

TLC Showcase

Valerie Mason-John



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Introduction

A new unpublished novel - *I AM MEMORIED*

What happens to a family, when you receive an email saying: “Hey I think I’ve found you. I think you are my sister?” This happened to me four years ago and I was fascinated by the lies, secrets and denial that unfolded. I took the fact of an adopted child, secrets and lies as my starting point for my latest novel that is almost near completion. As most writers know, you begin from a fragment, fictionalize it and all sorts of things can happen. I had a dilemma, I knew the child would have a white mother from England, but where would the black father come from. This led me to explore my own ancestry and choose the country from which I originate from, Sierra Leone. But having grown up in orphanages and foster homes, I knew nothing about the country.

I had the good fortune to receive funding from Arts Council England to do research on my second novel. When I went to Sierra Leone I was struck by three things, the fact that I was of slave stock, shocked at how little of the indigenous religions were visible and impacted by the stories from ex-rebels and amputees from Sierra Leone’s recent civil war.

The nuts and bolts of the story began to unravel. An African Supreme Being, Yaata, tells a story about the colonisation of her progenies, about Tamba Fengai, a plant, and a blood diamond.

Tamba wakes up one morning in London 1979, in his student digs and realises he has broken one of his traditional family oaths: sleeping with a white woman. The night before, drunk on palm wine, he ends up having sex with a high society white English woman at a swingers’ party. A child is conceived, and Tamba flees back to Africa to try and hide his mistake.

Before that, however, he breaks his second traditional oath. He sells his lucky charm, a diamond from his homeland Sierra Leone, so he can buy fraudulent dentistry qualifications and return home to his wife and children. A diamond from Africa, once sold for money becomes just like any other blood diamond.

The white mother, Elizabeth Clifford-Barnsley, refuses to keep the child too, through fear of losing her inheritance, and being branded a social outcast in her community. She privately gives the baby up for adoption, in the hope of never seeing it again. The life of this child, Harriet, is reinvented. She is not told about the adoption, or indeed that she has black Blood. Yaata’s plant, a Landolphia, that is part of Harriet’s new family’s household, and a diamond from the same red hot earth, unwittingly lead her to one day discover the truth. Lies, secrets and coincidences involving four families are revealed.

For Enquiries about the manuscript please contact my agent – Ken Sherman Associates - ken@kenshermanassociates.com

I AM MEMORIED

Extract from a new unpublished novel

The curse upon the Fengai family moved in 5am one morning in 1994. In fact it was the curse against the whole population of the diamond community. Most people had no interest in reverencing or worshipping the land. Yaata's life source was being smuggled out of the country and blood was on the smugglers' hands. Most people did not even know who Yaata the Supreme Being was. Allah and Jesus Christ had led them astray. Missionaries had promised: 'we'll educate your children but first you must let go of your primitive ways, destroy your wooden idols and stop pouring libations and making offerings to the trees, mountains and rivers.'

Tamba's wife woke up on this morning to a heavy rainfall of pelting gun shots.

Bondu shook her husband awake and demanded to know, 'Waytin that'

'Ah, dem finally come.'

'Who dat?'

'Nar the rebels, of course, dem come nar our town.'

'Komba, where Komba? Quick, catch our boy pikin.'

Tamba rushed out of his bed and left the room to the rousing anthem of the rebels who were rampaging in their village, taking control of all the diamond mines.

'Where the dimons dem Mr President? Where we gold Mr President? The Revolutionary United Front is hungry to know. RUF done for save Sa Leone.'

Tamba returned with his son on his back and got back into the bed with him.

'Dem right,' hissed Bondu.

'Who dat right?'

'The rebels dem. People like your brother don smuggled our dimons dem nar foreign lands.'

'Shush, this is no time for vex, listen to dem orders.'

Bondu took hold of her son and buried them both under the sheet.

'Who nar inna house commout nar door, commout,' a microphone boomed all over the town. Ten, twenty or more soldiers began singing again.

‘Go tell the president Sa Leone is me home.

Go tell yu mama and papa say yu nor see me no more.

I go fight te, te forever

Every Sierra Leonean dey fight for their land.’

An aggressive voice interrupted the anthem,

‘No run. Stop now.’

Pow pow pow. Bullets climaxed into the morning sky.

Tamba and Bondu held each other under the sheets, with their son pinned between them. They looked into each other’s eyes and no words needed to move their lips, it was certain somebody had been shot dead.

