sound of the heavy house door shutting behind me made her turn in my direction. As we made eye contact, I saw her lips parting slowly to
Hybrid Eyes - Reflections of an African in Europe

attempt a smile. It transpired that she was also going to catch the S-Bahn to the city centre.

“Es ist frisch,” she said, commenting that it was “fresh”. Pushing her umbrella aside and holding out a tissue from her handbag, she blew her nose and wiped it carefully, waiting patiently for my response as I drew closer to her.

I asked what she meant, lowering my head a bit towards her.

“Das Wetter ist frisch,” she clarified that the weather was “fresh”. I pretended to agree with her.

“Oh ja!”

If that was only “fresh” weather to her, why did she have on all those heavy clothes? I asked myself. She must have had on three layers of clothing under her long shiny wine-coloured coat that touched her black well-polished shoes. Her brown cap sat properly on her head, drawn slightly to cover her ears.

Normally, when it was cold, I walked faster so as to generate more body heat, but I had to slow my pace as I chatted with the old woman on the way to the train station. There were several commuters on the platform already, dressed in a rainbow of colours. As usual, it was difficult to distinguish between old and young, especially with the women because older women in Germany dress as if to tell the younger ones that they are still fashionable.

The train was expected at 7:40 a.m.. It was already 7:45 a.m. but we still did not hear it coming. Some people were walking up and down, showing uneasiness about the five minute delay.

“Das ist unmöglich!” It is not possible! exclaimed a man standing close by. He glanced at his watch a thousand times and I heard him ask what was happening in their country.

Five minutes late and he is so troubled? I asked myself. Certainly, public transport in Germany is efficient; trains, street trams and buses are usually absolutely punctual. I shook my head a little as my mind drifted
to a journey I once planned to Magburaka in the north of Sierra Leone. My brother, Andrew, accompanied me to the station where a state bus was scheduled to depart at 8:00 a.m. We arrived at the station at 5:00 a.m. to join the usual queue. We waited and waited. I enjoyed the sandwich Andrew bought me at 9:30 a.m. after we had been informed that the bus was going to be even later. We waited and waited again, then at 11:00 a.m. we were told that there would be no bus service to Magburaka that day. Given that experience, the reader will understand why I was confused that this man was fuming because a train was five minutes late. On the subject of punctuality, we can certainly learn lessons from the Germans.

The S-Bahn finally arrived at 7:50 a.m. At the next station, many people rushed out and had to run to catch their connecting trains. Indeed, this was why they had become restless and angry when the S-Bahn was late.

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“Herr Sankoh, Ihre Wohnung ist zu klein für Ihre Frau und Sie,” A foreign office official said, telling me that my apartment was too small for my wife and myself. He explained that German laws stipulated that I needed at least a forty-five square meter apartment in order to have proper living conditions for two people. This was after I had proudly placed my rent contract on his desk. I could not believe my years.

The official was in his mid-forties, probably younger, because Germans generally look older than they really are, while Africans generally look younger. All Germans who guessed my age put it between five and ten years younger. The official removed his reading glasses and declared that I needed an apartment of at least that size, otherwise it would not be possible for my wife to join me. Trying to imagine how eleven square meters could make such a
difference, I insisted that the apartment was large enough for the two of us. I wanted to plead with him; to tell him the problems I was having at the university; how the presence of my wife would make a whole lot of difference. I wanted to ask him how he would have felt if the tables were turned and I were an immigration official in Sierra Leone telling him his wife could not join him just because of a difference of eleven square meters. However, the official gave me no opportunity to try to change his mind. He called for the next person waiting outside, making it clear that he considered my case closed.

I was devastated. I tried to understand that the man was simply applying laws which he did not make, but still considered him inhuman. Does it mean that this man would not allow my wife to join me even if I had a forty-four point nine square meter apartment? I asked myself. Yes, it was possible, so if I wanted her to join me, I would have to look for an apartment of at least forty-five square metres. But the apartments were expensive and difficult to find. I had a problem, a huge one! So when should I start thinking about my daughters, Fatima, Fatmata and Christiana? Will I be able to rent an apartment that will be big enough for this official at the foreign office?

First, I went to register at the Student Welfare Office at the university which administered student hostels. There, I was told that my wife must already be in Dortmund and also a student before I could be issued an apartment for married students. Are these people out of their minds? I asked myself. Why do they apply policies to foreign students that are more appropriate for German students? To me, everybody seemed heartless.

I had no alternative but to go to the private market. I learned about the weekly newspapers and magazines where vacant apartments were advertised and I would stay awake till midnight on Fridays, so I could go to the central train station to buy the Saturday issue of one of these publications. The
following morning, I would start making telephone calls to prospective landlords and landladies. This became routine for about eight months. It was horrible experience. What made things worse was that as soon as some landladies and landlords suspected that I was a foreigner, they dropped the phone. Others said they did not mind foreigners but when I told them I was from Africa, they paused then told me that it would be unwise for me to live in their area. On those occasions I always remembered Wole Soyinka’s poem, ‘Telephone Conversation’ which I had read in my literature class at school. It describes the problems a black man encounters when he contacts potential landlords and landladies by phone in a country in Europe. Here I was many years later experiencing the same problems.

My fortunes changed as I was returning home late one evening. A fellow tenant was hanging a notice on the wall because he was looking for someone to take over his fifty-six square metre apartment. I explained him how I had been struggling to find an apartment and begged him to remove the notice. My desperate need was a God-sent opportunity for him, too, because he had secured another apartment elsewhere but without a tenant to take over his old one, he would have had to pay the rent for two apartments. He did not care if I was black or white!

I called my wife, Jariatu, in Freetown at once and gave her the good news, but she was not excited because she had almost given up hope that I would succeed. It was only after I faxed the rent contract to her that she believed she would finally be joining me in Germany.

After Jariatu’s visa application arrived in Dortmund, I received a letter from the immigration authorities asking me to present my rent contract, my passport, and proof of my income. I had all these documents ready and rushed to the Foreign Office. I spoke to the same official. This time he accepted all
the documents and said everything was fine. I asked him how long it would take to get the confirmation.

“Mindestens sechs Wochen,” he said. “At least six weeks”. He explained that they would first need to check with the Federal Central Register in Berlin and with the Office of the President of the Police whether or not I had committed any criminal offence. Noticing my disappointment, he therefore tried to encourage me by explaining that he would send a telex to the German Embassy in Freetown as soon as he received confirmation from the appropriate offices that everything was as it should be. He said he could do nothing to change the procedures.

Feeling dispirited again, I decided not to call Jariatu until I had received the necessary confirmation. Five weeks later, I went to see the man again and sensed his satisfaction at being able to tell me that the confirmation had arrived and that he had already sent off the telex. Assuring me that he always did whatever was in his power to do as efficiently as possible, he rose and gave me a firm handshake.

I cannot begin to describe how different my life became after Jariatu’s arrival in Dortmund. For one thing, I now enjoyed home cooking whereas I used to eat in the Mensa, the student canteen, where the food was generally quite good though there were times when I ate only to stay alive.
Jariatu found the options in the registration form for new arrivals in Germany fascinating. As far as Germans were concerned, Christianity was the only officially recognised religion, so the state computers in offices dealing with both foreigners and Germans had the following options: Religion – (Christian/None); Denomination – (Catholic/Protestant). This implied that if you were a Moslem, or a Buddhist, or a member of any other religious denomination, you were either a pagan or someone without a religion. Incidentally, few young Germans attend church services regularly. Many of them do not believe that there is a God. Some say that whoever invented the idea of a God did so in order to instil fear in mankind against committing inhuman practices on others. Others say that God did not, does not, and will not have anything to do with their country’s development.

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The S-Bahn had another four minutes to depart. Jariatu and I sat opposite each other, so there were two free seats close to us. A German woman in her early thirties boarded the train with her five-year old son. She looked ruffled and unkempt and her son looked no better.

“Nimm den Platz da,” she said, directing her son to the vacant seat close to us. The boy recoiled and twisted his mouth in defiance.

“Nein, nicht neben ‘Neger’.” The boy replied that he would not sit near ‘niggers’. His voice was loud and
shrill, causing other passengers to focus their attention on us. Looking embarrassed, the mother told him to shut his big mouth, adding that we were not niggers.

The boy protested that she had told him that all blacks were niggers.

"Diese hier sind keine Neger, kleines Schwein! (These ones are not niggers, little pig!)") she snapped.

I looked at Jariatu who had lowered her head trying to suppress her anger. I stood up, went to the little boy, knelt down and asked him, to come to me, saying that I was a human being just like him.

"Ja, du kannst Deutsch?" he asked in surprise when I spoke to him in German.

I answered in the affirmative and asked him to sit by me. I told him that I had something to explain to him. Still looking completely surprised that I could speak German, he accepted my invitation.

I then told him that ‘nigger’ was a term of abuse and that calling me a ‘nigger’ meant he was abusing me. I suggested that he call me either a black man or an African if he did not know my name and was not prepared to ask.

"Ein Schimpfwort (A term of abuse?)", he asked, surprised. He said that his mother told him that all black men were ‘niggers’ and wondered whether his mother was therefore abusing all black men.

"Ja." I told him that was what she was doing.

I then asked him whether he was a white boy.

"Ja," he answered.

I asked him whether he would accept it if I said he was the son of a Nazi?

"Nein!" he replied with an emphatic no!

I looked him in the eye and said that his response indicated that he would be angry if a small black boy told him he was the son of a Nazi.

"Ja, weil ich es nicht bin," he replied, telling me with pride that he would be angry because he was not the son of Nazi parents.
I told him that a black boy would be equally angry if he called him a ‘nigger’, and choosing simple words, I explained the origin of the word loudly enough for his mother and others to hear.

“The race of black people is called ‘NEGRO’. Perhaps this word resulted from a wrong translation by a white man called Pliny who visited the West African state of Niger several hundred years ago. White men and Arabs went to Africa and bought black people as slaves and forced them to work on plantations in the new world or the Americas against their will. These white ‘masters’ abused the slaves by calling them niggers instead of the correct word ‘Negro’. Since the slaves had no names, their white masters simply called all of them ‘nigger’. As a result, when a black man is called ‘nigger’ today, it is like telling him that he is still a slave. The term brought back unpleasant memories of the days of the slave trade. My friend, do you understand?”

As the small boy listened attentively, his mother remained curled up in her seat, looking around hesitantly, as if she was worried about the other passengers. When I finished, the little boy put his head on my lap and told me he was sorry.

“It is not your fault, my friend,” I told him.

Films were still shown on German television in which the word was used to refer to black people. It also appeared in books used in Kindergarten, such as the poem Zehn kleine Negerlein (Ten Small Niggers). So the children got it both from school and from home, and many teachers and the parents did little to change things. However, with the increase in interracial marriages and the children resulting from them, parents of Afro-German children had started fighting to eradicate such poems in school. Indeed, it was only right that Afro-Germans should champion the fight against racial discrimination in Germany because they suffered most from it. They were one hundred percent
German on paper but certainly far less in terms of how they were viewed by the general German public.

In order to avoid too much exposure to crass discrimination on public transport where hardly any Germans wanted to sit close to us, we bought a small car. Although this was really not ‘the’ solution, it helped. Sometimes! We discovered that as a result of the general negative picture of African countries painted by the Western media, most people in Germany did not believe that there were Africans who could afford to buy even a small car like ours, so when a black man in Germany can afford to drive a new car, he must first of all get used to being stared at in disbelief or worse. For instance, once when Jariatu had parked our car and we were taking things out of it, an old German man passing by suddenly stopped and looked at us with contempt, expressing his disgust that the state was using his tax money to feed economic refugees, and instead of buying food, he said, we were buying cars. He then spat in our direction and walked away, shouting, “Alle Ausländer, raus hier! (All foreigners, out of here!)”.
11. Fatmata, friends and disagreeable neighbours

The spouse of a foreign student is not allowed by German law to study or work until the status is changed. This is clearly rubber-stamped on the spouse’s passport.

With the arrival of our daughter, Fatmata, Jariatu’s hands were no longer idle. She also stopped being my teacher. I could not work with German students for group learning because I was no longer prepared to beg anyone to be included in a group so I would rehearse possible questions and answers with Jariatu whenever I had to take an examination. And if I had a seminar at the university to present, she would be the first to listen to what I had prepared.

Fatmata, started attending the Nordmarkt Primary School two weeks after she arrived from Sierra Leone. The registration had gone very smoothly. The Central Administrative Office for all public schools in Dortmund identifies and assigns children to schools which are closest to where they live. Since school is compulsory up to age fifteen, the state ensures that all children have the opportunity to attend. At the beginning of every school year, parents have to submit proof of school attendance of their children to the Home Office.

Our routine soon became taking Fatmata to school, helping her with the German language, and taking her to circuses. Kids learn languages so fast that a few months later, Fatmata started correcting our German pronunciation. I still laugh my sides out whenever I remember her first story in German which she told us in Prof. Urfer’s car. She was remarkably
confident for a child of her age who had only been speaking German for eight weeks.

Prof. Urfer, a German in his late fifties, had predominantly grey hair on a rather large head that sat on a smartly built body. He was always wearing a smile as if by this charming expression he was trying to balance the troubled face that seemed characteristic of Germans as the twentieth century drew to a close. I came to understand him better when I was about to finish my Masters programme. He had worked with reputable African statisticians whom he held in high esteem, hence, as soon as he heard about me from Klaus Langohr, he asked to meet me. This was how an enduring relationship began between our families.

He had invited us to visit his wife Barbara at their home. Fatmata, Jariatu, Klaus and I took a train to the town of Schwelm where Prof. Urfer picked us up. It was during the ten-minute drive to his house that Fatmata spontaneously began to narrate the story of a farmer and his troublesome cow. I remember the way she told the story much more vividly than I remember the story itself. That little girl certainly entertained us throughout the course of the journey, preventing any silence and discomfort.

Barbara Urfer, in her mid fifties at the time, was warm both in action and thought. She spoke quietly and slowly as if she always wanted to be correct about what she said. Probably, she believed in the adage “What comes out of a person, determines who he is.”

She emerged from the large wooden house befitting their village farm surroundings and kissed us a warm welcome. The floors of the house were protected by many tree trunks some of which were carefully carved while others had been left in their natural rough form. Outside, close to a storehouse, I saw bees flying into beehives from which the Barbara
and Wolfgang honey was produced. Down on the green hill slopes surrounded by a barbed-wire fence were cattle left to pasture. The surrounding farmhouses dotting the landscape always reminded me of the hurriedly built huts of migrant cattle herdsmen of the Western Sudanese people. Here, in the village called Altena-Ennepe, all the inhabitants knew each other just like the people in my own village, Warima. The serenity of the environment made one hear loud and clear the songs of birds and other wild creatures of the forest. On one of my visits, I locked my car with a key.

