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Freetown 'Lantans' : tradition, art and performance in Sierra Leone, 1895-1997

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FREETOWN *LANTANS*:  
TRADITION, ART AND PERFORMANCE  
IN SIERRA LEONE, 1895-1997

BY  
JENNIFER LESLEY ORAM

VOLUME 1

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF PhD  
IN THE HISTORY OF ART  
THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

2006





## **ETHOS**

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Finally, I am grateful to my husband who never quite gave up hope of this thesis being completed.

## *Abstract*

This thesis explores the *lantan* tradition in Freetown where street floats (*lantans*) used to be built to mark particular occasions – usually the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan each year. It constitutes a work of social and art history and addresses the *lantan* tradition from two main perspectives. First, it explores the tradition's history from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, its introduction, spread and development in Freetown as well as the roles that prominent individuals, politicians, parade organisers and lantern clubs played in nurturing the tradition and exploiting its potential. Secondly, the thesis focuses attention on the artefacts (*lantans*) at the core of the tradition - how they were built, the imagery they employed and some of the networks of *lantan* builders operating in the 1990s. An attempt is made to identify the principles that underpinned the evaluation of *lantans* in Freetown, and to address the issue as to whether *lantans* were in fact works of art. Finally, insights drawn from puppetry and performance theory are used to examine the nature of *lantan* performances and to relate them to other types of performance, in particular those associated with Freetown's masquerade figures (locally known as *debuls*). The techniques and concepts underlying puppetry provide tools that allow an examination of Freetown *lantan* and *debul* traditions within a single conceptual framework. It has been possible to identify related notions of performance, involving imitation/pretence on the one hand and characterisation/acting-in-character on the other, as the defining features of *lantan* and *debul* performances respectively. Lastly, the opposing concepts of 'power object' and 'plaything' (which are widespread notions within various West African artefact traditions) allow a distinction to be drawn between different types of *debul* traditions in Freetown, and illuminate the essentially 'playful' nature of *lantan* performances as an entertainment form.

## *Table of Contents*

### VOLUME I

|                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <b>Title</b>             | 1 |
| <b>Acknowledgements</b>  | 2 |
| <b>Abstract</b>          | 3 |
| <b>Table of contents</b> | 4 |

#### **List of figures:**

|       |   |                   |
|-------|---|-------------------|
| Fig 1 | Map of West Africa  | 9                 |
| Fig 2 | Map of Sierra Leone   | 10                |
| Fig 3 | Map of the Western Area   | 11                |
| Fig 4 | Map of Freetown indicating West, Central & East Wards               | inside back cover |
| Fig 5 | Map of Freetown and Environs showing location of 1993 lantern clubs | inside back cover |
| Fig 6 | Diagram of Freetown <i>lantana</i> builders' networks               | inside back cover |
| Fig 7 | Summary of lantern parade results, February 1997                    | 221               |

### **PART 1 A HISTORY OF THE *LANTANA* TRADITION: 1895-1997**

#### **Chapter 1 *Lantana* celebrations in Freetown, Sierra Leone: April 1993 and February 1997**

|     |   |    |
|-----|---|----|
| 1.1 | Introduction  | 12 |
| 1.2 | Background to the <i>lantana</i> celebration 28-29 April 1993 | 17 |
| 1.3 | Preparations for the <i>lantana</i> festival                  | 19 |
| 1.4 | The <i>lantana</i> festival and its aftermath                 | 24 |
| 1.5 | Background to the lantern-parade 7-8 February 1997            | 31 |
| 1.6 | Preparations for the lantern-parade                           | 31 |
| 1.7 | The lantern-parade and its aftermath                          | 37 |

#### **Chapter 2 The origins and development of the *lantana* tradition in Freetown: 1895 - 1945**

|     |  |    |
|-----|--|----|
| 2.1 | Introduction   | 43 |
| 2.2 | The tradition's roots in 19 <sup>th</sup> century West Africa  | 43 |
| 2.3 | Islam, trade and the emergence of the <i>lantana</i> tradition in 19 <sup>th</sup> century Freetown          | 48 |
| 2.4 | The spread of the <i>lantana</i> tradition within Freetown: 1890s-1945                                       | 56 |
| 2.5 | Pa Maggay and the emergence of informal <i>lantana</i> leadership in the first half of the twentieth century | 63 |

### **Chapter 3    The popularisation and politicisation of the *lantan* tradition: 1945-1997**

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 3.1   | Introduction  | 69  |
| 3.2   | The transformation of the <i>lantan</i> tradition in Freetown: 1947-mid 1970s                         | 71  |
| 3.2.1 | The resumption of <i>lantan</i> activities in the immediate post-war era                              | 71  |
| 3.2.2 | The YMMA and the formalisation of <i>lantan</i> leadership  | 73  |
| 3.2.3 | The proliferation of lantern clubs in Freetown and the growth of political and commercial sponsorship | 76  |
| 3.2.4 | The ‘popularisation’ of the <i>lantan</i> tradition: inclusion versus exclusion                       | 81  |
| 3.3   | The fluctuation in <i>lantan</i> tradition fortunes: mid-1970s-1997                                   | 83  |
| 3.3.1 | Constraints and challenges in the 1970s   | 83  |
| 3.3.2 | The revival of lantern parades in the 1980s   | 86  |
| 3.4   | The lantern parade as a political resource  | 91  |
| 3.5   | 1997: lantern parades as the focus of competing religious interests                                   | 96  |
| 3.6   | Concluding remarks  | 103 |

### **Chapter 4    The *lantan* tradition at grassroots level: lantern clubs**

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| 4.1   | Introduction  | 104 |
| 4.2   | Lantern clubs and the notion of neighbourhood loyalty               | 106 |
| 4.2.1 | Methodology   | 106 |
| 4.2.2 | King Tom and the western area of Freetown                           | 108 |
| 4.2.3 | Lantern clubs in central Freetown                                   | 111 |
| 4.2.4 | Lantern clubs in the East End of Freetown: Fourah Bay and Fula Town | 114 |
| 4.2.5 | Lantern clubs elsewhere in the East End of Freetown                 | 117 |
| 4.2.6 | Lantern clubs located south east of Freetown                        | 120 |
| 4.3   | Lantern clubs and the use of alternative notions of group identity  | 122 |
| 4.3.1 | Personal and family loyalties                                       | 123 |
| 4.3.2 | Original Bronx and city ‘style’                                     | 124 |
| 4.3.3 | Mandela Youth Organisation and Pan Africanism                       | 127 |
| 4.3.4 | The influence of ghetto sub-culture: Firestone and Babylonians      | 129 |
| 4.4   | Conclusion  | 132 |