They had heard about the rebels on the radio and were informed that, even if they did capture a town, no civilians would be harmed. The rebels were supposed to be fighting the government and their army. Shock surged through them both. They shivered like ripples in the river and sweated in the cool morning air.

‘Waytin next?’ Bondu whispered.

‘It’s too late, we can’t go out now.’

‘Why?’

‘Dem go kill we.’

‘No, Yaata, I no wan die. Do ya!’

‘Bondu, this nor to time for pray. Go, under the bed quick.’

‘Lock the door.’

‘No.’

Bondu jumped out of bed, saying: ‘Yu crazy? Give me the key!’ Tamba lunged from his bed, took his wife by surprise from behind, with his hand clasped over her mouth.

‘Shut your mout yu witch, if dem enter and the door is locked dem go no say we day still insai here,’ and he pushed her under the bed. Their son Komba did as he was told; he was too frightened to speak. He clambered out of the bed, and squashed himself against his mother’s bloated breasts. Tamba lodged himself beside them and ordered: ‘Close your breath.’

Komba gripped his father, while his mother continued to call for Yaata’s help.

‘Eh eh, Bondu, shut your mout. Listen the front door, dem day insai we house.

The weight of the combat boots crunched on their stone floor and Bondu was silenced. She cupped her hand over her son’s mouth and dare not breathe herself.

‘Na who dat in charge of this house?’

Pow, and the sound of clanging kitchen pots went ringing to the cemented ground. Two feet stormed around from room to room, while delivering gun shots generously.

Finally, the rebel entered the bedroom. Four shots rang out, each bullet wedging itself in a corner. The smell of gunpowder mingled with the silence as Tamba caught sight of two muddied boots from beneath the bed. They didn’t move. The rebel was listening with his eyes, ears and nose, waiting for their first noisy mistake.

‘Anybodi day insai come nar door,’ the rebel demanded.

Then came another round of shots, this time aimed at the wardrobe, the dressers and under the bed. Komba flinched, the bullet had grazed his foot. Tamba and Bondu silently prayed to Yaata. The rebel left the room and the front door slammed leaving their bedroom scented with bloody war.

‘Waytin are we for do now?’ Bondu whispered.

‘I nor know.’

‘Tamba, dem go know say we nar insai de house. Poor Komba is hurt.’

‘No no, I think say dem done gone.’

‘Waytin to do, we still have to commout na we house?’

‘Why?’

‘Blood day commout from we boi pikin and we need food.’

‘Papa me is okay, are can still walk.’

‘Bondu yu go nar door first; dem go sorry for yu and we boy pikin.’

‘No you go, yu na the man.’

Tamba gasped, held onto his son for solace and said; ‘No yu go, dem nor go do you anything if yu take the boy pikin.’

‘Me nor able to walk.’

‘Dem go sorry for belly woman. Dem nar harm a pregnant woman.’

‘Yaata, I beg you.’

‘If dem do yu any bad thing yu holler and I go fight for yu.’

‘No, you go and lef we here nar house; if they do anything I will shout.’

Pow! ‘I hear you speaking; if yu nor commout now I go kill nar all of you.’ Pow. The soldier had been standing outside their door, waiting patiently for their inevitable misfortune.

Tamba shoved his heavy wife and son from beneath the bed and followed swiftly behind.

‘Mama, I want me bed.’

‘Shut your mout, Komba. Tamba, open the door.’

‘Na open.’

Bondu pushed her husband towards the door: ‘Go on, open it. Before dem fire again.’

Tamba sucked in a deep breath, and slowly walked to the door; he pulled it open, and looked around with terror at his dishevelled home. The evidence of bullets splattered all around the communal area, and furniture turned over from the rooms lay astray on the floor. War was no longer a disembodied voice reporting from the radio, it had invaded their home.

‘Nobodi insai here; it’s all clear, na Bondu come.’

‘Impossible – look again bah!.’

Before Tamba could reach his front door, a man, five foot tall, thin as stalks with jet black rag doll hair, dressed in combat clothes that hung off him like sacks of sweet potatoes, entered. He had a piece of cloth tied around his thigh above his left knee, and one sleeve rolled up to his elbow. He looked, pointed his rifle at Bondu’s pregnant stomach ballooning from the bedroom doorway: ‘You, outside.’

She pulled Komba’s arm and hurriedly moved outside into their small compound.