“Herr Sankoh, Sie brauchen sich keine Sorgen zu machen,” Prof. Urfer said I did not need to bother, assuring me that there were no thieves in their village. In a big city such as Dortmund, it was a must to lock cars even when they were parked only for a short while.

By German standards, the Urfers were a well-to-do couple, but they lived in a strikingly down-to-earth manner that suited village life. As we took a walk in the fields once, Fatmata saw a stray bee and raised her foot to stamp on it. Prof. Urfer hurried to prevent her from doing that, saying without words “No, it has a right to live!” If people in the world applied this simple principle, there would be no need for wars. During the walk, the women formed one group and the men another, just as would have happened in an African village. I wondered whether that was because Barbara and her husband did not belong to what one would call the ‘modern Germans’, or whether it was that Germans living in villages did not bother much about the whole issue of gender equality.

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Just before Prof. Urfer showed up at the train station, Klaus had hurried into a florist’s shop and bought some pretty flowers whose petals were
Hybrid Eyes - Reflections of an African in Europe

protected by thin, transparent plastic wrapper. Just as we had never become used to drinking coffee, my family had never adopted the German custom of presenting flowers when paying visits, so neither Jariatu nor I had thought about buying flowers for the Urfer family. When Klaus ran to buy his bouquet, I had the urge to follow suit but restrained myself because I do not like pretending. Some Sierra Leoneans have adopted this custom. I remember a striking incident at Düsseldorf Airport. I had accompanied a friend called Alie Bundu to pick up his wife, Hawa, who was arriving from Sierra Leone – it was her maiden journey to the west. Allie hurried to buy a bouquet of flowers as a part of his welcome pack for Hawa. As I greeted the beautiful woman, I focused my attention on her reaction to the flowers. Not one more word from me about that incident!

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In school, Fatmata had not made any friends. Since we did not know where or how to approach German children, we sought out African and foreign children and encouraged them to befriend our daughter. However, even among Africans social interaction is not always as easy as one might expect, the problem being that just like Europe, Africa is not one country and cultures vary even within individual countries. Language differences can also make friendships difficult to cultivate and besides, these days many Africans are wary of each other for fear of being dragged into drug-related problems.

As a result of the initial trouble she had with making friends and being called names at school, Fatmata found life with us difficult at first and was often in tears.

“She’s like a cage here!” she wept one day and asked us to send her back to her grandmother, saying she had had many playmates in Sierra Leone. Fortunately,
as her German improved to the extent that she could give as good as she got in terms of insults, she became more popular and therefore happier. But it is a sad commentary on human behaviour that even a child of her age needed to respond in kind to initial hostilities before she gained acceptance among her peers.

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We had moved to a building which was small but seemed enormous when it came to relationships among the nine families who lived there as tenants. We had hardly any contact at all with even our closest neighbours except for intermittent quarrels over whose turn it was to clean the staircase. However, living right on a busy street that led to the autobahn and having a bar on the ground floor was advantageous in that we did not experience any of the problems regarding alleged ‘noisiness’ that Africans usually encountered in more residential areas. Africans faced problems with their neighbours mainly when they played music which Germans considered ‘too loud’. What a contrast with Sierra Leone! When our neighbour’s son returned from the US with a powerful music system, if he did not play music loud enough for the whole street to hear, we grumbled that he was selfish. Living in Germany made me understand why the ‘US boy,’ as we used to call him, hesitated to play his music loud. In Germany, neighbours often called for police intervention on those occasions. Not that Africans always played their music too loud. Calling the police was simply to remind them that they were not in Africa and had to comply with German standards of etiquette.

In our previous apartment, knowing that my neighbours would complain about noise as they usually did, I had put an invitation card in their letterbox two weeks before my wife’s birthday. We had invited a few Sierra Leonean families over to
celebrate it with us and they had prepared special food. We knew the party would last till past midnight, and besides, such parties were usually characterised by a good deal of laughter, heated arguments about politics in Sierra Leone and intermittent loud music, especially when we played Sierra Leonean music.

As soon as the party started, I knocked at our neighbours’ door.

“Wie bitte (What do you want?)” the woman asked when she opened the door. She looked clearly disturbed.

Adjusting my smile to make it appear broader than ever, I asked her whether she received our invitation.

“Ja, danke, aber wir haben kein Interesse,” she said, thanking me but saying that they were not interested in our party. She closed the door firmly before I could say anything more.

I put them out of my mind, but at exactly half past midnight, our door bell rang and when I answered it, two police officers brushed passed me into the apartment. In a harsh voice, the more burly and taller of the two informed us that our neighbours had reported that we were causing a ‘loud noise’. Uproar then ensued as my guests complained bitterly that we had lowered the volume of the music and that our neighbours were only being difficult.

“Okay, bitte stellen Sie sie nicht wieder laut,” the other police officer said, asking us not to play the music so loudly again. As they were leaving, he joked that our neighbours probably had to work on Sunday.

While I was having this unpleasant experience with my neighbours, I was having pleasant ones with another German family several kilometres away. Herbert was in his late sixties, but though retired, had a job as an assistant locksmith at a firm where I worked one summer. We made steel doors, windows, and gates for houses and factories – a far cry from statistics, my course at the university. I found that with
Herbert I could discuss practically any topic. His wife, Elli, about five years younger, liked my children. Grandpa Herbert and Grandma Elli, as my kids called them, often invited us to barbecues in their backyard. Herbert always helped me out when I had problems with my electrical appliances, which I greatly appreciated since repair work was so expensive in Germany. For example, an old electric cooker whose value was, say DM 100, would cost at least DM 200 to repair. Similarly, if my wrist-watch needed repairs, it was cheaper to buy a new one, and if the soles of my shoes were worn on one side, I either threw away the shoes or sent them to Sierra Leone where they could be repaired cheaply. Shoe repairers are looked down upon in Sierra Leone, but this attitude towards them might change if they started charging higher fees for their valuable services.
12. A family ordeal and German generosity

Exactly three months after Fatmata’s arrival I received a horrifying fax message from Sierra Leone. I had returned from the university and was preparing for the first of my final comprehensive exams when the telephone rang. The fax was from my good friend, Dr. Len Gordon-Harris informing me about his suspicion that my eldest daughter might have a serious heart problem. He said he was sending her to a cardiologist for a proper diagnosis and I began to fear the worst. It was only by chance that I had asked Len to examine her.

I had secured a place at a university in London to pursue my doctorate degree and was preparing to move to England with my family. I had informed most of my friends in Germany that we were about to leave the country for good. I had given up my position as Secretary-General of the Sierra Leone e.V. (Union of Sierra Leoneans in Germany) based in Dortmund, as well as my position as Secretary-General of the umbrella union, the Federal Council of Sierra Leone Unions in Germany (FCSLUG), so the reader can imagine the turmoil into which that news threw my mind. If Len’s suspicion proved to be true, I would have to cancel all my plans because Fatima would have to come over to Germany immediately for treatment. A few days later, I received another fax from Len confirming his suspicions: Fatima needed urgent heart surgery. The family was terrified and greatly concerned about not having sufficient funds to bring Fatima to Germany.
I decided to contact Dr. Reetz at the city council in Dortmund. He had helped our charity provide humanitarian assistance to refugees and displaced people in Sierra Leone. Dr. Reetz telephoned around to inquire where Fatima could undergo the surgery and who could possibly be of assistance. He was able to obtain a few names of eminent heart surgeons. I then decided to contact the professors. After I had explained my daughter’s predicament, one of their secretaries almost killed me by remarking that she had heard that some foreigners opted for heart surgery so as to be given visa extensions. Speechless with rage, I simply walked out of the office; but when I returned home, I wrote her a letter which I posted, letting her know just how much her careless words had hurt me.

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Fatmata returned from school, found a packet of cigarettes hidden in our living room and went on the attack.
“Daddy, whose is this? And don’t lie” she warned before I could answer. “You know we’re not supposed to tell lies in this house, no matter what.”

She was looking me straight in the eye, holding up the packet of cigarettes towards my face. As she waited impatiently for an answer, she stepped left, right, left, right – the way school children in Sierra Leone march through the streets on ceremonial occasions.

“I bought it several days ago,” I admitted, looking at her apologetically.

She knew that I smoked once in a while but that my policy was only to smoke cigarettes I did not buy myself believing, like my friend Foday, that this would stop smoking from ever becoming a habit. I had bought the pack Fatmata found in the hope that cigarettes would reduce the tension I was experiencing over Fatima’s situation; but it had not worked. I was
therefore able to promise my little girl that I would not smoke anymore. and she left me in peace.

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One Saturday evening, I sank into the sofa in our living room, uncertain about what to do next. I looked at the time: It was twenty-five to nine! Lotto had been played minutes before so the numbers would be available on videotext. I had bought a lottery ticket at the central train station after recalling the story of an East German. He had heard that one could become a millionaire in West Germany with just one deutschmark, so when he escaped to West Berlin, he tried his luck and indeed, he won! I would have been ecstatic even if I only won the exact amount I needed to pay for Fatima’s surgery.

I had had a rough day, but remained optimistic because I am not someone who gives up easily. I have faith in God, and besides, I always remember my mother’s expressed belief that a person who helps others will surely receive help in some form when he is in need. I had helped others before so I felt strongly that the help I needed would come.

“Don’t expect it from the same person you have helped,” Ya Mabinty would add. “God always works in a mysterious way.”

So I picked up the remote control expectantly, switched on the TV, and checked the videotext for the lotto numbers. I had chosen only one out of the six that were drawn. With a wry smile, I crushed the ticket in my fist, and slumped in the sofa again, telling myself that it was too much to expect that I would win the lottery on the very day I desperately needed money. For some reason, my mind then went to the advent of the Jackpot machines in Sierra Leone – how some people managed to lose all their wages and salaries on the day they were paid.
I changed the channel to SAT 1, saw an elated woman and paid more attention to the programme. It was Der Preis ist heiß (The Price Is Hot) and she had just won DM 45,500! With that amount of money, my daughter could come for her surgery! And all she had to do was guess the total price of a number of commodities on display. She had won because her guess was closer to the correct value than her competitor’s. I looked at that woman with envy. Although I switched off the TV after that, I was still thinking about the shows. There was the DM 100,000 Show where it was possible to win DM 100,000 in a few hours. There was also the Rudi Carrel show, Laß dich überraschen (Let Yourself Be Surprised). How I wished that someone who knew of my problem would write to Rudi and ask him to surprise me with Fatima in Dortmund and a check for her surgery! Rudi had produced even greater surprises than that. He had brought entire families from all over the globe just to surprise their relatives in Germany. These Germans are so rich, I said to myself. Look at all the money they waste! But are they really wasting their money? I wondered.

I must have dozed off because it was the sound of the telephone that roused me.

“Herr Sankoh, ich habe mit Barbara gesprochen.” It was Prof. Urfer telling me that he had discussed my problem with his wife.

“Ja, bitte? (Yes, please?)”, I asked.

He informed me that he was going to write to the German Embassy in Freetown about my daughter’s visa application.

Praise the Lord! I exclaimed mentally, almost collapsing with joy and relief. I think I must have been unusually silent because he had to say,

“Herr Sankoh, sind Sie da? (Are you still there?)”

‘Oh yes, sorry, I’m here and I heard you. Thank you so much!” My eyes had clouded over with unshed tears so I must have answered in a shaky whisper.
It is gratifying to note that I received moral support from most of the staff in my department at the university, but my fellow graduate students failed to show any sympathy for this African their midst! Even the Akademisches Auslandsamt (the Foreign Students Office) at the university did nothing to help me.

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I decided to ‘fall’ on Sierra Leoneans in and out of Germany for any assistance they might be able to give me. My appeal resulted in an outpouring of moral support and a concerted effort to help me find a sponsor for Fatima.. However, there was little success, so I decided to contact a popular daily newspaper in Dortmund, the Ruhr Nachrichten (RN).

I entered the Stadtredaktion (the city editorial department). A large hall, divided into cubicles by waist-high wooden walls, was filled with stacks of papers here and there. I saw people holding pocket conferences and others taking notes. I stood there for a while, feeling like an intruder in a secret society bush. Fortunately, a voice on my right side released me from the hissing sounds that threatened to overwhelm me.

“Kann ich Ihnen helfen?” It was a woman asking if she could help me. Her electric typewriter made me remember the one I had seen at a police station in Dortmund.

The policeman who was recording the case of my stolen mountain bike seemed to have worked with his typewriter for a very long time. In fact, it looked as if it was one that had survived the Second World War! He had to hit the keys hard to make a good impression on the paper and as he did so one grey hair flew from his head and landed on the paper. He blew it off, his thick lips forming a shape which only his
mother would have admired. When I made a joke about the typewriter, he told me things were getting difficult in Germany.

In contrast, the woman’s electric typewriter seemed to be quite new. I could see the shiny letters and numbers on its keys. I moved closer to her, as if to divulge a secret, and explained my problem. Before I could finish, a medium-built, confident-looking and charming woman passed by. The secretary interrupted me, pointed to the woman and told me that was the person I should talk to, which was how I met Mrs. Annette Feldmann.

She whisked me to a secluded area and asked what she could do for me.

“Herr Sankoh, was kann ich für Sie tun?”

Her crisp voice won my trust, as if she were saying: *Just let me know what the problem is. If I can help, I shall do my best. If I cannot, I won’t hesitate to tell you.*

I told her my story.

“*Das ist schwierig* (that is difficult),” she said. Apparently Fatima had to be living in Germany before the newspaper could organise an appeal for donations.

My frustration was such that I was becoming incapable of rational thought. Seven months had passed since I received Len’s fax and there still seemed to be little hope that my daughter could come to Germany for the surgery she needed.

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Since it is usually possible for students to bring dependants to Germany, I was advised to file the appropriate application for Fatima and I had instructed her to submit it at the German embassy in Freetown. I was therefore delighted to receive a letter dated July 18 from the Foreign Office requesting various documents in support of the application which had arrived in Dortmund on July 13. I presented all

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the required documents on July 19. Having looked through them, the official said,

“Diesen Antrag wird abgelehnt,” informing me, without giving any reason, that the application would be rejected.

He must be joking, I thought.

Non-Germans are at the mercy of such officials. They know all the dictates of the laws pertaining to foreigners and if they choose to apply them strictly, there is nothing one can do. Indeed, a rejection message was sent to the German embassy in Sierra Leone because I received the information from the consular officer in Freetown. She also did not provide a reason for the rejection, stating that the embassy reserved the right not to disclose reasons for its decisions.