## **PART 2        THE *LANTAN* TRADITION AS A FOCUS OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION**

### **Chapter 5    *Lantans*: the heart of the *lantan* tradition**

|         |   |     |
|---------|---|-----|
| 5.1     | Introduction  | 135 |
| 5.2     | <i>Lantans</i> and the representation of man-made constructions | 138 |
| 5.2.1   | Ship imagery  | 138 |
| 5.2.1.1 | A history of ship <i>lantan</i> building                        | 138 |
| 5.2.1.2 | Construction techniques   | 142 |

|         |   |     |
|---------|---|-----|
| 5.2.2   | Imagery derived from buildings and monuments  | 145 |
| 5.2.3   | Imagery derived from land and air transport   | 147 |
| 5.2.4   | The role of human actors  | 149 |
| 5.3     | <i>Lantans</i> and the representation of the human and animal world                         | 152 |
| 5.3.1   | Animals and birds   | 152 |
| 5.3.2   | Islamic themes  | 152 |
| 5.3.3   | <i>Lantans</i> representing mythological, historical, topical and cultural themes           | 156 |
| 5.3.3.1 | Mythological and fictional themes   | 157 |
| 5.3.3.2 | Historical and heraldic themes  | 157 |
| 5.3.3.3 | Topical themes - entertainment, commercial and educational                                  | 161 |
| 5.3.3.4 | Cultural themes   | 163 |
| 5.4     | <i>Lantans</i> representing the occult world  | 164 |
| 5.4.1   | <i>Lantans</i> representing <i>debuls</i>   | 164 |
| 5.4.2   | <i>Lantans</i> representing Mammy Wata  | 167 |
| 5.5     | Construction techniques and the use of puppetry   | 168 |
| 5.6     | YMMA <i>lantana</i> categories and the shifting boundaries of <i>lantana</i> classification | 174 |
| 5.7     | Concluding remarks  | 180 |

## Chapter 6 *Lantan* builders: ‘Wi no wisef’

|         |  |     |
|---------|--|-----|
| 6.1     | Introduction   | 182 |
| 6.2     | Survey of thirty six practising <i>lantana</i> builders  | 184 |
| 6.3     | <i>Lantan</i> builders’ networks and the dissemination of skills in Freetown                               | 189 |
| 6.3.1   | The Yaskey network of <i>lantana</i> builders  | 190 |
| 6.3.1.1 | Eustace Yaskey – a ‘lion’ among <i>lantana</i> builders  | 190 |
| 6.3.1.2 | ‘Papa’ Mansaray and the Yaskey influence   | 192 |
| 6.3.1.3 | Brima ‘Tipo’ Kargbo and the development of Yaskey’s <i>lantana</i> style                                   | 193 |
| 6.3.1.4 | ‘Degool’ and the Yaskey connection in Portee   | 196 |
| 6.3.1.5 | Other Yaskey trained assistants  | 197 |
| 6.3.2   | Lasisi, Goba and the Firestone complex   | 198 |
| 6.3.3   | Joseph Mambu   | 201 |
| 6.3.4   | Black Arrow, Block Lane and Baimbrace <i>lantana</i> builders  | 202 |
| 6.3.5   | Bambara Town and its <i>lantana</i> builders   | 204 |
| 6.3.6   | Sherif Carew, Madu Carr and other Mountain Cut <i>lantana</i> builders                                     | 206 |
| 6.3.7   | <i>Lantan</i> builders from Magazine and the western end of Fourah Bay Road                                | 207 |
| 6.3.8   | Mighty Endeavour connections   | 208 |
| 6.3.9   | Alusine Conteh and his colleagues  | 209 |
| 6.3.10  | <i>Lantan</i> builders in Fourah Bay: Mohammed din Gabisi, Nazir Joaque, Abiodun Robinson and Alie Fofanah | 211 |
| 6.3.11  | King Tom builders in the West End of Freetown  | 213 |
| 6.4     | Concluding remarks   | 215 |

## Chapter 7 Principles of evaluation: are *lantans* art?

|     |   |     |
|-----|---|-----|
| 7.1 | Introduction  | 219 |
| 7.2 | <i>Lantan</i> evaluation in practice                                  | 220 |
| 7.3 | <i>Lantan</i> subject matter: recognisability                         | 224 |
| 7.4 | <i>Lantan</i> properties  | 227 |
|     | 7.4.1 Strength and size   | 227 |
|     | 7.4.2 Scale, shape, colour and detail                                 | 228 |
|     | 7.4.3 Finish  | 229 |
| 7.5 | Notions of resemblance and realism                                    | 230 |
| 7.6 | <i>Lantan</i> illumination  | 233 |
| 7.7 | <i>Lantan</i> action  | 236 |
| 7.8 | <i>Lantan</i> technology as art                                       | 240 |
| 7.9 | Concluding remarks: the artist as producer, puppeteer and interpreter | 244 |

## PART 3 LANTANS, PUPPETRY AND PERFORMANCE IN FREETOWN IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES

### Chapter 8 Notions of imitation and characterisation, power and play

|     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 8.1 | Introduction   | 247 |
| 8.2 | The origins of string and rod puppetry in Freetown's <i>lantan</i> tradition         | 248 |
| 8.3 | The essence of <i>lantan</i> puppetry: imitation and scenic action                   | 251 |
| 8.4 | The technology of body puppetry: <i>debuls</i> as puppets                            | 254 |
| 8.5 | The essence of body puppetry in Freetown: characterisation                           | 257 |
| 8.6 | The representation of <i>debuls</i> in <i>lantan</i> form: notions of power and play | 264 |
| 8.7 | Freetown <i>debuls</i> as power objects or playthings                                | 267 |
| 8.8 | Freetown <i>lantans</i> as an entertainment form                                     | 271 |
| 8.9 | Conclusion   | 274 |

### Chapter 9 Conclusion: *Lantans* past, present and future

### Bibliography

## VOLUME II

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Title page | 294 |
|------------|-----|