The rebel put the butt of his gun to Tamba’s head.

‘Man like yu fraid.’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Do yah! My wife, get full full belly.’

‘Old Pa like you nor get pikin already?’

Tamba flinched. He was not even forty years complete, but to this young man he was old.

‘Yes. Do ya! I beg you.’

The rebel pushed the butt of his gun into the side of Tamba’s head, directing him out into the compound. Bondu was crying.

‘Stop this nonsense,’ and the rebel pointed the gun at their son. Komba’s eyes swayed like a pendulum between his two helpless parents.

‘Mama, Papa, I wan go back to me dream time.’ Bondu grabbed her son’s hand and ran screaming towards the gates.

‘Stop!’ the rebel threatened.

‘Stop, Bondu stop,’ pleaded Tamba.

But it was too late; she fell to the ground before she reached the compound gates.

‘Mama, get up,’ and Komba tried to pull his mother up.

The rebel walked over, pushed the son towards his father, and pointed his rifle between Tamba’s shrouded eyes.

‘If you run I go kill you.’

Tamba knew this was true. He watched in despair as the rebel rolled his whimpering wife over, took a blade from his pocket and pulled up her kaftan.

Tamba shielded his son’s eyes and turned away.

‘I go kill you, if you move again.’

Tamba knew he had to turn and watch with his own eyes as the rebel slit his wife’s belly open; blood spat onto Yaata’s earth as he rammed one hand into her inners and barbarically removed the unborn six month foetus.

Tamba’s body stagnated like a tree in a petrified forest; everything stopped pumping though his veins. He became cold and solid, every vein protruded on his skin. Centuries of time and past karma had carved his petrified body. Just like the stunted and twisted minds that were rampaging through Sierra Leone. Tamba’s heart was gnarled and his thoughts stretched and grasped at any hope that would let it take root, in the desire to defy his morbid reality.

‘Here, take your girl pikin,’ and the rebel kindly offered the bloody foetus up’.

‘Tell Mr President nar gif from the RUF. If he doesn’t give us our dimons, he nor get no new generations for vote for him. Make him decide waytin he want?’ The rebel smeared his murderous hands clean on Tambas shorts.

Tamba realised he was still alive; warm pee trickled into his shorts, and down his legs. Tears brought life back into his cheeks and the pain in his throat was unbearable, but he knew if he screamed, he would be dead too. And he did not have the courage to die.

With the bloody foetus in one hand, his son anchored onto the other, Tamba was ordered to walk into the town centre. Everyone was headed in the same direction, some splattered with blood and others wailing as they too left their dead behind. Anybody who had tried to run met their bloody demise.

Tamba reached the town square and sat crazed among the frightened crowd, his daughter now stiff in his arms. He looked at the foetus and knew instantly this was his second daughter. He lamented to himself, I am not worthy of you. I have betrayed you. This is the curse of Sia. I must reclaim my first daughter; it is the only way I will be rid of this curse.

Before he could think any more, a rebel shouted, ‘Hey you,’ and snatched the foetus from him. Komba saved his life. Before he could protest, his son called out: ‘Papa, look na uncle.’

And there was Sahr standing with the rebels dressed in a Sierra Leonean Army uniform. Fresh blood was stained on his trousers. It obviously hours before belonged to one of the government soldiers who had been patrolling the mines. There were other familiar faces in plain clothes, all standing with the rebels. They had all abandoned the grip of the government, now under the influence of the rebels.

‘Uncle,’ Komba shouted and he ran limping to the other side.

‘Don’t move,’ and Tamba turned into the nose of a machine gun. Someone beside him settled their hand on his thigh and said: ‘Dem kill you.’

Tamba didn’t move, not even to see if his son had reached his brother Sahr. He listened to what the rebels said next.

‘Yu day under we control. We have come to drive the rotten system out. Waytin your government day do for yu? Yu nor even get electricity for more than two hours per day. Look how the roads rough dem. And yet this nar the richest part of the country, and most of you are poor poor. Waytin the government doing with your dimons? Look the Lebanese dem nar this country, they own everything and the Americans dem rich too. And yu is poor poor BAH!’

The words ransacked Tamba’s mind, storming through his ears. He knew it was all true. Minerals had been erupted out of every mountain, hill and piece of earth in this district, leaving many people homeless, and still most of the people were poor. The

poor had taken to back street mining, shaking and shifting their sieves in hope of finding a carat. But hardly any one of these shakers found a diamond of much worth.