Feeling dejected and increasingly tense but still optimistic, I contacted a church organisation to support my case at the Foreign Office. I was advised to present evidence of obligation to my country so I wrote them a long letter on August 5 in which I included my degree certificates, my CV, my appointment letter at the University of Sierra Leone and a letter confirming that I was on leave from Njala University College. That did not help. On August 9, I received a response from the Foreign Office that its decision on July 31 was irrevocable. I faxed an appeal to the German Embassy in Freetown and stressed the need for Fatima to undergo a heart surgery. Four weeks later, the consular officer in Freetown responded with the following conditions:

1) Dr. Gordon-Harris had to provide a written diagnosis of Fatima’s problem and a confirmation that the illness could not be adequately treated in Sierra Leone. Len prepared what was required.

2) Prof. Polonius, director of the Thoracic and Cardiovascular Clinic in Dortmund had to send a confirmation that an operation at the city clinic
was planned. He prepared the letter and faxed it to the German Embassy.

3) I had to submit a statement from my sponsors guaranteeing the availability of funds to pay for Fatima’s treatment.

The guarantee of funds was my only remaining problem. The letter stated that if I could present all the above documents, the visa would be issued, so with this glimmer of hope. I rushed to Mrs. Feldmann at the press house. She agreed to publish the appeal for donations which the AWD Foundation opened in December with DM 10,000. Fatima arrived in Germany on December 31. The Ruhr Nachrichten published a total of fourteen articles about her and by early February, 1996 a total amount of DM 56,118.72 had been collected, mainly from unknown donors, but a female medical doctor donated the proceeds from the sale of jewellery worth DM 22,000!

The German surgeons were amazed that Fatima had survived for many years with a hole in her heart and a blocked pulmonary artery. Investigating how her circulatory system had made natural adjustments to keep her body functioning became an interesting research project for them.

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I could devote an entire book to my experiences in connection with bringing Fatima to Germany. Let me just take this opportunity to express, on behalf of my family, thanks and appreciation to all those kind friends, African, European, and indeed from all over the world who must remain nameless, for their moral and financial support during my family’s ordeal. Despite the hassle I went through with the German authorities, I also want to express my gratitude that they issued the visa in the end. And I remain deeply grateful to the heart surgeons at the University Clinic in Münster. Apart from curing Fatima, they waived
their honoraria in order to ensure that the money donated would cover all of her hospital bills.
13. Fatima is saved

As in many developing countries, medical facilities in Sierra Leone are not advanced enough to allow our doctors to handle certain medical conditions. One can only hope that the Government and humanitarian organisations endeavour to make it possible for such patients to be treated overseas. There is also an urgent need to improve diagnostic facilities for children’s illnesses. With the limited medical facilities in the country, Fatima could have died of her heart problem undiagnosed. The cause of her death would have been attributed to another cause. Someone might even have been accused of causing her death through witchcraft.

Apropos of witchcraft! In Europe, for some reason probably dating back to antiquity, that word is used for the negative sense and wizardry for the positive sense of extraordinary powers. Witchcraft is taken to be an ‘evil’ feminine activity and wizardry, a ‘good’ masculine one, so whenever reference is made to extraordinary powers leading to the creation of things, wizardry is the word used; never witchcraft. I consider this an unfair distinction and was certainly not suggesting a particular gender when I used the word.

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With the confidence I had in German doctors, I found it a waste of time when they asked me to sign an agreement before Fatima’s surgery. I was sure the surgical team would do their best to help my daughter
and only prayed that God would guide them as they tried to save her life. I signed the agreement only for compliance, though I realised there was a good reason for being asked to do that. Many Germans blame the doctors whenever surgery is unsuccessful. Some even take them to court for malpractice and demand compensation. I understand that this situation is even worse in the US. Of course, mistakes do happen sometimes, as in the case of the surgeon who amputated the left foot of a patient instead of the right, but I believe that advanced economic and social development can lead to the loss of some moral values.

Fatima’s chief surgeon visited us in her room and explained everything the team had done. Given my family’s confidence in the surgeons and the fact that they had demonstrated their readiness to help, we did not entertain any thought that they might have made an error when the surgery turned out to be unsuccessful; but I was not surprised to hear a few German acquaintances say that Kunstfehler (professional error) might have occurred. I was at pains to explain to anyone who talked about Kunstfehler that with heart surgery anything was possible. I have to say that at that difficult time I would have appreciated hearing words of encouragement rather than those that could have made things harder for us.

Fatima had a second open-heart surgery, again in Münster, in February, exactly one year after the first. I am grateful to be able to say that this time she fully recovered.

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I will now return to the authorities at the Foreign Office. Fatima’s three month visa was to expire in April. Students must renew their visas annually and leaving her at home, I went to extend our visas at the end of March.
“Herr Sankoh, wo ist Fatimas Paß? The lady in charge was asking about Fatima’s passport in a very soothing and friendly voice. I had put it aside and told her frankly that I was a bit hesitant to raise Fatima’s issue at that point in time.

She responded that they were not heartless and informed me that her boss had given the okay for Fatima to stay in Germany until she was completely well and for as long as I was living in the country. She said it would have been pointless to insist that Fatima return to Sierra Leone so soon after major surgery.

Indeed, if Fatima had returned to Sierra Leone after the first surgery, we would have had to start the process of bringing her to Germany all over again for her second surgery. The extension and change of her visa status was a big help as it was then possible to register her with my health insurance which meant she could visit doctors for any illness. In Germany, one also needs a certain amount of luck and even with their excellent health insurance system, one may sometimes need a lawyer for assistance as I did when my health insurers refused to pay for Fatima’s second surgery. Insurance companies are the same everywhere in the world. They take contributions from their clients with pleasure but are always reluctant to pay.

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The fifty-minute drive on the autobahn A1 from Dortmund to the heart centre in Münster had become routine. During one of those long journeys some interesting occurrences took my mind off my troubles. The RTL 2 radio which I usually listened to, reported a strike by prisoners somewhere in the country for an improvement in their prison conditions and I laughed aloud at the thought of prisoners in Sierra Leone going on strike for better conditions. In Germany, prisoners have a television room, heating facilities in
their cells, and several other amenities. I have even heard that, since some released prisoners find it difficult to live a decent life out of prison, they deliberately commit new crimes so that they can be returned to prison.
Whenever I had time in Freetown – which I always seemed to have – I would take a walk down Kissy Road in the east end of the city to listen to the latest popular music from all over the world. I enjoyed talking to the guys selling music tapes on the walkways. They advertised their wares so loudly that one could hear the lyrics distinctly above the noise of the sea of hawkers, other pedestrians, and the long snake of vehicles crawling in both directions – towards or away from the city centre.

About 2:00 p.m. one afternoon, as girls in the green and orange uniforms of the Annie Walsh Memorial School oozed out of the gate, I saw some of them dancing to the sound of Madonna’s record, ‘Like a Virgin’, which filled the air. Their shouts and laughter even added more flavour to the vibrant scene as commuters, waiting for taxis or poda-podas (private mini-buses), tapped their feet and swung their heads to the beat and passers-by adjusted their steps to match the song. Some women deliberately shook their buttocks, making their lappas (wrappers) and skirts swing seductively up, down, left, and right, to catch the eyes of the men watching. A Road Transport Corporation bus stopped nearby. As passengers rushed out of it, the waiting schoolgirls and other people rushed to enter. I sensed some regret that it had arrived just when Madonna’s hit song was rocking the area.

In Dortmund I found that sort of daily entertainment only at the central train station where someone selling compact discs played loud music to
attract people passing by to catch their trains. As I always had ten minutes to wait for my underground train after alighting from the S-Bahn which brought me from the university, I usually walked slowly to the underground station so I could enjoy the music. Whenever I reached that part of the station, my mind often returned to those Freetown streets where loud music is the order of the day.

Talking about underground trains reminds me of a Sierra Leonean I met in Dortmund. It was Karmokor’s first week in Germany and as he alighted from one underground train to catch another at the central train station, one level above, I saw that he was dressed as if he had been invited to join the Apollo crew for a journey to the moon. It was not all that cold but it seemed he had taken seriously the warning that German weather is unreliable. He appeared lost, turning left, then right, then left again, before walking towards the steps that would take him out of the tunnel and up to the main entrance. I waited for him because I observed that he had not noticed me.

“Oh, Mallam O.!” he exclaimed when he eventually caught sight of me. Then, with a chuckle, as we embraced, “Man, Dortmund is a double-deck city. I climbed up and up and up. Man, these people are really advanced!” I led him to the platform above where he took the S-Bahn home.

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Having mentioned a Sierra Leonean, reader, let me share with you a letter I received from my brother in Freetown when he was a university student, and my response after he had graduated:

“Dear Mallam O.:
Greetings from your younger brother right here in the ‘Athens of Africa,’ Fourah Bay College. I am writing this letter in my room at the student hostel.
When I lift my head and look out, I can see the whole central and east end of the capital. I am sure that the British who decided to locate this college on Mount Aureal – the highest of the peninsula mountains – had in mind that whoever is a student here should feel that he is higher up than the ordinary people below.

I don’t need to explain to you what ‘Athens of Africa’ means. Well, you attended Njala University College, so perhaps you would envy me for attending Fourah Bay College, which is the first university in West Africa.

Do you understand why FBC students feel higher up than those at NUC? Man, we’re fortunate to dub the walls of the most famous university in West Africa. I am sure that our degrees will be recognised all over the world. This is why I’ll do my best to graduate with a very good division.

Mallam O., I am very thankful to you for paying my college fees and taking care of my boarding and lodging at college. Honestly, without your financial assistance, I would not be where I am today, trying to obtain a degree in economics. I’ll try my best because I know that if I complete my studies and get a job, I’ll assist you in helping the rest of the family.

After writing this letter, I’ll walk down the hill to meet my family. I spend weekdays here at college and weekends in town.

Life is becoming difficult for students without scholarships. Even students who have awards must “pinch their cakes” so that they’ll last for the whole semester. Prices at the student canteen have soared up.

I understand that if there is a 30-minute power outage (what we call blackout) in the city where you live, there’ll be great commotion. Life must be good for you there Mallam O. We are used to frequent blackouts here but we’re hopeful that after the Bumbuna hydroelectric project is completed in a few years time, the whole country will have enough
electricity for the people. I hear that we’ll even export electricity to other countries. That’ll be good. I am looking forward to that.

Mallam O. I would appreciate it very much if you could add a little bit more to the amount you send monthly. You usually say that things are difficult for you in Germany. I think, however, that your suffering out there is my luxury in Freetown presently. What about the jobs? Aren’t you working? Isn’t it possible for you to make a lot of money?

Look, Samuel came recently from the US and bought a big house. Every year, the city is full with holiday makers, mostly from America. They drive flashy cars, dress well and hang large gold chains on their necks. Instead of putting up in their family homes, they take expensive rooms in our four- or five-star hotels including Brookfields Hotel, Mammy Yoko (Sofitel) Hotel, Paramount Hotel, Cape Sierra Hotel, and Bintumani Hotel. They take dinner at the Chinese Restaurant on Wilkinson Road and in the expensive Lagoonda Complex at Aberdeen. They are all over in the city’s clubs and on the beach smoking cigars and other expensive cigarettes. Why can’t you come, Mallam O.?

I visited our mother, Tha Iye, recently at Rokel village. She’s doing fine. Three of our aunts and six children are living with her. She asked me not to forget to tell you to send additional capital for her business.

Two weeks ago, I went to Warima to see our stepmother, Ya Mabinty. She’s getting older each day. Fortunately, there are many people around her who help her and do many things for her. She is very happy and looks healthy. Our house in the village has started having problems with its roof. We need to change the corrugated iron sheets. I used the money you sent recently to repair the drainage around the house. I painted the walls again, but the roof problem is serious.
My brother, the rebel war is threatening daily. The reports we hear on SLBS TV and radio are not at all good. The rebels are inflicting untold atrocities on the common people. What I don’t understand is that if they are fighting for the freedom of our people, why must they mutilate and kill so many innocent people and destroy their houses and other property?

Oh Mallam O.! Lest I forget. My friend, Edmond Taylor, came with Andrea Müller-Taylor recently and introduced her as his wife in Germany. Boy, Andrea is beautiful! Edmond told me how thankful he was to Andrea and her parents for the nice treatment they have been giving him. He said that the discrimination he faced at his work place in Germany was so terrible that whenever he went home from work and Andrea embraced and kissed him, he always felt like a human being. By the way, why is Andrea called Mrs. Müller-Taylor instead of simply Mrs. Taylor? I still can’t understand the problem of discrimination as Edmond put it.

Anyway, I visited him and Andrea on a Sunday afternoon. I found Andrea in the parlour smoking. She had shorts on which appeared to me like underwear. Her feet were on the table, she had chewing gum and a novel on her lap. Edmond was cooking in the kitchen. Oh my God! Is this what they call female emancipation in Germany? Such women, not for me!

By the way, I was reading a report recently at the German Embassy at Howe Street. The author signed her name as Prof. Dr. Dr. Ulrike Steinwerfer. Why not simply Prof. Steinwerfer? Are the titles so important in Germany? Why Dr. Dr.?

I saw the video tape which you sent and we were able to watch it a few days ago. You’ve grown a bit fatter than you were, but not as fat as I have grown. When we looked at your apartment, we couldn’t believe our eyes. Are you serious when you said you picked most of that furniture from the streets? My
brother, do you mean that people out there are so rich that they can afford to throw those nice things away like that? Why can’t you then collect what they throw away and send them to us to do business? It’ll be very good business.

Your apartment is quite nice but when we heard that you are paying DM 730 a month for it, we calculated that in Leones. It is Le. 365,000 a month! Do you really mean that? Are you so rich? Nobody pays that amount of money here for even the best of mansions. How much money do you and Jariatu spend on food in a month? That must be another fortune? But you tell us that you depend on a meagre monthly stipend from your sponsors. How do you manage things?

When do you intend to complete your studies? It has taken much longer than usual, I think. Peter spent one year doing his Masters degree in Britain and Elisabeth spent two years in Canada. Why is it taking so long in Germany? It is now more than two years since you went to Germany and you have still not got your Masters degree. What’s wrong? I am told by your German friend Michael that you needed to do another Bachelors degree. Why? Is this what has kept you so long? I planned to do my Masters degree after my course here but it seems I should not think about going to Germany at all.

My brother, SLBS TV is doing well for us. We see the European Football Championships live here on TV. Sometimes when I watch those matches, I just cannot concentrate on the matches themselves. I keep envying the players especially when the commentators talk about how much money these guys are paid. Is it true? Then Mallam O., why do we spend so much time on acquiring education when these guys earn so much money even without university education?

Okay my brother, I have to stop now so that I can walk down to the house. Mallam O. Jnr. will be delighted to see me. But before I stop, I want to
Osman Alimamy Sankoh (Mallam O.)

assure you that we always pray for you and Jariatu especially when we see on CNN reports about racially motivated attacks in that country. Sometime ago we saw pictures of a house on fire in a German city. It was reported that black and other foreign asylum applicants were in that house. We hope that you’re safe in Dortmund. Please go away from anyone who could possibly attack you. Please! We depend on you, Mallam O.