### List of figures:

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Fig 8 <i>Lantans</i> and lantern clubs that participated in the January 1986 lantern parade | 508 |
|---|-----|

|             |   |                   |
|-------------|---|-------------------|
| Appendix 1  | Source material: List of interviews conducted with consultees and list of appointments and events attended, 1991-1997                   | 295               |
| Appendix 2  | Title page  | 305               |
|             | Copy of 1997 lantern parade brochure  | 306               |
| Appendix 3  | Title page  | 358               |
|             | Copy of 'Float traditions in Sierra Leone and The Gambia' by Jenny Oram, <i>African Arts</i> 1998, Vol XXXI Number 3                    | 359               |
| Appendix 4  | Title page: list of YMMA records  | 370               |
|             | Copies of YMMA records  | 371               |
| Appendix 5  | Chronological list of references to <i>lantán</i> building, <i>lantán</i> groups and <i>lantáns</i> in Freetown: 1895-1997              | 391               |
| Appendix 6  | Biographical notes on consultees and <i>lantán</i> builders   | 423               |
| Appendix 7  | <i>Lantán</i> music, <i>aswebi</i> and comportment: complementary components of <i>lantán</i> processions                               | 445               |
| Appendix 8  | Social characteristics of <i>lantán</i> builders, 1993 & 1997   | 461               |
| Appendix 9  | Title page: list of 1997 Lantern Parade results   | 469               |
|             | Copies of results sheets for the 1997 lantern parade  | 470               |
| Appendix 10 | Title page: list of <i>lantán</i> sketches  | 486               |
|             | Sketches of <i>lantán</i> skeletons by Tipo and Degool  | 487               |
| Appendix 11 | Thoughts on the theatrical function of <i>lantáns</i>   | 506               |
| Appendix 12 | Title page  | 516               |
|             | Copy of 'Marionetas e cortejos de lanternas-carros alegóricos em Freetown, na Serra Leoa', by Jenny Oram, <i>adágio</i> 2001, Vol 30/31 | 517               |
|             | Typescript copy of English original 'Puppets and lantern-float parades in Freetown, Sierra Leone' by Jenny Oram,                        | 534               |
| Appendix 13 | List of illustrations   | 546               |
|             | Photographs   | 557               |
| Appendix 14 | List of video excerpts  | 665               |
|             | DVD   | inside back cover |

# MAP OF WEST AFRICA

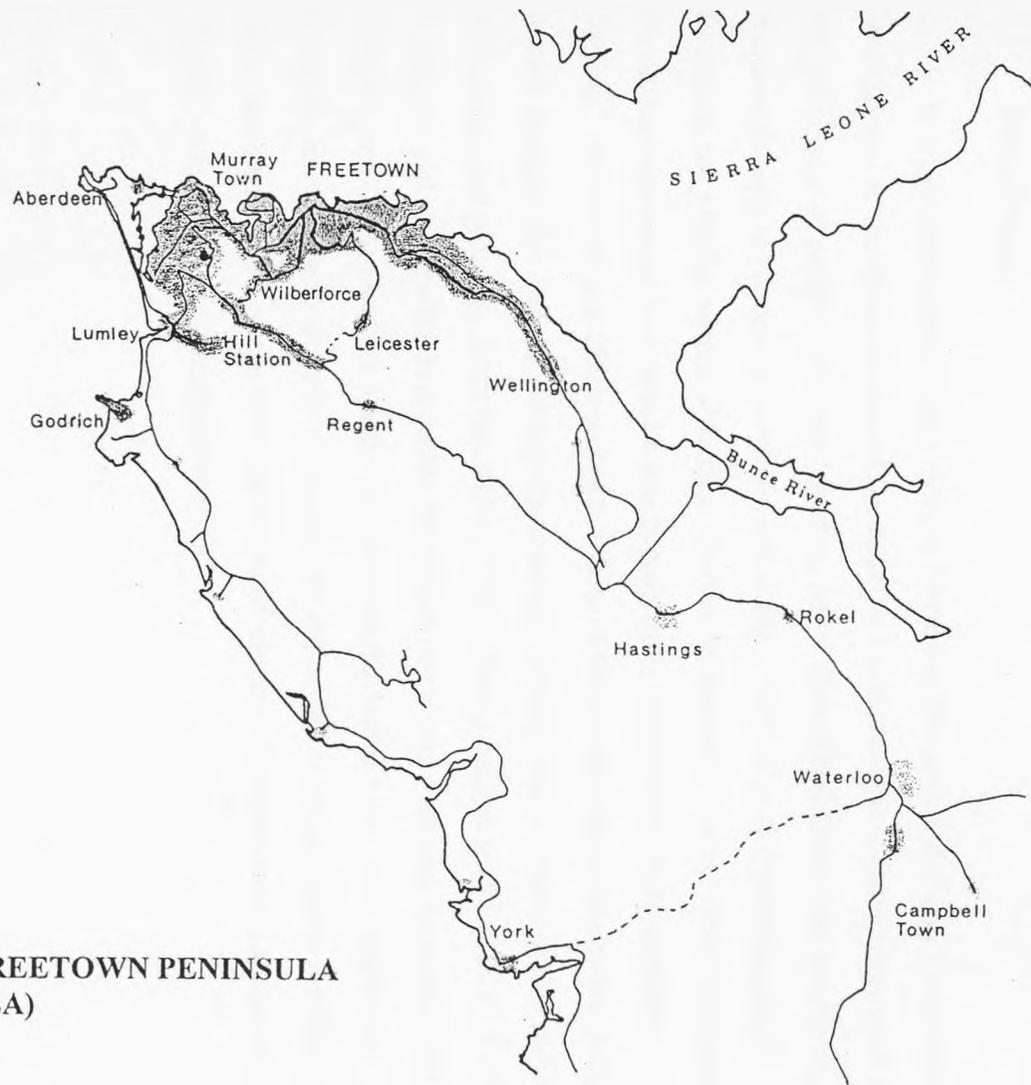


Figure 1



**MAP OF SIERRA LEONE**  
 Showing provincial and district boundaries

**Figure 2**



**MAP OF THE FREETOWN PENINSULA  
(WESTERN AREA)**

**Figure 3**

## PART 1

### A HISTORY OF THE LANTAN TRADITION: 1895-1997

#### *Chapter 1*

#### **TWO LANTAN CELEBRATIONS IN FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE: APRIL 1993 AND FEBRUARY 1997**

##### **1.1 Introduction**

In April 1989 during a brief visit to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone and headquarters of the Western Area of the country, I discovered that throughout much of the city groups of people were busy building large, illuminated floats that were to be paraded through the streets of Freetown one night in early May to mark the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. Over a decade earlier John Nunley had learnt about this tradition of float parades and subsequently commented on its apparent decline.<sup>1</sup> Yet by the late 1980s record numbers of floats were being constructed for the annual float parades and my subsequent research revealed that in Freetown the tradition of building and parading floats had a long history, dating back at least to 1895.<sup>2</sup> Only in exceptional circumstances (notably during the two world wars and the recent civil war in Sierra Leone) had the practice of parading floats at the end of the month of Ramadan been suspended, thereby denying the thousands of people whom the float festivities attracted each year onto the streets of the city, the opportunity to enjoy a night of song, dance and visual entertainment.