‘Who dat wan save Sa Leone?’ One of the rebels demanded to know.

Tamba wanted to save his land, but not by civil war. He knew his brother had made a mistake. Yaata would not approve of diamonds financing a war that killed his people. He was back at his initiation ceremony, sitting cross-legged with the rest of the chosen boys listening to an elder speaking the finest English, they were taught in several European languages so that they could ward off anyone who was trying to steal their minerals under the guise of a good business investment. ‘Diamonds are the blood of this land. We kept them secret for centuries because we knew once our sacred minerals were found, evil would be performed on this land. It is your job, every one of you must protect Yaata, and make sure you only take what the rain seasons provide. Leave the rest to do Yaata’s work. Greed will destroy you. Some of you must be paramount chiefs so you can make sure the diamonds don’t leave our vicinity, so that they can provide money for developing our villages, roads and homes. Do you hear me?’

These rebels were not elders; they were driven by the same voracity as the government. They had no intention of leaving the diamonds in the land. His heart jumped, the diamond his brother had given him, he had sold it. Greed, too, had consumed his heart. Before he could distract himself from what was happening around him, men, women and even children stood up and cheered: ‘I do. I want to save Sierra Leone.’

On this dark humid heavy morning, with the strong winds blowing in the dry season, the RUF recruited 30 people from this community. They were pulled out of the crowd and inaugurated with the RUF anthem.

‘Everyone up.’

Everyone did as they were told; Tamba caught a glimpse of his brother Sahr standing with his son. He thought:

‘Sahr, how you disgrace your mama and the knowledge our mama done give we? Den dimons na medicine, dem fine precious minerals and belong in nar groun. The money way yu get from the rebel dem for the dimon, dem nar blood money. Den go kill we people dem,’ He vomited, he remembered too he had done exactly the same. But peace came back to his obliterated mind when he justified his misuse of the diamond for paying for his degree, and not financing the rebel war. Money from diamonds was blood money.

This is what they had also learned during initiation. Take what you need, and leave the rest for Yaata and the ancestors. Tamba turned cold again. He cried to himself. ‘My oath is broken. Sahr is my twin brother, there will be karmic consequences. Our actions will destroy us both.’ And then the elders’ words came even louder, he could not block out the memory of his initiation. He had heard the wise words, and knew

that many of these rebels would never have had the opportunity to be taught by the traditional custodians of the earth. He knew Yaata would be kinder to them, but he and his brother, who had been taught the secrets of the land, had committed the biggest sin. The elder had told the young men: 'It's better to be asleep than to have been woken up to the secrets, and then pretend to be asleep.' Then he gave his final discourse that had been passed down by the original inhabitants of the land.

'Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the child of the earth. People did not weave the web of life; they are merely strands in it. Whatever they do to the web, they do to themselves'.

Tamba was pushed with his misery into the crowd, and onto the dusty highway that lead away from their town. The people could smell petrol, their town was burning. There was no turning back, this was their reprieve. They walked on foot to the next town. But Tamba and a few others took flight into the forest. Tamba needed to make peace with Yaata. He needed to find Sia.

About the Writer

Dr Valerie Mason-John Aka Queenie

Award winning author of six books, Author Valerie Mason-John, writes fiction, non fiction, poetry, plays and prose. Her debut novel *Borrowed Body* first published by Serpent's Tail and second edition by BAAF, renamed *The Banana Kid*, was named as the British Colour Purple and she was also named as one of the new fiction authors to watch out for. This novel won an arts council award and was given a free read by The Literary Consultancy. Valerie writes, "This read was pivotal, it changed the direction of my novel, and coached me into rewriting a draft that was suitable for publishing."

Dr Valerie Mason-John's poetry has been exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery London, as well as other major galleries in Britain. She has written several critically acclaimed plays some of which are published, and she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of East London, for her literary contribution to the African and Asian Diasporas. Her most recent book of non-fiction, *Broken Voices 'Untouchable' Women Speak Out* was commended by the Indian Media.

She is currently nearing completion of her second novel, *I Am Memoried* (working title)—which brings together the Rebel War in Sierra Leone, High Society England, Blood Diamonds, a swingers' party and a secret adoption, narrated by the African Supreme Being Yaata who comes alive in an English home. She currently works as a performance artist, writer and blogs regularly on: www.valeriemason-john.com. Website: www.valeriemason-john.co.uk.