I almost forgot to tell you that your friend Patrick was here. He is asking that you send him a tipper vehicle so that he can use it to transport sand for people who are constructing houses. He tells me that it is possible to recover the money within six months.

Until I hear from you again, please extend my regards to Jariatu, Richard and Andrew.

Best regards to you and bye for now.
Your younger brother,
Andrew.”

*****

“Dear Andrew,

Sorry that I am responding only now to your very interesting letter.

I am happy that you have now graduated with a good degree in economics from Fourah Bay College. I consider it an investment to have sponsored your studies. You know that this is how many Africans feel when they help their younger brothers and sisters and other relatives. It is the same way our parents feel about us. They nurture us with the expectation that we shall help them in the future when they are old. In Germany, parents don’t expect their children to take care of them any longer. In fact, they consider such an expectation as a burden on the children.

I am sure that you now face a real life situation – working to feed your family. When I talked with you
recently, you told me that this was not what you expected after leaving college. Yes, sometimes it is even better to stay as a student because your relatives would understand your status and as such they would not depend on you for financial assistance. Now that you are a teacher, I am sure that you can understand the amount of burden I have had trying to take care of my family here in Dortmund and support all of you in Sierra Leone.

I agree with your plans to pursue a Masters degree at the University of Sierra Leone. To be honest with you, I would not have advised you to come to Germany to read economics. Irrespective of your good degree in economics, the German system would have belittled it.

I have just heard that the Germans are now planning to adopt the British-American system by introducing Bachelors and Masters programmes so that their graduates will fit well into the international academic arena. I think that this will reduce the problems which foreign students with undergraduate degrees from their home countries must grapple with when they come here to pursue graduate programmes.

If you had studied agriculture at Njala University College, I would have advised you to apply to the Universities at Kiel and at Göttingen. Many Sierra Leoneans have studied agriculture in these universities and have very good academic records there. Consequently, their Bachelors in agriculture degrees from Njala University College are easily recognised as equivalent to the German Vordiplom.

Your letter seemed to be dominated by requests for which I need a lot of money to settle. That you still made those requests indicates to me that you, like many others, still can’t believe that I face financial difficulties here in Germany. I have told you many times that I rely on you to explain my situation to our people. It is an educated brother like you who should
have trust in what I report to you. I’ve only made sacrifices to pay your college fees because I thought it was very important to do so.

If I can raise the money for your ticket and if you can get a visa, I will arrange that you come to Germany and see for yourself. The stories Sierra Leoneans heard long ago about making good money quickly in this country are things of the past. Germany now faces serious economic difficulties, especially after the reunification of East and West Germany and the opening up of the European borders. I can tell you that foreigners, especially Africans, don’t have it easy anywhere!

Immediately after the reunion of East and West Germany, it was still possible for us to get student jobs. A few years later, hundreds of thousands of East Germans and East Europeans started competing for these jobs. They are called ‘black jobs’ but it appears that there is now need to change this name. Black doesn’t only mean jobs that are illegal, they are also hard and dirty jobs which the white man doesn’t normally wish to do. But now that times are hard in Europe, the white man himself is even begging for such jobs. As such, I’ll now label these jobs as “formerly-mainly-black-but-now-unavoidably-black-and-white-jobs”. It makes for good listening, doesn’t it?

With the current image of war and destruction which Sierra Leone holds in the international community, it will be even more difficult to secure a visa to come to Germany. How can you prove to the German authorities that you are not coming to live here for good and enjoy the better life you claim I enjoy? Yes, it is difficult for Sierra Leoneans to obtain visas to travel to Germany.

However, let me share something interesting with you. A German guy planned a visit to his friend in Sierra Leone. He contacted the Sierra Leone Embassy in Bonn for a visa. He was totally surprised when the
embassy asked him to present a letter of invitation from his friend in Sierra Leone. He thought that as a German, the embassy of a poor country would not even ask him questions. He therefore asked me to ‘beg’ our embassy to accept his passport by post since he didn’t wish to miss his job and drive almost 500km to Bonn where our embassy is. He also asked that the invitation letter issue be dropped because it would cause him to postpone his journey. I explained to him the difficulty Sierra Leoneans face when they apply for a German visa.

“But Mr. Sankoh, what do you think I would like to do in Sierra Leone?” he asked.

“There are many Germans in poor Sierra Leone who would not like to come back and live in your rich Germany. They live with people and they enjoy their lives,” I told him.

“But Mr. Sankoh, you know that I am just going to visit Alfred Sankoh,” he explained.

“Who knows whether you are not going for our diamonds and gold? You know what, call Alfred in Freetown and tell him to fax a letter of invitation to the embassy in Bonn,” I advised him.

He realised later on that I was serious. I called the Sierra Leone embassy and expressed my appreciation for their stance. Why shouldn’t we ask Westerners wanting to travel to our country for the same documents their embassies in Sierra Leone ask us to produce when we want to travel to their countries? Not every Westerner travelling to Sierra Leone is going there to ‘help’ Sierra Leone. Many are similarly economic refugees there as they brand us in their countries. The difference is that we Sierra Leoneans make it possible for Westerners to exploit our country whereas Westerners make it difficult for us to live in their countries. When do we stop being so stupid?

* * * * * *
Let me return to your question about getting a job and making good money. There is a student section at the Labour Office where students register for holiday jobs. Foreign students are normally permitted to work only during the holidays and for not more than two months in the year. This has been increased to three months recently. Also, foreign students can get permission to work for 10 hours per week during sessions. Those who have completed their studies can get a two-year job permit in order to gain practical experience in their field of study if they can find a job. Well and good.

However, it is necessary to consider the stipulated conditions for the above permissions. In order to get a work permit, you first need to show evidence that you have found a job. But when you apply for the job, you are asked for a proof of a work permit. It is the chicken-egg story; which one comes first? If an employer wishes to help, he will write a recommendation to the Labour Office. Good. But look at this: the Labour Office will then tell you that the vacancy must first be advertised and preference will be given to Germans. If there’s no suitable German for the job, preference is given to other EU members. It is only when there is no suitable person from these groups that you could be considered. Note that as I write there are about four million Germans who are jobless. With that, I leave you to consider the implications of the policy for Africans.

As an African student, it is many times more difficult for you to get a holiday job than it is for European students. I am saying European students because there are many foreign students in Germany from other European countries.

However, the workers at the Students Service are always helpful to all students. There was a time when I was in dire need of a job in order to settle rent arrears for my apartment. I went to the Students Service and spent the whole day waiting patiently for a job offer.
Each time the gentleman in charge walked from his office to and from a colleague’s office, I would look at him with pleading eyes. He would stretch his hands downwards; push his head left to a raised shoulder to indicate no success. At the end of the day, the gentleman promised that he would call me when there was an offer. And he did.

I rushed to his office to collect a card which students take to the prospective employer. The job – to help in a store with the loading and unloading of commodity-trailer lorries – was to be offered by a supermarket. Before I left, the gentleman in charge called the employer. The lady requested that I rush to her immediately to register. I did so. I walked through a labyrinth of cars parked by shoppers and found my way to the administrative building. Looking at the sheet of paper on which I wrote the name of the lady whom I was to speak to, I asked a worker in a blue overall working suit.

“Excuse me,” I approached him.

“Could you please direct me to Mrs. Löffelbieger?” I asked him politely.

The name sounded interesting to me. Löffelbieger in German means someone who bends spoons. The ancestors of this woman were probably professional spoon-benders. You see, there are several family names in Germany that suggest the professions of the ancestors. Examples are Schneider (tailor), Tischler (carpenter), Jäger (hunter) and Schlosser (locksmith). There are similar examples such as ‘Taylor’, ‘Carpenter’, in Sierra Leone too, especially in the villages.

“Certainly! She is our personnel officer here,” the gentleman said, after looking at the card I showed him.

I found Mrs. Löffelbieger leafing through a pack of papers. When I entered her office and explained that I was from the Students Office for the advertised job, I saw her pen slip effortlessly from her fingers as
if they had just gone numb. She appeared sunk in her chair. She crossed her fingers as if to display her manicured nails. Her long straight nose sat disproportionately between small blue eyes that were almost covered by her eyelashes. With those eyes, she looked me over, from head to toe.

“The administration has just decided to postpone the job for a while,” she told me, raising both shoulders as if to say that it was not her decision.

“But just 30 minutes ago someone talked with you and you asked that the student rush to you immediately. This is the student!” I protested. I knew that she was lying to me. Apparently she was not expecting a black student.

“Young man, I am sorry but there is nothing I can do,” she told me definitively as she started to flip the papers again. I looked at her with astonishment.

In fact, another woman almost collapsed when she opened her door and saw me. She was expecting a student to clean the tennis courts somewhere in Dortmund but there I was standing in front of her. Wasn’t I a student?

“No! No! No!” she exclaimed. “Someone else has just taken the job,” she told me, breathing heavily and holding her left breast as if her heart would fall out if she did not. I had spoken to her by telephone a few minutes before I got to her!

I walked slowly and thoughtfully back to my car.

But, yes, if you are lucky to cross all those hurdles and you get a job at a garden firm, at a locksmith’s firm, at a painting firm, at a printing firm, etc. etc., it is possible for you to earn up to DM 2000 a month. With such an amount, you can pay the monthly salary of three university professors in a developing country. If you are a scholarship holder, however, you may not earn a salary above a stipulated amount. Any amount above that will be deducted from your stipend.

Irrespective of all these problems, it is always possible to find exceptionally helpful Germans. One
of them is the Gloy Family in Dortmund-Brackel. Jens – the head of the family – gave me a part-time job in his firm where we produced various metal cases for lamps and other things. I could weld, use the massive electric scissors, measure, cut metal plates, and construct a variety of things. I could use different kinds of huge electric-hydraulic machines all on my own. Oh Andrew! With the type of hard jobs we do here, you don’t need to go to a gym to develop your muscles. I mean it!

You’d be justified if you’re already wondering what a postgraduate statistics student was doing in shops loading and unloading trailers, in gardens, in locksmiths firms, etc. instead of sitting in an office. From the time the British told us about “white-collar” jobs in Sierra Leone when we were under their rule, I never had the opportunity to understand what they actually meant. Living in Germany makes this possible. Jobs where you need a necktie and sit in an office are basically for white people here. I understand that things are changing positively now in Holland, Britain and in the US. I exclude the jobs in African embassies in Germany because an embassy is an extension of a country’s territory.

* * * * * *

You talked about the holiday-makers in Freetown from America. My brother, let the holiday-makers enjoy their lives in their country! Some criticise them for creating the wrong impression to young Sierra Leoneans that life overseas is sweet and sweet all the way. However, they’re able to spend large amounts of money because of the value of the foreign currency they take along. It’s possible for them to do things in Freetown which they normally can’t do overseas.

Besides, Sierra Leoneans living in overseas countries sometimes need a place like Sierra Leone where they go to be admired, be respected, and be
regarded as people who have achieved or who can achieve. They wish to be viewed as the lucky few who are fortunate to live in countries where many Sierra Leoneans would like to live. It doesn’t matter whether or not they borrow the money to do that. What matters is that they have the opportunity to ‘have a break’ from all the discrimination and problems they face and the hard jobs they do in these countries.

I must, however, hasten to let you know that there are many Sierra Leoneans and Africans in general who have achieved success in Germany, America, Britain and elsewhere in the West. In Germany, however, they’re forced to go into private business because it’s difficult for them to secure jobs in their actual professions.

The problem is, for example, African medical doctors and other professionals must first of all, naturalise as German citizens before they can practice their professions in Germany. Consequently, although there is a good number of black medical doctors around, they’re not reflected in official statistics as African doctors since they are registered as Germans. It’s therefore not possible to assess the contribution Africans make to the German society. The point is that many Africans have achieved in many fields and are working everywhere in the world! So, I don’t think there is anything wrong if these groups enjoy their lives in their home countries. They deserve it, don’t they?

You expressed concern about the brutal rebel war that has caused the callous deaths of hundreds of thousands of our people. Yes, I have also been worried about all of you. I condemn the senseless rebel war. I hope that God will guide our leaders as they strive to achieve a lasting peace in Sierra Leone.

I enjoyed your bit about Edmond Taylor and his wife Andrea Müller-Taylor. Apropos of beauty! Andrew, German women are generally beautiful. Even when you don’t want to do so, natural instinct will
force you to turn around at least once after a beautiful woman has just crossed your way.

Once, Jariatu and I were taking a walk when a half-naked lady approached. She was dressed in a black body-tight blouse that didn’t cover her belly and she had shiny black body-tight shorts that clearly displayed the contours of her underwear. As she walked majestically towards us, her platform-shoes helped her to bounce with her long straight legs that were shaped like an upturned pyramid from her hips to her feet. Her heavy breasts danced to an imaginary pop rhythm that she probably listened to before she stepped out of her apartment. Swinging her hands and combing her hair intermittently with her fingers, her beautiful face attempted a smile as she came closer.

Jariatu raised her voice deliberately in order to detract my attention from the approaching beauty that I seemed to feast on with my eyes. She judged correctly that I’d like to turn round to look at the lady’s behind after she passed. As the lady came closer, she greeted us with a “Hi!” and revealed a wonderful set of teeth which were, until her greeting, hidden by a well-shaped pair of lips that were painted with red lipstick.

I hoped that her beautiful face was not a result of expensive plastic surgery. You see, many Westerners spend huge sums of money to change their looks. They straighten their noses, increase or reduce their breasts, remove extra fat from their bodies, etc. etc. As a result, it’s difficult to tell whose beauty is really natural.

“Hi!” I returned her greeting hesitantly not to reveal a smile.

I pretended not to have interest in looking back. After a few minutes, I attempted a slight turn but Jariatu’s hand was already waiting to prevent me from doing what I wanted to do.

“I knew you would do that. Men!” she commented.
“What?” I pretended as if I didn’t know what was going on.

Sorry, I was carried away by that pleasant thought. I wanted to respond to your questions about Andrea.

Andrew, our Sierra Leonean brothers are so thankful to the German women who marry them. Their looks don’t really matter. I’ve told you already that it’s a prerequisite that Africans naturalise as German citizens if they want to go into certain respectable professions in this country. The easiest way to do so is to get a German spouse. What I find very interesting is how German authorities look at Africans with German passports.

For instance, when I was returning from Sierra Leone, I travelled with a Sierra Leonean woman who possessed a German passport. At Amsterdam Airport, she was only released long after I had passed the immigration counter with my Sierra Leonean passport. It was because her German passport needed to be checked more thoroughly than mine. The same thing happened at Düsseldorf Airport in Germany where the immigration officers engaged her in a ‘friendly’ conversation to prove something.