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<sup>1</sup> Nunley 1985:97. John Nunley refers to the late Sierra Leonean playwright, Dele Charley, who, in a newspaper article (*Daily Mail* (hereafter *DM*): 14 August 1980), bemoaned the decline of the tradition during the 1970s. John Nunley, however, was in Freetown during 1977-78 when the annual parade of floats coincided with the rainy season and relatively few people participated.

<sup>2</sup> *Sierra Leone Times* (hereafter *SLT*): March 30 1895. According to John Nunley (Nunley 1985:45) the tradition of building floats was introduced to Freetown in the 1930s by a trader known as Daddy (Pa) Maggay who had witnessed the Gambian version of the tradition in Bathurst (now Banjul). My research has confirmed a Gambian/Senegalese origin for the Sierra Leonean tradition and indicates that Pa Maggay indeed played a major role in promoting the tradition not just in the 1930/40s but several decades earlier. See Chapter 2.

In Sierra Leone the floats are known as *lantans* in Krio<sup>3</sup>; the term *lantan* is derived from the English ‘lantern’.<sup>4</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries *lantans* took the form of huge model ships and mosques, comprising wooden frames covered with delicately cut paper designs and lit from within by candles. They were, therefore, genuine light chambers (lanterns). In addition, during the annual parade of *lantans* participants used often to carry individual hand *lantans*.<sup>5</sup> The annual parade was known to everyone in Freetown as ‘the lantern parade’. Owing to the civil war in Sierra Leone no lantern parades were held in Freetown from 1991 to 1996 to mark the end of Ramadan. However, a special *lantan* celebration was held in April 1993 to commemorate the first anniversary of the coup which brought the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) to power in Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> The event was organised by the Young Men’s Muslim Association (the YMMA), the same organization that took up responsibility for arranging the annual, end-of-Ramadan parades in 1959 (the year when the YMMA was in fact founded). The 1993 celebration took virtually the same form as the annual lantern parades with the exception that the curfew in force at the time meant that the celebrations had to finish by midnight instead of continuing throughout the night. Nevertheless, the event proved an enormous success and over thirty *lantans* paraded through the centre of Freetown, followed by thousands of supporters and watched by tens of thousands of spectators.

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<sup>3</sup> Native users of the Krio language are descended from the freed slaves who were settled in Freetown and the Western Area of Sierra Leone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (See Chapter 2.) The language is now used as a general lingua franca throughout the country (Fyle & Jones 1980:ix-x).

<sup>4</sup> Fyle & Jones 1980:214. I use the term ‘lantern’ in this thesis when referring to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century publications and newspaper reports in which the terms lantern (English) and *lanterne* (French) appear. In Freetown the phrases ‘lantern parade’ and ‘lantern club’ are commonly found in their written, anglicised form and I adopt this usage. From now on, I use the Krio term *lantan* to refer specifically to a float of Sierra Leonean origin (and hence to the Sierra Leonean *lantan* tradition).

<sup>5</sup> A hand *lantan* comprised a small light chamber (either box-shaped or in the form of an animal or object) made from sticks of palm pith and covered with paper. It was mounted on a long wooden stick and lit by a single candle. By the time of my research few people bothered to make hand *lantans*. One consultee referred to a hand *lantan* as a ‘Jonka box’ and described it as ‘a small *lantan* which people carried and danced with’ (Interview 92/67). The term ‘Jonka’ is reminiscent of ‘jonkonnu’ (a Caribbean street festival – see Nunley & Bettelheim 1988:39-83) but there is no evidence of any relationship.

<sup>6</sup> This commemorative parade accorded with a custom introduced around the time of Sierra Leone’s Independence in April 1961 whereby lantern parades were occasionally held in Freetown to mark important national or city events. See page 82, note 49 and Appendix 5.

Approximately three years later, in May 1996, the NPRC handed over power to an elected government headed by President Tejan Kabba, the new leader of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). A peace accord was signed with the rebel forces in November 1996, and, when six or so weeks later the month of Ramadan began, the YMMA decided to seize the opportunity and organise a full-scale lantern parade in customary style to mark the conclusion of fasting. An all-night event, the parade attracted the participation of over forty lantern clubs and their supporters, and drew the usual large crowds of onlookers who relished the first end-of-Ramadan lantern parade to be held since 1990.<sup>7</sup>

This thesis is the product of research which I carried out between 1991 and 1997. During the period 1990 to 1993 I lived in Freetown and began to document the *lantana* tradition on an informal basis. Just as I began to explore the tradition, the civil war broke out in the southern and eastern areas of Sierra Leone and the lantern parade that was being planned for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations in late March 1991, was cancelled a week before it was due to take place. The contacts I made during the parade preparations, however, enabled me to carry on with my investigations. I met a wide range of *lantana* enthusiasts, especially older people whose links with the *lantana* tradition stretched back, in some cases, to the 1920s. Inevitably I found myself concentrating my attention on the Freetown neighbourhoods (Fourah Bay and Fula Town) where the tradition originated and was still very strong. The tradition also existed in the provinces (Kambia and Port Loko Districts) where it had spread from Freetown, probably by the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> In 1991 I managed to attend the end-of-Ramadan celebrations in Mange Bureh (a town in Port Loko District) which was once famed for its *lantana* builders and is still acclaimed as the source of the *bubu* music so beloved by Freetown lantern clubs. However, the spread of the civil war soon made it impossible to travel upcountry in safety and I was forced thereafter to concentrate my research in Freetown. There I was able to consult material in the Sierra Leone National Archives. Between 1993 and 1994 I found the British Library (Newspaper Library) in London an

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix 7, page 458, note 28 describes the confusion that has arisen over the exact chronology of lantern parades in Freetown in the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>8</sup> Gamble 1989:44 and Interview 94/66. See Appendix 1 for a list of interviews conducted in Freetown and of appointments and events attended in Sierra Leone during the course of my research.

invaluable source of information. I returned to Freetown between November 1994 and June 1995 to undertake more systematic research among *lantan* builders, club members and supporters, and YMMA officials. I also discussed my interests with street artists and members of different secret societies. In early 1997 I was able to revisit Freetown in order to attend the lantern parade organised for the end of Ramadan that year. In May 1997, however, the security situation in Freetown deteriorated dramatically. It became impossible to plan any further research there and to my knowledge, no full-scale lantern parades have been held in Freetown since the one I attended in February 1997. However, the wealth of data I accumulated between 1991 and 1997 has enabled me in this thesis to reach a tentative interpretation of the history of Freetown's *lantan* tradition between 1895 and 1997 and to explore the implications of the tradition in terms of art, puppetry and performance.<sup>9</sup>

Part 1 of this thesis addresses the history of the *lantan* tradition and its most recent manifestations in Freetown. Soon after beginning my research the YMMA gave me access to a video of the 1989 lantern parade, preparations for which had sparked my interest on my first-ever trip to Freetown. This video provided me with a foretaste of what to expect in 1993. Excerpts are included in Appendix 14 (App 14:1) and should be viewed as an introduction to this thesis. The rest of this chapter is devoted to descriptions of the two *lantan* celebrations held in 1993 and 1997. Together with further video excerpts and accompanying illustrations (cross-referenced to appropriate points in the text) they provide a general introduction to my research topic and convey something of the atmosphere that surrounded the building, performance and parade of *lantans*. Since I shall be using the two parades as the basis for discussing *lantan* art, aesthetics and puppetry in the main body of my thesis, the descriptions will serve to introduce certain data and themes that are more fully addressed in later chapters.