The problem I had was with my hand luggage at Amsterdam Airport and with my suitcase at Düsseldorf Airport. Both of them were checked painstakingly because when Africans arrive from Africa, they’re automatically suspected of carrying drugs. Even though we shouldn’t blame the German officers outright for treating us like that since some of our brothers and sisters have been apprehended with drugs in their luggage as well as in their bodies, I think that it’s completely wrong for them to generalise.

* * * * * *

Your question about the emancipation of Western women is indeed appropriate. Western women claim that they are emancipated. If female emancipation is
taken to mean the freedom of women from the control of men, then I’ll agree with them to a certain extent. German women, unlike most of their Sierra Leonean counterparts, try to show that they can do everything that men do. They want the freedom to do whatsoever they wish to do. They contribute financially to the upkeep of the home and to raising the children. They share the daily chores in the home with the men and they strive hard to remove labels from certain jobs that are thought to be purely for men. This is similar to the freedom enjoyed by the educated woman in Sierra Leone. The difference stands out clearly when German women are compared with the less educated Sierra Leonean women in villages.

However, it’s important to note that the Sierra Leonean women in the villages are governed by the customs and traditions of marriage. Their relationship with their husbands is usually falsely equated in the West to slavery and suppression. Sierra Leonean women generally respect their husbands and regard them as fathers of their children who therefore must be served, encouraged, and be loved. They take their husbands’ family names without questioning. It was the same in Germany, but German women can now form compound family names like Andrea’s.

On the other hand, female emancipation in the West has a lot of negative aspects. The women have taken so much freedom that a good number of them are misusing it. Their way of dress is one example. In summer, most of them dress virtually naked and walk publicly in city centres, in shops and in other public places. Some of them lie out in open fields with underwear, some even leaving their breasts uncovered.

What I don’t understand about the emancipation of Western women is their willingness to be misused by men in the media. To tell you the truth, Western women are not as emancipated as they claim. They’re
the first to drop their clothes and be naked even in the most useless of films. Is this emancipation?

Come to Germany and see the multiplicity of sex shops and peep shows and brothels. Prostitution has become a profession in this country. Many German women go into it and speak publicly about it. The main driving force behind this is money. Prostitutes make more money than women in other professions. Day in day out there are reports of women being imported from the poorer European and Asian countries to bigger cities in Germany for prostitution and pornography to add to the German prostitutes. 60,000 prostitutes earning about DM 400 – DM 600 per day are reported to be in Germany. If this is the emancipation the Western women boast of, I’d rather prefer the quiet life of my mother and sisters.

Wait a minute! Prostitution doesn’t refer to females any longer. In Germany, there’re male prostitutes as well. This will be a shock for you, I know.

The day of March 8 was declared as the International Women’s Day. So, on March 8, 1995, I wrote the following poem for our mother:

MY MOTHER DOES NOT KNOW ...

Does she know what day today is? Does she know when it was agreed on? Does she know who took the decision and why? Does she know what to do today? Does she know that some women are fighting for her rights? Does she know that today is a day for women’s voices to be heard? What does ‘general awareness for women’ mean to her?

Yes, my mother in the village has accepted it that long.
To her, it is quite normal.
Was there, is there and will there be an alternative to male control of female?
She has never tried to answer this question.
She does not have time to think about it.
Suppression or oppression of women, what does it mean?
Her children must be fed, daily.
That’s important.

In the morning.
As I was in my mother’s womb in Africa,
I saw my mother hold a hoe;
I saw a bowl on her head;
I heard her talking to my brother on her back,
As she galloped us a mile barefooted to the farm.
She made a bed for him and gave him something to eat.
My brother did not see my smile as we were leaving him.
I prayed to God to protect him.
As my mother bent down to sow some seeds,
I saw an ant take away the first.
I told my mother but she was humming a song.

In the afternoon.
She gathered a few sticks to make fire.
It was very hot.
She went to the hut,
Where my brother was asleep, tired of crying.
She made food, hurriedly.
I didn’t know why.
She ran with me around to gather some wood;
She picked up my brother,
Put the bunch of firewood on her head,
And galloped us quickly home.

In the evening.
It became clear to me why she was in a hurry.
My father was attending a meeting somewhere,  
In a village close by.  
He should find food at home on his return.  
Oh men of Africa!  
Why not be a bit more reasonable,  
To my mother who is carrying me all the way?

It is true that my father also did some work,  
But he always had it easy to walk to the farm.  
He would hold a machete and that’s all,  
He would stop on the way to discuss the politics of the village with friends.  
My mother had me, my brother and a bowl or something else.  
In the morning,  
In the afternoon,  
And in the evening.

On this day,  
I think about my mothers, my sisters, my aunts and all women,  
Especially in Africa and elsewhere in the ‘Muslim’ world;  
Especially those who still have it like my mother;  
Those who spend all day looking after their children;  
Those who must stay in backyards when decisions are to be taken;  
Those whose office is ‘destined’ to be the kitchen;  
Those who have just accepted things that way;  
But also those who want things to change.

On this day,  
As you ‘enlightened’ women try to make your voices heard,  
I stand up to give you my support.  
You may not hear or see what I do,  
But you surely will!
My wife and daughters will join you in your fight, “One day is one day”.

* * * * * *

Andrew, I smiled when I read your comments about my apartment in Dortmund. You know that I would not like to create false impressions to you and to my friends in Sierra Leone about life in this country. It doesn’t matter who will read this personal letter I am writing to you, I’ll not be ashamed to confirm that I picked up most of my furniture from the streets. As a student, you don’t need to buy any of these things here. Some rich people change their house furniture regularly. Instead of paying to dispose of them, they advertise the items they want to donate. Some sell theirs cheaply while others merely throw theirs outside. It’s always a wonderful spectacle on Saturdays when Germans and foreigners alike drive around the city to pick up good items of furniture ‘thrown’ out on walkways. Others open up second hand shops to sell what they collect from the streets.

One more thing! Indeed, boxers, athletes, pop musicians, film stars, golf-, basketball-, football-, tennis- and handball-players earn millions of dollars. You’re right that it sometimes seems as if it’s not necessary to spend all those long years studying at a university. Yes, but only sometimes! The problem is that there’re just a very few people out of the many who are lucky enough to succeed in sports to the extent of earning millions of dollars.

Your brother,

Mallam O.”
15. Perceptions, stereotypes and realities

Germans are proud of their country; they have a right to be proud. Germany is a model in terms of beauty and organisation among the highly industrialised countries in the world. They are to be admired for their attitude towards state property. They believe that what belongs to the state belongs to them, whereas a typical Sierra Leonean would say, “It’s government property, so it’s not my business.” I pray for a time when the majority of Africans adopt positive attitudes toward their countries.

Unlike the situation in many developed countries where there is disparity in development between regions, Germany is uniformly developed. There is no region or state that lags distinctly behind in terms of economic and social development, so visitors to Germany do not need to spend a lot of money travelling around to see different places, unless there is somewhere in particular they wish to see. German cities are generally neat and clean and display glass-walled houses, especially in city centres. However, the streets are not always as clean as one’s breakfast table, as claimed by the German diplomat who signed my visa when I was leaving Sierra Leone.

“Mr. Sankoh, congratulations on getting a German scholarship,” he told me with pomposity. “You’re going to a country where the streets are as clean as one’s breakfast table.”

I always remembered him when I came across any squalid quarter in Germany. That was a gross exaggeration of the facts. I agree that Germans always throw all their garbage in a dustbin or rubbish can.
This habit has even evolved to the point where rubbish is sorted out according to its biological and chemical texture. Biodegradable rubbish is disposed of separately from the rest. Sierra Leone has a long way to go in that regard, but we can learn from Germans the habit of throwing rubbish where it belongs and not everywhere in streets and backyards. A man does not need to be dirty because he is poor! The Germans have also developed the technology to recycle discarded items after they have been sorted. One can imagine what was going on in my friend, Peter Bassie Bundu’s head when, on the day he arrived to pursue graduate studies in Bochum from Freetown, the janitor at the student hostel showed him the different coloured bins for separating rubbish.

However, hard as it might be to believe, with all the affluence in Germany, I encountered abject poverty from time to time. A few weeks after Fatmata arrived from Freetown, we went out window-shopping on the main business street in Dortmund. At one point we observed her staring at a man sitting on the sidewalk with a plate in front of him and a card with the word “HUNGER” written on it.

“Daddy, please come!” she called out. When I got closer to her, she gazed at the man and then at me.

“Is he a German?” she asked.

“I don’t know exactly. Could be,” I replied.

“You mean there are Germans or white people that are so poor they have to beg in the streets?” she asked in great astonishment.

Not too far from where this old man was sitting, we saw a young man in his twenties, also begging for money. Again Fatmata stared in disbelief. And she did that again, down at the central train station when a German woman in her late teens came staggering toward us, begging for money.

“Daddy, she’s not even ashamed to ask us for money?” my daughter asked. “Do you sometimes give a white beggar money?”
“I haven’t done so yet, my child.” I promised that when we went home, I would try to explain about the other side of Germany.

As soon as we arrived home, Fatmata demanded answers to her questions. I explained about the tens of thousands of German street children who beg for something to eat; about the one million Germans who do not have somewhere to sleep, some of whom freeze during the hostile winter weather – close to a hundred people die every winter; about the four million Germans who are unemployed; about the two million who depend on social assistance; about the thousands of drug addicts in the streets; about my bicycles stolen at the university; about the burglary in our apartment.

She was very quiet as I enumerated these negative aspects of Germany. It was as if she was trying to work things out and find out where she really was. Her mental picture of white people had been based on what she had heard and seen in Sierra Leone and was totally different from what she had seen in the streets of Germany and was hearing from me.

“They stole your bicycle?” she asked, her mouth wide open in disbelief.

We had dinner after our discussion and when I asked her to lead us in a short prayer, I was amazed when she came up with something like this:

“God, Heavenly Father. I thank you for this food we’re about to eat. I thank you that you have made it possible for my parents to provide this food. I thank you that we can eat it because there’re others who have food but can’t eat because they’re sick. God, please help that white man in the street today. Help the other one who was begging. In this country where a lot of people have a lot, let the few not suffer. In my country, a few people have a lot and the many suffer. God, help the many people in my country..."
and provide for them so that they can eat like we’re about to do. Why is there all this difference, God? Is that what you want to happen? God, I believe in you and know that you love all of us. Help all those who are ready to help themselves and guide them. Amen.”

She wiped away tears as she ended this unexpectedly long prayer. It was our turn to show disbelief that all that she had seen had made such an impression on her mind.

There were many things I did not explain to Fatmata because I felt she was too young to understand them. I could not explain to her that just like Sierra Leone, in Germany there is unequal distribution of income. Indeed, if the wealth in Germany were to be distributed equally among all its citizens, there would be no poverty at all. The same thing applies to Sierra Leone where, were it to be distributed more evenly, the wealth enjoyed by a very small percentage of the population could eradicate the poverty that characterises the lives of most people.

I shall now consider the different perceptions my brother in Sierra Leone would have about life in Germany and those a German would have about life in Sierra Leone. Understandably, given the general characteristics of the two countries which I have mentioned earlier, my brother’s first thought would be that all Germans are rich, and a German’s first thought would be that all Sierra Leoneans are poor. Since I know that there are rich Sierra Leoneans and very poor Germans, I will consider two cases: a very rich Sierra Leonean visiting Germany and a very poor German visiting Sierra Leone.
I will take Stefan Pleite, a poorly educated, unemployed German to a village in Sierra Leone, say Warima, and bring Mela Kabia, a university educated Sierra Leonean and owner of a successful business, to a German village, say Musterdorf. I must point out that the villagers in Warima and in Musterdorf, referred to here, constitute the majority and not the totality of the inhabitants. As always, there are exceptions.

Stefan will be shabbily dressed because he cannot afford better clothes, whereas Mela will always dress well because he has the money to buy good clothes. By the way, I will not be concerned about the physical differences in the facilities in the two villages, which are obvious. Rather, I want to look at the relationships between my visitors and their hosts.

Stefan and Mela will experience an identical problem. The attitude of the villagers towards them will be based on general stereotypes about Europeans and Africans. The people of Warima will therefore assume that Stefan is a rich, educated white man visiting Sierra Leone for pleasure, whereas the people of Musterdorf will assume that Mela is a poor, uneducated African running away from hardship to enjoy a better life in Germany. No matter what Stefan and Mela do, the perceptions of their hosts will remain unchanged and as a result, very interesting relationships will follow.

Stefan will probably be held in high esteem and therefore solicited for financial help by some of the villagers, young and old, whereas Mela will probably be looked upon with contempt by young and old no matter how well he dresses. Poor Stefan will have more company than he desires, whereas Mela will end up being alone most of the time. If he buys himself a smart car and rents an attractive house, the people of Musterdorf may start suspecting him of criminal activities and even register their suspicion with the police, instead of admiring him. In Warima, if Stefan
takes one room in a small house and buys an old bicycle, which is all he can really afford, the villagers will think kindly of him, saying he is a simple man who has already enjoyed his life and no longer wants to live like a rich man.

Both Stefan and Mela will face the discomfort of being stared at. At first, Stefan will think that the people of Warima are being rude or trying to annoy him; but he will soon realise that they stare because they admire and envy him. They will call him Oporto in Themne, meaning ‘white man’. They think all white men come from Portugal since the first Europeans to visit Sierra Leone were from Portugal – possibly from the Portuguese city of Oporto.

On the other hand, Mela will receive largely scornful stares in Musterdorf. Nobody will admire him or envy him for any reason. The villagers will call him nigger both mentally and verbally, in public, even though most of them know that it is a term of abuse. The word still appears in textbooks and other literature produced by writers, ranging from professors to novelists.

However, I want to stress that there might be a few people in Musterdorf who will look at Mela with respect, try talking to him and even invite him to their homes. In most cases, they will be people who have travelled to other countries and experienced other people’s hospitality.

I think that at this point, it is worth mentioning how a Stefan and a Mela might finally react to the false perceptions about them.

Germans are generally very open in terms of who and what they are, and hardly ever pretend. As a result, a Stefan will continue to try to prove to the Warima people in words and in deeds that he is far from rich. However, if he realises that there is nothing he can do to change this positive opinion of him, he might then seize the opportunity to exploit the villagers. One cannot blame him in this case because
he has tried to make things clear to the people. They simply do not believe him. He will only be unlucky if Mela comes to Warima while he is still there. The reason is that Mela will expose him. Mela will tell his people that Stefan is an unemployed, poor German and that he is in Sierra Leone in search of a better life.

Similarly, there is nothing a Mela can do to change the negative opinion the people of Musterdorf hold about him. There are only a few of them who appreciate his worth and this is not enough. Unfortunately, since he belongs to the streets, even if Stefan returns to Musterdorf when Mela is still there, he will have no opportunity to reveal that Mela is a rich Sierra Leonean. Even if he had that opportunity who would listen to him? Mela will therefore soon regret that he decided to visit Musterdorf.

A Stefan will most likely want to stay a little longer in Warima. At the time of his departure, the people of Warima will organise a farewell party for him, with traditional dancers. He would have had a chance to get to know the village elders, even the chief. When he is ready to depart, people will come around to say a last farewell and to see if he is leaving anything useful behind. Some of them will shed genuine tears at the thought of not seeing him again.

On the contrary, Mela’s landlord or landlady will be glad that he is leaving and they will check his house thoroughly for any damage. His farewell party will be the several people in Musterdorf who will be peeping through their curtains to see him go. He will leave Musterdorf as quietly as he came.

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As the days go by, Stefan will grow more and more comfortable with the environment and way of life in Warima. On the contrary, the longer Mela stays
in Musterdorf the more his uneasiness will become. The tolerance he might have felt at the beginning will start changing to anger. He will become more sensitive to racist jokes told by the few people who befriend him. When he shows anger, they will say they did not mean to hurt him.

If Stefan decides to marry a woman in Warima, he will find few problems with that. Though Africans generally hesitate to give their children in marriage to white people, it is only because of the cultural differences. It will be possible for Stefan to marry even the chief’s beautiful eldest daughter, Fatu Kamara, who is about to complete her secondary school education at the Harford Secondary School for Girls at Moyamba. Fatu’s parents and all her relatives will be happy that she will have a white man for a husband. They may consider going to Germany and the assistance she might be able to give them from time to time. The other unmarried young women will envy Fatu for her good fortune. Fatu herself will be delighted and look forward to going to Germany.

But Stefan will certainly think about the reality of social status in Germany: living on welfare assistance and without a proper house; without a job. So, as Fatu and her parents rejoice, he will be in agony over the stark realities that will be staring at him. He will also be thinking about his parents and wondering how they will respond to Fatu. He will be overwhelmed by feelings of sympathy for Fatu, knowing the discrimination she will face in his country. He knows how difficult life will be for her.

While Stefan, the poor man, can marry the chief’s daughter, Mela, the rich man, will find it difficult even to meet a beautiful woman in Musterdorf. In the end, he could decide to go to a night club. If he is unlucky enough to choose one that only welcomes whites, he will have to look around for one where blacks are accepted. If he manages to find a night club where
there are German women, he can befriend one of them; let us call her Petra Glücklich.

It will be difficult for Mela to convince Petra that he is rich and therefore worth her time. However, if he is able to cross the first hurdles, they might start a serious relationship. If Petra later agrees to marry him, he will have more hurdles to cross. Petra’s friends will not like the idea of her marrying a black man, and her parents will think she has lost her mind. They will be even more convinced of that when she tells them that she and Mela are planning to live in Sierra Leone – that poor country where there is malaria and all sorts of other diseases. They will worry about the food their daughter will have to eat, and about her life in general. Mela, who has a wonderful mansion and a fleet of cars in Freetown, will smile when Petra mentions her parents’ concerns. He knows he can offer her a much better life in Sierra Leone than her present life in Germany.

In Warima, Stefan and Fatu’s wedding a big affair in which the whole village will take part. There will be traditional dances and the women will sew Ashoebi, (dresses of identical cloth) for the occasion. Stefan will be a bit embarrassed because he may not even have enough money to pay the full dowry. Ironically, the people will be expecting him to shoulder responsibility for the feast, although he would have told them several times that he did not have much money. Anyway, the chief will foot all the bills for his educated first daughter’s wedding to a white man.

In order to marry Petra, Mela would have to present a lot of documents to the authorities in Musterdorf. It will be a small wedding at the registry office, with only a few people present as Petra’s parents would be unable to purchase the bride’s dress and organise a party. As a result, Mela will provide all the money and even pay the caterers. Even though he could afford it, he will not need to worry about paying any dowry to Petra’s parents.
After their successful wedding, Fatu will come to Germany and while she will be struggling to be accepted by Stefan’s friends and parents, Petra on the other hand, will be living like a queen in Freetown. Fatu will receive letters from her parents asking her not to forget about sending this, that, or the other for them. Petra’s parents might write to ask whether the food is all right and whether Petra has opportunities to drink wine or even to smoke a cigarette. In her reply, Fatu will tell her parents about the problems she will be facing, but they will not believe her. Similarly, if Petra tells her parents about her luxurious life in Freetown, they will not believe her.

One worry Fatu might have in Warima will concern Stefan’s uncircumcised status. All the village women will get to hear about this somehow, and even though they knew that Fatu would benefit from the marriage, they will tease her about it. How could O’Sheymah (a positive Themne term for a proper circumcised woman) decide to sleep with O’Gborkah (a negative Themne term for an uncircumcised person)? Some of them will say they would never marry a man like Stefan even if he was the king of kings. To please Fatu, Stefan will promise to allow himself to be circumcised in a hospital on his return to Germany.

Mela will face the problem of having an uncircumcised wife if he chooses to take Petra to meet his parents in his village. The villagers will be happy that their son was able to marry a white woman, but they will gossip about Petra not being circumcised. To them, no matter how rich Petra might be, her uncircumcised status will make her inferior to them.

Petra might write to her parents and complain about this problem. She knows what circumcision involves, at least the surgical aspects of it, but she will observe that none of her new relatives will be willing to discuss the issue. If she asks questions about it, the village women will look at her in astonishment.
because they uphold the secrecy of their *Bondo* Society which is the traditional institution in charge of female circumcision.

I have to digress a little here to mention some issues relating to the *Bondo* Society. The illnesses and deaths that result from circumcision from time to time, suggest that the practice can be harmful. And there is also a need for women in regions where circumcision is practised to accept the fact that times change and that the wishes of people who do not want their dependants to take part in the ceremony should be respected. I even think that the rights of such people should be protected by law. All too often, young girls are forcibly circumcised, sometimes without their parents’ consent.

On receiving their daughter’s letter, Petra’s parents will be outraged and like all Germans, will use negative terms such as ‘senseless mutilation of the genitals of women’ to describe what happens in parts of Africa. Petra’s mother might even discuss the subject with other German women and they might organise seminars on the topic. They could write about female circumcision in the newspapers, calling it a barbaric act which Africans, Asians and Arabs perform on poor girls and women on the flimsy justification of cultural, religious and social traditions. They will mention the negative effects and say that circumcision is largely responsible for the deaths of mothers in Africa. They will talk about the crude and unhygienic instruments used to perform circumcisions, and set the percentage of women dying from that cause as high as 30%.

The United Nations has condemned female circumcision and is trying to make it illegal worldwide, so the German women receive support for their activism from the World Health Organization (WHO)
and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Petra’s parents are also able to get certain ‘enlightened’ African women on their side, and they achieve some success because the issue is now discussed in African countries, including Sierra Leone. However, they only concentrate on the surgical aspects of circumcision and its negative effects. Consequently, they straightaway demand a total ban on the practice, which is surprising because German women, who are mostly educated, usually want to hear both sides of any question. With this topic, they are not prepared to listen to the views of the women directly involved in female circumcision. They make no attempt to understand the social context in which it occurs or the basic reasons for the women’s firm belief in the practice; nor are they interested in striking any compromise about phasing out female circumcision in stages. They are using the wrong approach and are therefore bound to fail.

I have only daughters myself and I do not support female circumcision; but I refuse to accept the overbearing way Petra’s mother, her colleagues, and Westerners in general will fight to outlaw it. The approach I take with my daughters is to engage the topic with them and give them my position regarding female circumcision. I talk about the possible health effects but also stress the cultural importance of the Bondo Society, especially in rural communities. I am praying for the day when young girls can be initiated into the Bondo Society without having to undergo this ritual.

Anyway, circumcision is only one of the problems Fatu and Petra will face in their new environment. Mela’s friends and relatives will come from far and wide to visit them without notice. Some of his village people will also bring children to stay with him to attend school in Freetown. Petra will not understand this. In tears, she will tell Mela not to accept the children and to inform his people that they
should write letters to indicate their wish for a visit. She might think about the preparations she will have to make, about the noise and all the inconvenience of having so many people in the house. Seeing her tears, Mela will promise Petra that he will do something about it in the full knowledge that there is really nothing he can do. Not unless he is prepared to detach himself from his people.

While Petra grapples with the problem of having to cope with so many of Mela’s relatives, Fatu will weep over having to live a solitary and boring life. Stefan’s relatives will keep away from them and call only on special occasions. She would want to meet and talk to lively people, but when Stefan’s friends come around, they might spend the whole visit grumbling about their unemployment and other problems. The few who have managed to find work, might end up talking about cars and other material things which makes Stefan even more depressed and Fatu’s life even more unbearable.
16. O, Africa!

The telephone connection with the capital had collapsed, so I had to make a journey from Njala to Freetown one Sunday evening about twenty-eight years after Sierra Leone’s independence from the British. The sole purpose of my journey was to inquire at the German Embassy the following day about the status of my scholarship application. I decided to stop at Warima to see my second mother, Ya Mabinty, since the village is just on the edge of the highway to Freetown.

Ya Mabinty, is in fact, my stepmother but I refuse to call her that. Since she was not fortunate enough to bear a child herself, it was she who asked my father to marry a younger relative of hers, Isatu, who became my biological mother. Ya Mabinty had told me how happy she was the day I was born, but her eyes could not hide the tears as she took me through the sad history of her inability to bear children because her womb had to be removed. I embraced her and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“You are my mother, Mama,” I assured her. “All my life, I have known only you as my mother.”

Isatu married our father quite early. We call her Tha Iye. Tha is a title given to an elder sister. She is a head shorter than my younger brother who is a head shorter than me, so she enjoys telling her friends that I am her elder brother.

Like Tha Iye, several decades ago, women in Germany also had children early and they had as many children as possible. However, once they started seeking higher education, and as the industrialisation
process intensified in their country, they put off having their children till they had graduated from university. Many of them now wait until they feel financially secure, limit the number of children they have, and even choose between children and their careers. They usually calculate in terms of money and pleasure, the cost of raising children. However, there are still a considerable number of young German girls who bear children while in their teens, even though family planning is the order of the day in Germany and abortion is approved by law.

Incidentally, in Germany, children receive sex education in primary school. When Fatmata was eleven, she brought her school papers home one day. Some of them had drawings of male and female organs with explanations about sex and childbearing. Jariatu, being a typical Sierra Leonean mother was at first too shy to discuss the topics with her. Fatmata observed her mother’s shyness and as a result spoke provocatively about her school work. We had agreed to discuss sex issues with the child, but when the day actually came, Jariatu had been caught off guard. I realised the problem and intervened; took over the papers and led the discussion. Fatmata already knew more than we expected. When I got stuck over translating a word, she was able to give me the correct answer straightaway.

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I explained to Ya Mabinty the purpose of my journey to Freetown, and she found it unbelievable. As if she had waited all along for this opportunity to voice her dissatisfaction with the entire system in Sierra Leone since independence, she educated us about how things used to be in the colonial days and how they had deteriorated with the years.
“Travelling to Freetown from Njala just to ask a question?” she exclaimed. “In the days of the white man and about ten years after he gave us independence, all the big towns in the country had telephones, pipe-borne water and electricity supplies. I used to visit my sister in Bo. Things were so sweet there that they called that city ‘Sweet Bo’. The son of the sister of my elder brother’s friend, Khalil, did his BA at Fourah Bay College. As soon as he finished, he was loaned a brand new VW beetle for which he was paying a small amount of money each month. Not now! I think you young people must consider very seriously about asking the white man to come back and rule us. Your brothers – yes they have mostly been brothers – have failed us completely. Let the white man come back. We should swallow our pride and ask him to come back. We have even spoilt all that he left for us and we cannot make anything new. Let him come! I tell you, let him...

My sister interrupted her, announcing that the food was ready. A large tray containing cooked white rice with ‘chicken soup’ poured over it was placed on a low table. My travelling companions and I surrounded it. Ya Mabinty had advised that we would enjoy the meal much better if we ate with our hands and brought a bowl of water and soap for us. We washed our hands and settled down to eat.

We left a share of the delicious ‘chicken soup’ for the small boys since it was uncommon to eat ‘chicken soup’ in the village. Chickens are usually reared only to feed distinguished family guests. Different kinds of fish are what people normally eat. Interestingly, fish is expensive and chicken cheap in Germany!

“Uncle, please send something nice for me,” another of my nephews pleaded with me as we were leaving. Ya Mabinty and the children waved us farewell and we drove off.

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As we continued on the journey, John Kandeh, one of my travelling companion, wished that we had not eaten such a lot of boiled corn at Mile 91 where we had stopped for a cold drink (This is a very important junction town leading to Magburaka in the north and Bo in the south).

“Your mother can really cook,” commented John. “Our older women can prepare delicious meals with very few ingredients.” We all laughed out loud.

Francis drew a cigarette out from his pack of ‘555 State Express’. From a crumpled box of matches manufactured in China, he drew out a match and lit his 555. As he did so, he raised the cigarette for all to see and gave an explanation in which we were not at all interested.

“This is the real one from London,” he said. Aureal Tobacco Company Ltd. at Wellington, near Freetown, manufactured cigarettes in Sierra Leone and secured the rights to produce 555 locally. However, smokers used to complain that the 555 made in Sierra Leone was not “that sweet” compared with the “real one” made in England, even though they could not really prove that. The importation of 555 made in England was therefore banned so as to boost sales of the locally manufactured variety. Petty traders who were still able smuggle in the ‘real 555’, sold it at a higher price under cover, so anyone who was able to buy it always liked to brag that he had the real one from London.

Unfortunately, this negative attitude towards locally manufactured products applies to many other goods, such as paint, cement and suitcases. Local industries therefore find it very difficult to break even because the majority of Sierra Leoneans prefer foreign goods to those produced by indigenous industries. The general opinion persists that things made in England are better than those made in Sierra Leone. England usually signifies overseas. If Sierra Leoneans
or Africans continue to think this way, then Africa is doomed. Such behaviour shows that though the colonial masters physically left Africa, African minds are still not completely free from the bondage of colonialism.

“Francis, we’re not really interested in your rubbish about which 555 is real and which is not real,” Patrick said, apparently disturbed by the smoke. “It would do us good if you didn’t smoke in the vehicle.”

All of us then scolded Francis and he agreed not to smoke his real’ 555 anymore.

About five kilometres into our journey, my mother’s words about the facilities that existed before independence started ringing in my ears. I realised the truth in what she said because I had witnessed the disappearance of some of those facilities. The important railway had been closed down. There were numerous branches of Western firms which had eventually closed down. I remembered my father ordering shoes and other items direct from Britain because it used to be possible to pay for them in our local currency, which had an exchange rate of Le.0.60 to US$1.00 up to the late seventies. There also used to be state controlled enterprises that sold school uniforms, books and other items all over the country, and at cheaper prices. Those shops closed down. There were many firms selling new cars and it was possible to own a car by leasing it or through bank financing. Instead of the government improving these facilities, they were all allowed to die away.