Chapter 2 provides an historical overview of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown from the late nineteenth century up to World War II. It examines the tradition's roots in early nineteenth century Senegal and The Gambia, traces its transfer to Sierra Leone by the

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<sup>9</sup> In 1998 and 2001 some of the results of my research were published in short articles. See bibliography and Appendices 3 and 12.

late nineteenth century and documents its spread and practice among Freetown's Muslim population until the early 1940s.

Chapter 3 examines the popularisation and politicisation of the *lantana* tradition in Freetown from the late 1940s until 1997 and, in particular, highlights the way in which lantern parades have generated fierce rivalries among competing interest groups. Chapter 4 discusses the role of lantern clubs which were the bodies responsible for constructing end-of-Ramadan *lantans* and for organising the processions in which the *lantans* were incorporated. It explores the way in which clubs have used lantern parades as a means of negotiating expressions of identity and difference through their individual *lantana* processions.

Part 2 focuses on the core of the *lantana* tradition – the *lantans* themselves. Chapter 5 concentrates on *lantans* as artefacts and describes the repertoire of *lantana* imagery that existed in Freetown at the time of my research, as well as techniques of construction. Chapter 6 is devoted to the network of *lantana* builders whom I found competing for recognition as artists through the medium of the *lantans* they constructed. While there were many *lantana* builders in Freetown, my research indicated that certain builders were particularly respected by lantern club members either because they were considered to excel in the art of *lantana* building or because, for other reasons, they had strongly influenced the tradition. In 1994 - 1995 I focused my research on these people and on their own perception of their work, thereby supplementing my own observation of *lantana* art in the 1993 and 1997 parades. Chapter 7 attempts to provide insights into the way these people thought about *lantans* in terms of their artistic merit and aesthetic significance and examines the issue of whether *lantans* are in any sense works of art.

Part 3 addresses a number of related notions, notably those of puppetry and performance, that emerged during the course of the many discussions of *lantana* technology and evaluation that I held with *lantana* builders and *lantana* enthusiasts generally. Chapter 8 examines the role of puppetry in Freetown, first in relation to the *lantana* tradition which, during the second half of the twentieth century, has incorporated an increasing amount of rod and string puppetry. It then examines puppetry in relation to other art and performance forms (notably to what anthropologists call 'masquerade').

I argue that in Freetown *debuls* (as ‘masqueraders’ are known in Krio)<sup>10</sup> constitute a form of what I term ‘body puppetry’. Finally, it utilises the opposing notions of power objects and of non-power (play) objects to probe local perceptions of different modes of entertainment, including *lantans*. Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by elaborating the concept of *lantans* as transitional objects. It suggests that the concept has been central to the role of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown in the past and will affect any reinvention of the tradition in the future.

## **1.2 Background to the *lantan* celebration of 28 - 29 April 1993** *(The reader should already have viewed Appendix 14:1)*

In March 1991 the invasion by rebels from Liberia (which had been plunged into chaos following the outbreak of its own violent civil war in December 1989) affected the eastern and southern areas of Sierra Leone. Preparations were already underway in Freetown for that year’s lantern parade but tension in the city ran high and after a week of speculation the parade was cancelled. It was generally agreed that it would be inappropriate to stage a lantern parade when the country was faced with an armed invasion, when thousands of displaced villagers were fleeing their homes and when rumours of a possible rebel invasion of Freetown (being planned for the very night of the lantern parade) were rife.<sup>11</sup>

By 1992 the country had suffered twelve months of protracted civil war which, according to mounting public opinion, the ruling All People’ Congress (APC) party seemed unwilling or unable to fight effectively. No attempt was made to organise a lantern parade but at the end of April 1992 young army officers from the warfront came down to Freetown and staged a coup which toppled the existing civilian government and brought the military NPRC to power. The coup generated a sense of euphoria in the capital, especially among the youth who had long been disillusioned and

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<sup>10</sup> See page 26, note 21 for a fuller explanation of the term *debul*.

<sup>11</sup> Since the mid 1990s an emerging body of scholarship has focused on the origins of Sierra Leone’s civil war and the issues raised by it. Abdullah (2004) provides particularly insightful analyses. References to the war in this thesis are the result of my personal experience and understanding at the time.

demoralised by the country's economic decline over which the All People's Congress party had presided for twenty five years.<sup>12</sup>

The first year of military rule witnessed a number of setbacks, both military and political. In particular, the NPRC claimed to have foiled an alleged counter-coup in December 1992 and in the aftermath over twenty people were executed without trial. This led to international condemnation but within Freetown public opinion swung strongly in favour of the military government. Throughout January and February 1993 the youth of Freetown banded together in self-help, neighbourhood organisations and, in a display of patriotic fervour, began to clean up and beautify the city. They cleared gutters, cleaned streets, patched roads and planted flowers completely on their own initiative and then started commissioning commercial and other artists to create wall-paintings, cement sculptures and other street art to celebrate publicly the 'revolution' (which they, the youth, considered the young NPRC leaders to have effected). Freetown became a transformed city.<sup>13</sup>

By March when the Ramadan fast was underway the executive of the YMMA was in a dilemma. The mood of the city was positive: the youth, who were spontaneously giving their time and effort to improve the urban environment, were the very people from whom the lantern clubs (that customarily organised the building of *lantans*) generally drew their membership. But the YMMA itself was in disarray: its President was under investigation by one of the judicial commissions set up by the NPRC (to look into the problems of corruption within the APC government and parastatals) and the YMMA therefore lacked credible leadership. Until it could solve its leadership crisis it was in no position to organise an event on the scale of a lantern parade. By April, however, it had persuaded another of its executive members to act as its President and, although the month of Ramadan was almost over (and it was too late

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<sup>12</sup> The term 'youth' is used in Sierra Leone to refer to the semi-educated, disadvantaged, urban underclass which largely comprises people who dropped out of school, who are low paid or unemployed and who can be aged anything up to their forties. The term has political overtones as it was used during the rule of the All Peoples' Congress (APC) to refer to a section of the population the regime found useful to manipulate to its advantage. Urban youth culture is not new in Freetown. It started to emerge as a distinct 'subculture' within Freetown in the 1940s (Banton 1957:36; Nunley 1987:50; Abdullah & Muana 1998:173). Abdullah, Bangura and Rashid argue that an appraisal of the role of Sierra Leone's youth (lumpenproletariat) is fundamental to any analysis of the country's civil war. See Abdullah 2004.