Our alluvial diamonds are among the best in quality in the world, but what do we have to show for them? A few people grow richer and richer while the majority become poorer and poorer. Selfish and unpatriotic Sierra Leoneans connive with Western crooks to smuggle out the country’s mineral resources. This must stop, and NOW. Sierra Leoneans should not allow this to continue...
As such thoughts drifted through my mind, we arrived at Waterloo junction where we decided to buy some *Casada braid* (pounded cassava (or *manioc*) made into small flat round cakes, baked, and served with fried ‘bonga’ fish). The town of Waterloo, about twenty kilometres from Freetown, is famous for these cassava cakes.

The rest of the journey was uneventful.
17 Seeing with ‘hybrid’ eyes

When I was a child in my village, Warima, if it rained in the evenings, we always enjoyed going out in the rain to bathe ourselves, playing hide-and-seek. In Dortmund, it was different. The first time it rained after Fatmata arrived in Dortmund, she asked to be allowed to go out and play. Jariatu and I looked at each other and shook our heads in refusal.

“Why Mummy? It is nice,” she protested, moving close to the window. She pressed her face on the glass and looked outside.

“Something like ice is falling down. Who’s throwing that?” she asked with fascination.

“That’s real ice falling down, Fatmata,” I said. “It is called hail. It is very cold outside so you cannot bathe in hail. Besides, children here don’t bathe in the rain,” I tried to explain to her.

“OK, let’s go out and let me see,” she said, and I took her outside.

“Hey! If ever I have a headache at a time of a hailstorm, I will only need to come outside to cool my head,” she remarked.

“Well, the two things have to take place at the same time,” I teased. She held my hand and asked me to take her back to the apartment.

I decided to put on the TV. Coincidentally, the weather report was on. Snow was falling in some areas in Germany. I knew that Fatmata would ask another question as soon as her eyes caught the TV screen.

“But that’s different. It’s very white, and look! People are walking in it.” She pointed to the screen, moving closer as if she wanted to touch the snow.
“What’s that and why don’t we have it in Sierra Leone?” she asked curiously.

“That’s snow,” I responded and asked her to come with me to the kitchen. I opened the deep freezer and scraped some of the ice from its walls.

“Oh, that is similar to what I just saw on TV!” she exclaimed.

“You’re right,” I said. “However, what you’ve seen on TV didn’t happen in a freezer. Snow is small white crystals of frozen water which are formed directly from the water vapour in the air. It can’t happen in Sierra Leone because it’s too hot there,” I explained.

“Children here play in the snow. They make balls of snow and throw them at each other. There’re also other games they play outside after it has snowed. You’ll have the opportunity to do all of this now that you’re here. But it’ll be too cold for you at the beginning,” I warned her.

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As I raised my children in Germany, I clung to many of our customs and traditions and tried to pass on to them some of our values. I only left out those to which I did not necessarily subscribe. I knew what it would mean to our people if we returned to Sierra Leone and started behaving as if we did not belong there. No, I was born and bred in a village. I lived with the village people and did things in common with them. I am man of the village! The several years I have spent in a European country have indeed broadened my horizons about humanity but they have not changed me to the extent that I would be a misfit in my own society. I have not allowed this to happen. I never shall. I have not forgotten my roots. What is a tree without its roots? Similarly, what is a tree without its branches? I know that the roots and the branches
of a tree are very important for its survival; that is why I have never forgotten my extended family.

What I saw on television while I lived in Germany, and what I have read and still continue to read in newspapers about Africa as a whole, were mainly reports about poverty-stricken cities, about towns and villages with people living in dilapidated houses and huts. They have shown me children and adults in ragged clothes looking hungry and thirsty, living in noisy and dirty surroundings. Even though they do have similar scenes in their own countries, the Western media make ours appear to be typical of Africa. They report about wars, hunger, poverty and disease in Africa. The common images I saw on German TV were those of African people who were barely able to carry their skeletal bodies around as they scrambled for food and gifts thrown to them from trucks owned by Western aid organisations. I still see those images and sometimes I wonder why the television cameramen do not put their cameras aside to help a dying child they are filming. Yes, Western TV groups seem to enjoy showing such images in their news programmes.

One certainly does not like to read or hear only negative reports about Africa all the time, as if there were virtually nothing good to report. In Europe, the saying that “No news is good news” held true because if one did not hear or read anything from the Western news media about one’s country, then all was well.

In Sierra Leone, there are Germans, Canadians, Americans, French, Italians, and any other Europeans one can think about. These people are engaged in gold mining, alluvial diamond mining, bauxite mining, road construction and several other major industrial activities there. They make their living there, many pay few or no taxes, many steal whatever they can, and live like kings and queens. However, Western reporters do not write about the contribution of their nationals to plundering our wealth. I blame African reporters who
do not bother to write about the negative things Westerners do in African countries.

Consider the worst diseases ever known. Western countries will report that they emanated from Africa. There will always be explanations that trace the source of the diseases to Africa. Africans have to stop this.

Sadly, now I cannot help but see things with partly Western eyes. However, these ‘hybrid eyes’ that I now use, have not made me any happier than I was in the villages of Warima and Songo, where I attended Church of God Primary School and Tomlinson High School respectively. (I remember my friend Abdul Tarasid Tarawally, whose Admission Number at Tomlinson was 001 and mine was 003.) My eyes used to be different. I was oblivious of most of the negative things these Westerners now force me to see.

In Germany, with my ‘hybrid eyes’, I saw only a lot of people looking down on me. I saw them look contemptuous when I got close to them. I did not see many friends, only people with lots of material things but who never seemed content with what they had.

When I closed my ‘hybrid eyes’ for a while and restored my proper Sierra Leonean vision, I saw my village in my mind’s eye.

By all standards, the people of Warima were content with their lives and they earned a living from selling agricultural products. There was no unemployment because everybody was engaged in farming and gardening. Most of what the people ate daily was grown and processed in the village. Only the younger men and women, who did not want to do farm work, migrated to the bigger towns to learn a trade.

I also saw some negative things with my proper Sierra Leonean eyes, which told me that, negative and positive exist irrespective of where one lives.

I clearly recalled that schooling in the village was partly fun and partly terror. Food was cooked and served in school to encourage children to attend daily,
but our teachers used to beat us with thick canes whenever we went to school late, when we could not solve a problem, or for any small offence. So even though food was prepared and served in school, children who were afraid of the beating, used to dodge school. They would wear their uniform and pretend to go to school just to satisfy their parents, but they never arrived. Teachers also asked us once in a while to fetch firewood for the cooking that was done in school and also for their homes. At some point I began to hate school myself. Fortunately, that happened just about when it was time for me to leave Warima for secondary school in Songo.

In Dortmund, even in public schools children wear whatever they like, so most of them dress in ways that reflect the status of their parents, as well as the current fashion of the season. Children do not have to worry about being beaten in school by their teachers, or even at home. Parents who beat their children get into trouble if the Youth Office finds out about it. Sometimes neighbours call the police and complain about parents maltreating their children, including those who have too little time for their children. There have been reports of the Youth Office taking children away from their parents by force and giving them to foster parents.

My ‘German’ children were a lot more outspoken with me than I was with my father. I always needed to think over and over again what I wanted to tell him. I feared him. Whenever my friends saw his vehicle approaching the village, they would shout to warn me that he was on his way. I would then run around in the shop and in the house to ensure that everything was in order. After he had turned off the ignition, all of us would run to welcome him and help him with the many things he usually brought along. But as we did this, I always prayed that he was too tired to notice if anything was not in order. If, within ten minutes of
his arrival, there was no shout from him, we would rejoice. I detested the beatings I got from my teachers. Sometimes they were savage. Children would cry from the wounds the teachers inflicted on their backs. However, it had a positive effect because as I grew up, I became a strong opponent of beatings in schools and homes.

The teachers were believed to be wiser than everybody else in the village. They and their families were highly respected. They did not need to do any farming to grow their own crops. The villagers were always delighted to offer them gifts of rice and other crops. There was a time the village chief became angry, having realised that when some villagers had problems, they went to the teachers to settle their differences instead of coming to him.

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Yes, the days before I developed ‘hybrid eyes’ were, for the most part, pleasant and uncomplicated. Now, much as I love my country, its traditions and customs, and detest the negative images of Africa shown in the Western media, I cannot help but see that, in many respects, we have not done well. Yet though I can understand Ya Mabinty’s frustration, I think it would be a disgrace for Sierra Leoneans to invite the white man to return to the country to take over the top jobs in the civil service. It would be like bringing colonialism back to Africa, and this time by invitation. It does not matter if they offer to pay their own salaries. They used such tricks to colonise us once before!

I agree that our leaders have failed us by allowing corruption to sink deep into the system. However, I also strongly believe that all is not lost. It’s never too late to make amends: through mass public awareness campaigns by setting the right leadership tone, by
stringently upholding the law, and by fairly weeding out officials who abuse public office. In my view, these are some measures by which corruption in Sierra Leone and in Africa as a whole can be remedied. Once corrupt individuals can be identified and punished according to law, others will certainly begin to act with more propriety. Sierra Leoneans are quite capable of solving the corruption problem without having to bring the white man back and give him such strategic posts as Accountant General, Financial Secretary, and Commissioner of Police. If we gave in to the temptation to do this, we would simply be agreeing with popular opinion about Africans in the West that: “AFRICANS CANNOT PUT THEIR OWN HOUSES IN ORDER!”

The End
Reviews of HYBRID EYES
Hybrid Eyes - Reflections of an African in Europe

By

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Osman Sankoh’s Hybrid Eyes is not just another in the catalogue of stories about Africans in Europe, it is a fresh puff of narrative air, and a compelling story of tremendous human interest. In this book, the author focuses on a particularly important “moment” in his life. The experiences and “encounters” that fill the space of this “moment” engender a revision of previously held views, a critical re-evaluation of the author’s own culture, and a bifocal appraisal of the new culture (German) with which the author is confronted.

The book opens with the author waking up to a new physical and cultural environment. We hear him say, “I have been trying to figure out where the hell in the world I am.” An African from Sierra Leone, the author is now in Germany in pursuit of higher studies. Osman’s story is not new; what is new and of great interest is the way he tells it, and the VISION embodied in the narrative.

The author’s narrative style is a blessing to his vision. Because he employs a multiplicity of narrative
techniques, Osman is able to “say”, dramatise, and interpret his experiences, and at the same time share with his readers, the essence of his message. For example, while following the life of Osman Sankoh, the reader is brought intimately close to the “nature” of racism through the author’s use of *dialogue* and *engagement*. In his encounter with the elderly German woman, the author uses dialogue to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the participants with regard to RACE (Colour). But the author goes beyond the dialogue to what I call “engagement,” whereby he captures the German lady’s attention, exorcises the fear of Blacks in her, and then calmly tells her a story about the origins of Black – skinned and White – skinned people. This method of engagement has an educational value. It allows the breaking of the barriers of ignorance and fear that breed prejudice. The author uses the same technique in his encounter with the little boy in the public transport (S–Bahn). When the little boy refuses to sit near the author and his wife because his mother had told him that “all blacks were niggers,” the author engages the little boy. Without rage, but with a sincere intent to “educate” the little boy, the author succeeds to “detoxicate” a young mind. This is a refreshing feature in the story of the African in Europe. It is not about passive complaint; it is about confronting this human issue in a human way.

Osman Sankoh employs the epistolary method to raise and deal with very topical issues. In Andrew’s letter from Sierra Leone to the author in Germany, issues of racism, the Western woman, money in
Europe (the greener pasture phenomenon), the rebel war in Sierra Leone, and a lot more, are raised. The reader accesses Andrew’s views on all of those issues through the author’s use of the epistolary method. It is very revealing. The issue expressed in the American proverb, “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence,” is of interest particularly to African readers. Any African, especially one from a large family, who lives in Europe or America, knows about the enormous pressure from relatives and friends to send money back home and to help them come over to the “Greener pasture.” It is difficult to convince anyone in Africa that one suffers in many ways in Europe or America. The author uses two lengthy letters that clearly map and discuss the problem. Since people are usually unsatisfied with their lot in life, a modern psychologist has spoken of “The ‘Greener Grass’ Phenomenon” by which modern individuals continually evaluate supposedly better alternatives for themselves. This basic behavioural truth expressed in a universal metaphor, “The Grass is always Greener on the other side of the fence,” the illusion of the land of plenty and luxury, is eloquently dealt with in this book.

Another important issue that the reader is forced to grapple with is that of individual versus group behaviour. In the book, the author’s family faces a serious crisis. The author’s daughter was born with a hole in the heart and is diagnosed in Sierra Leone while the author and his wife are in Germany. The little girl, Fatima, needs immediate medical attention. The outpouring of sincere human concern and
support, both moral and financial, is enormous. Of interest here is the fact that the support comes from both BLACK and WHITE people. The story of Professor Urfer and his wife Barbara, both white Germans, is testimony to the fact that generalisations about human beings are, to say the least, inaccurate. Why then do we have racial tensions around the world? In the words of Carol Tavris, a social psychologist, “Something happens to individuals when they collect in a group. They think and act differently than they would on their own.” Osman’s book is a perfect laboratory to test the validity of the above theory. This book is certainly one of great human interest.

The narrative of HYBRID EYES is laced with humour. Behind the veneer of humour is the author’s vision. Differences in cultural practices, and statements about how human perceptions and actions are closely linked with one’s world view, are made in a humorous tone. The story of the Sierra Leonean male who brings ”flowers” to welcome his loved one is told in a humorous way but speaks volumes about cultural differences. While flowers are important in interpersonal relationships in Europe and America, their function is different in the author’s culture. The BEE episode is another story told in a humorous way but making a profound statement. Walking in the fields on Professor Urfer and Barbara’s farm, Fatmata sees a stray bee and lifts her foot to smash it. Professor Urfer immediately intervenes to save the bee's life saying, “No, it has a right to live.” The need for humans to respect the life and dignity of every
creature on this planet, and particularly of other humans, is eloquently expressed in Professor Urfer's protest.

The author has injected freshness in the genre of autobiography. While telling his story, he does not merely stand or sit, watch and report, but actively participates in the social drama. He interprets, “engages” other characters, fights back, reflects on issues, evaluates, and tells HIS and OUR story.