<sup>13</sup> This is well described by Joseph Opala (1994).

to organise the customary lantern parade on the eve of Id-ul-Fitr<sup>14</sup>) there were rumours that the annual public holiday that always marks Independence on 27 April would be extended for two further days to celebrate the one year anniversary (on 29 April) of the NPRC 'revolution'. The YMMA thus decided that it would be appropriate - given the nature of the forthcoming event, the enthusiasm of the youth and the three year break since the last lantern parade - to organise a special *lantan* celebration to mark the proposed three-day holiday period.

### **1.3 Preparations for the *lantan* festival**

The YMMA had to contend with a number of immediate problems. Firstly, it was faced with a severe shortage of committed members with time to devote to organisational matters. Like many associations and clubs in Freetown, the YMMA existed in name and could boast a few interested executive members and 'advisers'; its paid-up ordinary membership was, I suspect, non-existent. Even its active executive members had diverse loyalties, several of them being executive members of a range of other, busier organisations which took up most of their free time. They were also split among themselves: early on one of their number dropped out of the *lantan* event as a result of personal differences with another executive member. In the absence of any paid staff, the YMMA had to rely on the voluntary efforts of its office-holders to arrange events on its behalf and, inevitably it fell to the few who were self- (or un-) employed to take the lead. In the end the *lantan* celebrations were organised by the ebullient Organising and Publicity Secretary (who was a self-employed businessman) with assistance from a few other YMMA officials and with whatever secretarial help he could find.

Secondly, the YMMA had to acquire government approval for the event. Under the emergency laws in force since the 1992 coup all public gatherings were forbidden. Besides, without government support the YMMA could not hope to enlist the co-operation of the police force and army who would be responsible for closing the parade route to traffic on the evening the *lantans* were to process, for patrolling the streets,

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<sup>14</sup> *id-ul-fitri* (Id-ul-Fitr) is one of the major festivals in the Muslim year. It falls on the first day of the month of *shawwal* (Shawwal) and celebrates the end of the preceding month of *ramadan* (Ramadan).

marshalling the participating lantern clubs, and controlling the immense crowds which would undoubtedly turn out to watch. The provision of adequate 'security' (i.e., the proper policing of the event) was high on the YMMA's agenda. At the same time the government's emergency regulations included a curfew: no one was permitted on the streets of Freetown after midnight and, since lantern parades normally lasted the whole night, this posed a serious obstacle.

Thirdly, the YMMA was penniless. Funds were needed not just to cover the general expenses incurred in organising the event and to supply prizes for the eventual winners but also to provide subsidies to the registered lantern clubs in order for them to participate in the celebrations at all.<sup>15</sup> Thus fund-raising on the part of the YMMA was an immediate priority.

The way in which the YMMA managed to surmount most of its problems (raise funds from reluctant sponsors, manipulate the government into a position where it could hardly refuse to allow the *lantana* celebrations to go ahead, cajole the lantern clubs into accepting the various constraints which the continuing emergency regulations imposed on the event) constituted a masterly display of political manoeuvring and power negotiation which the Organising and Publicity Secretary of the YMMA handled with consummate skill.

The YMCA's first move was to call a meeting of all lantern clubs interested in participating in the proposed *lantana* celebrations: the date, time and venue of the meeting was broadcast over the local radio and spread by word of mouth. This was normal procedure except that in the current climate of uncertainty people were generally reluctant to attend gatherings which could be misrepresented as having sinister or subversive intentions. As it was, no attempt was made by the government to stop the meeting although the authorities did send a number of observers from the CID, and a sprinkling of curious journalists also attended. The meeting was well supported by lantern club representatives all of whom were keen for some sort of parade to take

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<sup>15</sup> It was never customary for the YMMA to subsidise lantern clubs in full. However, given the country's depressing economic climate the Association introduced the practice in the early 1980s of advancing an agreed sum of money to each participating club in order to help the clubs get started with their *lantana* building. See page 86, note 61.

place. However, out of respect for the curfew, and in order to allay any government fears that the celebrations might pose a major security problem, it was agreed that the *lantans* should be paraded from late afternoon onwards and that, instead of plying the whole of the usual route (returning to their home neighbourhoods only at daybreak) they should all process past the Law Courts in the centre of Freetown (where the official YMMA judging of *lantan* processions customarily took place) and then proceed to one of the main government office complexes called the Youyi Building (Fig. 4). There the *lantans* would be left overnight, viewed the following day by interested members of the public, and then collected and returned home by the respective lantern clubs in daylight hours. After a great deal of wrangling it was also agreed that only twenty five or thirty clubs should participate, partly because the YMMA felt it could not realistically expect to raise enough money to subsidise more than a limited number of *lantans* and partly to ensure that all *lantans* would pass the judging point in good time to reach the Youyi Building grounds well before the curfew.<sup>16</sup>

To everyone's surprise this initial meeting between the YMMA and the lantern clubs, and the decision to stage what was now being called a 'Lantern Festival' (to distinguish it from the usual all-night lantern parade) were reported that day by the BBC Africa Service on its regular news programme 'Focus on Africa'. The Sierra Leone government refrained from any comment and this was widely interpreted as a sign that the festival would be allowed to go ahead. To forbid it would now inevitably attract African-wide attention to the fact that the government felt too insecure to allow people onto the streets to celebrate the government's own one-year anniversary.

From then on, the participating lantern clubs concentrated on organising themselves and on building their *lantans* while the YMMA spent the remaining weeks before the festival frantically raising funds and attending to the organisational details involved in making the event a success. The core of active YMMA executive members and a few helpers approached over one hundred businesses in Freetown for financial donations. Any commercial firm willing to make a minimum gift was promised

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<sup>16</sup> YMMA records show that 45 lantern clubs registered for the 1990 lantern parade. Oral and video evidence indicates that over fifty *lantans* actually took part and the last of them did not pass the judging point until 5 am.

acknowledgement in the proposed festival brochure and was allotted a lantern club which then became responsible for advertising the sponsor. Some businesses provided their specific lantern clubs with advertising materials to use during the festival parade, while others promised their clubs a financial bonus if they managed to win a prize. As a result of its fund-raising efforts during the run-up to the festival the YMMA was able to distribute subsidies in several instalments to the clubs in order to help them buy materials for their *lantans*. Eventually about 85% of all the money collected by the YMMA was shared evenly among the registered clubs and the balance (amounting to the equivalent of about £300) was used to cover the administrative costs of the *lantan* festival. Given the fact that the country's official economy was in ruins and that businesses were experiencing an all-time low, the success of the YMMA's fund-raising efforts was remarkable.

Meanwhile lantern clubs were responsible for raising further funds for themselves from neighbours, friends and local dignitaries. Building *lantans* was in itself very expensive and the YMMA subsidy to each club probably covered only a third of the cost of constructing a *lantan*. Moreover, lantern clubs also had to hire musicians (to accompany their *lantans* while they paraded) and to buy cloth for their members' costumes. Spirits, however, were high and, after several years' break in *lantan* building, clubs and *lantan* artists were eager to excel.

Throughout the period the YMMA held regular meetings with lantern club representatives to keep them informed of decisions affecting the festival. Each participating club had to fill a registration form for the YMMA and collect its subsidy money as and when it became available. In addition, the YMMA broadcast announcements over the radio to keep the clubs and the public up-to-date with developments.

At the same time the YMMA wrote formally to NPRC officials informing them of the proposed *lantan* festival and requesting NPRC co-operation. Even the Head of State's Office and the Deputy Head of State were contacted. No replies were forthcoming, however. Written requests were also sent to the appropriate authorities for permission to use the forefront of the Law Court buildings (as the official judging point) and the grounds of the Youyi Building (for the safe-keeping of *lantans*

overnight) and for the provision of police security for the event. The Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service was asked to provide live coverage of the festival and the National Power Authority was requested to ensure that on the night of the festivities the Law Court area, the Youyi Building and the streets of the parade route should be supplied with electricity (Freetown being a city habitually subjected to extensive power-cuts). Still without any word from the government that the *lantana* festival would be allowed to go ahead the YMMA started planning a small brochure and eliciting messages for inclusion in it from various Secretaries of State and eminent people. As the date (27 April) drew near hundreds of invitations were distributed to leading citizens; the *lantana* festival was billed as the YMMA's first, and its Distinguished Grand Chief Patron was publicised as being the Deputy Chairman and Chief Secretary of State, Captain S.A.J. Musa. During the few days preceding the festival the YMMA finalised arrangements for a P.A. system to be hired and installed, chairs for invited guests to be borrowed and transported, and refreshments to be provided to VIPs during the evening parade. Finally, the YMMA contacted about a dozen people whom it considered suitable to act as judges for the event.

The parade of *lantans* was scheduled to take place on the evening of Tuesday 27 April, the first of the three days of public holiday. By the morning of 26 April the YMMA was still awaiting the NPRC's permission for the event to be held. The permission only arrived at midday. A hurried meeting with the Inspector-General of Police, however, revealed that the police wanted the event to be deferred until the evening of the next day in order for it not to coincide with an Independence Day celebration scheduled at State House. The YMMA readily agreed to the new date and the lantern clubs were pleased to have one more day for their last-minute preparations. The change of date was broadcast over the radio, together with a list of conditions imposed by the police on participants. In particular, people were strictly forbidden to carry weapons, bottles or any other dangerous implements and all lantern clubs were ordered to ensure that their *lantana* processions passed the Law Courts by 9 pm.

By the morning of 28 April most of Freetown was in a frenzy of expectation. Some of the groups of musicians hired by the clubs to accompany their *lantans* had been practising all night long - and continued practising during the day - creating a festive air that further increased the general excitement. By 2 pm the police started to

close the main thoroughfares into and through Freetown and by 5 pm the lantern clubs situated farthest away from the centre of the city started to drag their *lantans* on the long journey to the assembly point just east of the Law Courts. From a vantage point along the main dual carriageway leading into Freetown I watched as one lantern club proceeded towards the city; the top of its *lantan* was visible from afar amidst a cloud of dust, and it was surrounded by club members and musicians and followed by probably a thousand or so dancing supporters. The *lantan* festival was underway.

#### 1.4 The *lantan* festival and its aftermath

By 6 pm the thirty one participating *lantan* processions were converging from all parts of Freetown to two designated assembly points in the centre of the city. Each *lantan* was mounted on a low, wheeled iron chassis which was hauled by teams of club members and supporters; this was no mean task given the pot-holed condition of the streets and the weight of each *lantan*.<sup>17</sup> The club members who accompanied their club's *lantan* on its slow progress through Freetown generally wore clothes made from identical cloth or, at the very least, matching T-shirts.<sup>18</sup> They moved rhythmically and as they went they sang a variety of songs practised specially for the occasion. Behind them in each *lantan* procession came the musicians hired by the club accompanied by a throng of supporters. These supporters included club members who could not afford to buy the *aswebi*, as well as non-members drawn from the particular neighbourhood where the *lantan* was built, or from other parts of the city. This motley throng, together with any spectators caught up in the excitement of the procession along the way, often totalled many hundreds of dancing, singing revellers. Notorious for their often rowdy, drunken behaviour (and sometimes bawdy singing) this general *mêlée* of supporters

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<sup>17</sup> All *lantans* carried small generators to provide power for the lights strung round their frames and most *lantans* carried a number of human actors or puppeteers on board (see pages 149-151 and 168-174). These people contributed significantly to the *lantan*'s weight.

<sup>18</sup> This type of club uniform was known as *aswebi*. The Krio term *aswebi* is derived from the Yoruba phrase *aso ebi* meaning 'family cloth' (*aso* 'clothing' and *ebi* 'blood relation'). In Freetown it refers to the practice, on the part of people (especially women) sharing common membership of a particular group, of wearing identical costumes on special occasions (Fyle & Jones 1980:15).

often included people in fancy dress, men in women's costumes, acrobats and entertainers.<sup>19</sup>

In this fashion each *lantana* procession moved slowly along its way to the appropriate assembly point, stopping en route for respite, or to acknowledge and perform for the crowds of onlookers, or to negotiate such obstacles as hanging overhead cables, rough sections of road or badly parked vehicles. Inevitably the two assembly points became jammed with *lantans* and people - club members and supporters mingling with spectators who lined the streets and who happily joined in the dancing and merry-making. The city resounded to the noise of a medley of musical groups competing to attract the most attention for their particular *lantans*, and, as the noise level rose, so the various groups of *lantana* supporters grew more frenzied and the crowds more enthusiastic. Harassed policemen tried to shepherd the *lantana* groups on their way in some semblance of order, but with the tail-back of *lantana* processions stretching right the length of Kissy Road the police often despaired and instead succumbed to the excitement of the moment and to the throb of the beat, and joined in the dancing themselves. From time to time army vehicles on patrol swooped along the streets, their sirens blaring; but their progress was impeded by the crowds which refused to give way to provide them passage, so the soldiers on board, their guns at the ready, usually jumped down and joined in the fun.