The language is intimate, conversational, and accessible. Like the storyteller in Warima, Osman holds a dialogue with the reader. The most interesting aspect of his narrative technique is the intricate interweaving of stories within the story. Since his story in Germany is about encounters, experiences, and slices of other lives, the story switches from one encounter to the other, or from one slice of life to an encounter, without notice. All the little “slices” or “pieces” are intricately tied in one huge examination of – human – nature story. Hybrid Eyes is not only about the experiences of an African in Germany, it is, in a wider context, a reflection on the human condition – black and white. By recognising the beauty and deficiencies in both cultures, by raising prejudice to the level of a universal category, by recognising the role of language in the construction of social reality, by reflecting on the nature of politics in contemporary Africa, and by challenging Mankind to shed the clothing of FEAR and IGNORANCE and embrace one another, Hybrid Eyes transcends its physical, temporal, and social setting. Hybrid Eyes goes beyond the personal story, and assumes universal
appeal. It is the story of everyone everywhere who lives with the “other.” It is a story worth reading and discussing in classrooms everywhere.
By

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Canada

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In the many countries in Europe and North America where Africans (and particularly Anglophone Africans) study, Germany is not among the most attractive. There are historical and practical reasons for this, and they have to do with long and concrete associations through colonialism and language. But there is another, altogether less sentimental, reason for the European nation's lack of the easy attractiveness which Britain or France or the United States and Canada afford to the aspiring African scholar or immigrant: it has to do with the aggressively monocultural reputation of Germans, a tendency which easily and often violently translates into the kind of racism and racist attacks which has set Germany apart since the Holocaust. For this reason, I approached Osman Sankoh's *Hybrid Eyes*, an account of his experiences as an African student in Germany, with some trepidation, not to say uneasiness. At the end of my first reading, which surprisingly took me only a day, much of my fears were confirmed; but so nuance and subtle is this book that I also emerged with a far deeper appreciation of the various levels of humanism, of the kind of broad-mindedness and kindness of heart among a good number of this much-maligned
people which I first came in contact with through my association with Karl Prinz, Germany's former ambassador to Sierra Leone.

The book opens with the author, from the impoverished West African state of Sierra Leone, finding himself in a very wealthy Germany. The wide-eyed observations he makes about his new surroundings are appropriate; the metaphor he uses are crisp and fresh, the language superb. He is in a large room with another Sierra Leonean student named Hudson Jackson. The room's many “rectangular boards of different colours were neatly joined together to form a beautiful pattern.” And he compares this room, much too favourably, to his “whitewashed concrete” one at Njala University College in Sierra Leone. Looking through the window, he sees beautifully organised rows and rows of houses reminding him of “pictures I used to see in geography textbooks”; there is a “clean grey street whose long back was covered with a make-up of bright straight white lines and arrows.” There is no self-absorption here, and one of the book's appeal is the author's remarkable sense of appreciation for his new surrounding, a foreign country. But it also means that the intensity of feelings and emotions which come with such self-absorption, the kind that helped create great leaders and great autobiographies (Gandhi, Nkrumah), are rather ruefully absent: there is only a man vacillating between appreciation and outrage, not taking a strong position, whining when there is a xenophobic terror, in effect pleading to his hosts for a better understanding and appreciation of Africans and
other immigrants; a very normal, intelligent man out to make a good life for himself and others close to him. This is not a world-changing view, but it is no less worthy for it being limited. It is a sound vision, and to show how sound it is, let us look at how another “Third Worlder” recounted his days as a law student in Europe.

In *The Story of my Experiments with the Truth*, Mahatma Gandhi, India's great nationalist leader, recounts his experiences as a young man studying law in Britain. He went to England at the age of 19 in 1888, when he was already married for 6 years. The long journey was by sea, but nowhere in his account does Gandhi describe anything seen or heard that did not relate to him personally. There is no description of the sea or the ship; though Gandhi spent three years in England, no London building is described, no street mentioned, there is no observation about the weather (a favourite pastime in England). But at the time that Gandhi arrived in England, London was the capital of the world, the greatest city on earth, surely something that would not fail to impress a young man from a depressed little town in India. Gandhi’s inward concentration was total, his self-absorption fierce. Three years after he arrived in England, Gandhi suddenly becomes a lawyer; the adventure is over: “I passed my examinations, was called to the bar on the 10th of June 1891, and enrolled in the High Court on the 11th. On the 12th I sailed for home.” There is what V.S. Naipaul has called a “defect of vision” in Gandhi's whole worldview: the failure to absorb other experiences, to appreciate other cultures, to open up
to a changing world. It is the quintessential caste mentality. But this was the foundation of his greatness: the small man in the calico dress, a near-naked man, highly opinionated and bespectacled, bringing down the British Empire.

Osman Sankoh is certainly not Gandhi, and he does not pretend to be so. Still, there are moments of superb engagements with the higher issues in Sankoh's *Hybrid Eyes*. In his interesting review of the book, Sheikh Umarr Kamara has referred to Sankoh's technique of dialogue, which allows for the “breaking of the barriers of ignorance and fear that breed prejudice.” There is Sankoh's conversation with the old German lady, which quickly takes the form of Sankoh patiently lecturing the nervous woman on the issue of race, as well as his engagement with the innocent, but already polluted, mind of a German kid who calls him a "nigger" in a subway. These are superb scenes, as much for their sustained humour as for the educational value. They are also revealing of the kind of man Sankoh is: diplomatic, non-confrontational, a patient gentleman, and very, very clever. He is also very brilliant. Germany's graduate programmes, unlike those of North America and the UK, appear to seriously disrespect undergraduate degrees from African universities. So that even though Sankoh had graduated with a distinction in mathematics from the University of Sierra Leone, he is forced to do all his undergraduate courses all over again before he would be allowed into graduate school--some of the courses he had himself taught at Njala. Needless to say, he does it in style, graduating
with ones in both his Masters and Ph.D. degrees. In December 1998, he wins the prestigious German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) prize for “excellent academic performance and extraordinary social engagements by a foreign student”, the first African to be so honoured. If his performance does not indicate to the Germans that Africans are not only just as good but could be better, then of course there are more serious issues.

Sankoh is an ‘accommodationist’; with him there is always another side to an issue. At the same time that he dreads the brutal and racist German police, the racist pranks of lumpen Germany, he also shows genuine gratitude and affection for those Germans who are truly nice to him and have a totally anti-racist worldview, people like Professor Urfer and his wife Barbara who invites him to their home. Initially a near-sceptic of German humanism, Sankoh's attitude changes dramatically after the painful affair involving his daughter, Fatima. Fatima gets dreadfully ill, with a hole in the heart, in war-ravaged Sierra Leone. A tabloid newspaper campaign in Germany brings in all the help that he needed to fly in Fatima to undergo surgery in Germany.

The list of sponsors included a “female medical doctor” who “put her jewellery on sale with the value of DM 22,000 to help pay” for the surgery. His conclusion: “This is indeed a proof that generalisations about people, be they Europeans, Americans or African, are not good. There are always many people who not fit the generalisations.” Just where does this lead one? The reply is nowhere: sit
right where you are. Sankoh is not here to inspire you to fight the proletarian or anti-racism war to the finish; his extraordinary brilliance aside, Sankoh is a normal graduate student, an aspiring professional. If he had been Rasa Parks, Sankoh would gently have argued with the white fellows in the bus, patiently lectured them about black humanity and charmed them into not taking him to court for sitting in a “white only” section of the bus (and perhaps there would have been no civil rights movement or Martin Luther King and all those big marches?). When an African explains how he was wrongly accused of stealing, Sankoh laments:

Indeed, it is true that some blacks have been caught in criminal acts. But this is not a necessary and sufficient reason to put all blacks in this country into that group. A black man in Germany is generally perceived to be a poor man, just like those hungry and starving Africans shown on German television.

Hybrid Eyes is no doubt a brilliant narrative, highly readable. There are many memorable passages. Sankoh's descriptions of the many strange things he encounters are often matchless in their eloquence. Here is his encounter with a wooden lift.

The lifts here are different. They are small wooden cabins for a maximum of two people at a time that roll continuously up and down. I looked at them suspiciously, went a bit closer, but gave up any attempt to use them. I saw one person come off and another get on. I looked left and right, as if to be sure that no
one was watching me to see whether or not I could make it. I moved closer, held tightly to the grip on the wall, raised my foot and waited for the next cabin. I then jumped in quickly.

The sentences build and add, every word belongs. The high point of *Hybrid Eyes* is Sankoh's lengthy reply to his brother's letter from Sierra Leone. The two letters deserve to be read very carefully. Young Andrew's letter is enthusiastic, sincerely irresponsible in some places, very acute and sharp in others. The older Sankoh replies in a measured tone, (characteristically) patiently lecturing his brother about how misguided his views are about Germany as the “greener pasture”, the drudgery of work he has to ensure to make sure that the deutschmark (always the deutschmark: without the deutschmark Andrew would not write the eloquent letter for he probably wouldn't be at Fourah Bah College: the deutschmark makes all the difference) keep getting to the family in Sierra Leone, the racism he encounters almost on a daily basis, all the worldly troubles. Clearly, Andrew would not be impressed by this argument. In his letter, he kept coming back to the ravages of the war in Sierra Leone, the trouble his family name (although not related to the warlord Foday Sankoh) would cause, the fact that he may not want to sit back all the time expecting to receive the packages from his brother (fruits of the drudgery of work in Germany!). Here, there are really no higher issues discussed; Sankoh knows better than to lecture a sharp and perhaps hungry FBC student about how to change the world.
In *Hybrid Eyes*, we see how incomplete “hybridity” always is, how it is always a process, a precarious and often painful condition, a process of unequal negotiation. Osman Sankoh’s book is a treasure for its unabashed and fiercely exact representation of this condition.
This book is long but it is never a boring read. From page one to the end, the reader is inescapably riveted to Osman's ambidextrous weave of countless themes and sub themes about the experiences of an African in Europe - Germany.

The book could thus be called semi-biographical even though the author narrates only a tiny portion of his life - his stay in Germany since the early nineties.

But Osman Sankoh is such a good narrator that he uses flashbacks, letters and telephone messages from home, Sierra Leone, to recount his experiences - both as a youth in the village and as a civil servant in the city - thereby filling the gap to complete his autobiography.

Osman Sankoh arrived in Germany to do a postgraduate course in statistics under a German government scholarship. But that is where the goods ended, at least for a time.

For example, the German college he was to attend would not even allow him to immediately start his course because the authorities weren't sure an African with a degree from an African country will be able to cope with the course. Luckily for the Black race and Osman in particular, he came top of his class and was awarded the top German academic award.
The author also exposes many facets of the life of an African student immigrant in Europe. He discusses the visa curtain, racism both covert and overt, relationships with European women and the participation of African immigrants in development projects back home.

Sankoh has a sharp eye for details. He has meticulously recorded almost all there is to see or experience in the West: the graffitti on walls, “it is seen all over Germany,” car theft, the impact of African footballers in the Bundesliga. “Blacks have gained recognition in German sports, a positive step…” The author ably stresses the impact of such Africans as role models for Black immigrants.

Yet the author uses humour and satire to lampoon the poor performance of Africans in their continent, thus the question “Why Africans always fail at home but succeed in Europe?”

The book also provides an incisive insight into a day in the life of an African immigrant family. The experiences of the author's daughter and his wife in trying to learn the new language and observing decorum like not to throw waste about or to queue for buses, or at the post office.

Such culture shock is adequately depicted by the author to unravel the dichotomy between African and German cultures.

The author's language is concise, crisp and simple. This makes the book well suited for the average reader. His ability to discuss emotive and controversial issues like racism and the adulterous disposition of African couples in the West with humour is
exceptional and reveals the makings of a good writer in the author.

This book is recommended for Africans living in Europe or are yearning to travel to Europe. And who is not?
Western Europe is often perceived by many people in developing countries as a land of hope and opportunity. To many Africans, Western Europe is a place of endless economic opportunities and where poverty and suffering is "non-existent." This perception is sometimes created by Western films and holiday-makers visiting Africa.

Written in direct and simple language, the author, while drawing from his own experiences and observations, discusses the pertinent issues in Germany towards the end of the twentieth century.

Osman arrives in Germany at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall - the reunification of East and West Germany. His first impressions of Germany is of a highly industrialised country with good infrastructure. However, he soon discovers that, even in this land of wealth and prosperity, poverty does exist. To his surprise, there is an unequal distribution of income, just like in his homeland Sierra Leone, although in no way are the levels of poverty in the two countries comparable. In Sierra Leone and in most of Africa, people continue to face increasing poverty due to unfavourable terms of trade coupled with mismanagement of resources, poor leadership as well as military dictatorships, corruption and political
instability which are not suitable environment for economic development.

Contrary to popular belief back home, Germany is not the rosy place it is made out to be. Looking for a house for example, is an African's worst nightmare since some German landlords and landladies are not comfortable renting their houses to foreigners let alone black people. Some Germans would also not entertain the thought of having black neighbours. Even in apartments where Africans live, it may take a long time before Africans can establish any kind of contact with their German neighbours. In public transport and even in the universities, Africans tend to feel isolated in the initial period of their study and without the support of the family, relatives and friends, Germany is indeed a lonely place to live.

As the century comes to a close, Germany is increasingly facing economic difficulties. The once abundant job market is shrinking. Coupled with the opening up of the borders in Europe, there is an increased demand for jobs. Germans are presently competing for the 'black jobs' which were once the reserve of African students and other foreigners as well. In this kind of atmosphere, there is an increasing intolerance by Germans towards Africans and foreigners as a whole.

Most of the difficulties that Africans undergo in Germany, racial discrimination notwithstanding, have to do with the stereotypes that Germans have of Africans. As is often portrayed in the Western media, Africa is a continent of poverty, starvation and endless wars. Hence most Africans are perceived as either
criminals, illegal immigrants or economic refuges living at the expense of the German tax-payer. The author is also quick to point out that this does not mean that all Africans living in Germany are law-abiding. Africans are also often thought of as being 'foolish' and most Africans have to prove themselves in order to dispel this myth. Even in some German universities, certificates from African universities are looked upon with suspicion and more often than not, African students have to excel in order to gain admission in the courses they intend to study.

The author also points out that not all Germans are racists. The overwhelming support he got from many Germans during his daughter's major surgery, is a case in point. He is therefore of the opinion that both Africans and Germans are people and each should be judged from an individual perspective. He does not rule out the fact though, inspite of there being a minor increase in intermarriages between Germans and Africans, there are still problems of integrating the children of such mixed marriages in society.

In addition, the author also brings out the different cultural perceptions of the two communities. In Africa the role of the family as the backbone of the society is still strong. Both men and women have defined roles which are governed by the traditions and customs of the community.

The author adds that, issues that are not even discussed openly in most of Africa like homosexuality and transsexuality are slowly gaining acceptance in Germany. In the same way, polygamy and female
circumcision would be unthinkable among Germans. He emphasises though, for some of the 'harmful' traditions like female circumcision to be phased out in parts of Africa where it is still practised, the willingness to change must come from within the practising community and from Western pressure.

This book is a good read and it encourages the reader to revisit some of the different perceptions they may hold of the African society and the German society as well.