By 6 pm not only were the streets of the city crammed with *lantana* processions and onlookers, but the area around the Law Courts (the official judging point) was packed with spectators four to six deep. The judges were in position round a table at the foot of the sweep of steps leading up to the Court entrance; the YMMA executive members (each sporting a T-shirt donated by the German Ambassador and advertising German aid to Sierra Leone) were waiting impatiently. Invited guests were seated along the pavement and on the Court terrace while a number, cameras in hand, paced around waiting for the action to begin. As the P.A. system crackled so the YMMA's Organising and Publicity Secretary welcomed everyone to the parade and invited the

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<sup>19</sup> The Krio term referring to the general throng of supporters following at the back of a *lantana* procession always sounded to me like *bakaff* ('back half'). I have been unable to ascertain whether this word is connected with the verb *bagof* (a variant of *barof*) which means to 'cause a noisy disturbance ... resist authority noisily' (Fyle & Jones 1980:26).

YMMA's Acting President to give the opening speech. Finally, an ex-President of the YMMA was called upon to recite the opening prayers, both Muslim and Christian. Then at last, to everyone's delight, a slow-moving crowd could be seen in the distance bearing down the main street to the judging point. The first *lantan* was approaching (Appendix 13:1 and Appendix 14:2.1).

Built in the shape of a warship the *lantan* measured at least twenty feet long and stood eight to ten feet high on its chassis. It belonged to Tengbeh Town Lantern Club. Seated inside, in front of the ship's bridge, was a club member wearing a cheap, white rubber mask. He represented the ship's European captain and waved benignly in response to the roars of the crowd. Slowly the ship passed by on its journey of several miles to the Youyi Building and in the gathering dusk the electric bulbs fixed inside its frame (and wired to a throbbing generator balanced below on the chassis) glowed brightly under a street banner announcing the '29<sup>th</sup> APRIL REVOLUTION First Anniversary Celebration'. Immediately following the *lantan* the members of the Tengbeh Town Lantern Club moved in procession, wearing their *aswebi* and singing their club's particular songs. As they proceeded so the judges awarded points for the *lantan*, assessed the *aswebi* and the singing, and thereafter, judged the general comportment of the whole group. The YMMA long ago established the custom of judging each *lantan* procession according to these four main categories, awarding prizes in each category (and sub-categories in the case of *lantans*) as well as giving a prize to the club with the highest aggregate of points overall.

After what appeared to be an interminable length of time another *lantan*, quite different from the first, came into sight, borne along, it seemed, on a tide of seething, dancing humanity (App 13:2 and App 14:2.2). This *lantan* comprised an assemblage of life size puppet figures (known as effigies in Freetown<sup>20</sup>) representing (according to the club's own description) 'Masked Devils of Sierra Leone'.<sup>21</sup> Puppet figures of six

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<sup>20</sup> The English term 'effigy' does not have a Krio equivalent in Fyle & Jones (1980) but was used by my Krio speaking consultees to refer to *lantan* puppet figures. They never used the Krio word *popet* (Fyle & Jones, 1980:297) meaning 'puppet'.

<sup>21</sup> The English term 'devil' (*debul* in Krio) refers to what is called a masked dancer or masquerader in the literature on African art. The word *debul* does not carry the negative connotations of the devil in English. In Krio a *maskare* (masquerade) is not a *debul* but a performance by a person who dresses in fancy or bizarre costume, disguises his face (e.g., with coloured powder) and entertains anyone who cares to watch

*debuls* (of different types and origins) were included together with four puppets depicting human figures playing different musical instruments. The *debul* puppets were strikingly similar to actual *debuls*, and, as the group of real musicians accompanying the *lantan* beat appropriate rhythms, the puppets swayed about. Operated by puppeteers (who crouched below the floor of the *lantan* and used rods and strings to control the puppets above) they mimicked the movements of 'real' *debuls* and musicians. The dexterity with which the puppets were manipulated and the way in which they performed to the music brought cheers of appreciation from the spectators, and, as each puppet danced more frenetically so roar upon roar of approval swept through the watching crowds. After performing for the judges the *lantan* was hauled onwards preceded by the mass of club members displaying their *aswebi* and their singing skills and followed by the general mass of supporters and musicians. Slowly the huge entourage passed by the Law Courts as, way ahead, the *lantan* could be seen continuing its progress and performance to the delight of the crowds lining the route.

In time further *lantans* began to pass the Law Courts more quickly and the same judging routine was followed for each *lantan* procession. Early on in the parade came a *lantan* in the form of a mosque carrying several puppets representing human beings performing the ritual of prayer (App 13:3). The members of the club responsible for the *lantan* were all dressed in conventional Islamic style and sang religious songs in Arabic as they accompanied their *lantan*. They moved slowly past the judges in a sedate procession followed by a huge crowd of supporters drawn from their home area several miles west of the centre of Freetown. Other *lantan* processions followed with varied *lantans*: a magnificent replica of the Clock Tower (a major landmark in Freetown); a model of a KLM airliner; the Statue of Liberty; a full-size replica of a London double-decker bus (App 13:4-7). This latter *lantan* with mock headlights illuminating its path,

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him and give him a few coins for his efforts. Masquerading is a common way of raising funds during festive periods such as Christmas, or for special projects such as *lantan* building. The term *debul* is reserved for a physical entity which comprises a standardised costume (depending on the type of *debul*) animated by a member of the group to which the entity belongs. A *debul* connected with a branch of one of the more feared secret societies is perceived as embodying special power and is described as *man pass man*: it is not a mere 'mortal man' (human being) in disguise but something that is, in and of itself, more than human. *Lantans* may include effigies (puppet representations) of certain *debuls* but must not be confused with the *debuls* themselves as appears to have happened in Bravmann's discussion of Al-Buraq (Bravmann 1983:80). *Lantans* and the puppet figures that *lantans* might include were not considered in Freetown to constitute a form of masquerade in any sense of the term, nor were actual *debuls* of any type ever part of a lantern parade. See note 35, page 39 for an explanation of Al-Buraq.

carried fifteen to twenty children in school uniform. Painted boldly across the front of the upper deck was the inscription ‘Clinetonians Lantern Club - Support NPRC - 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary’ and along the side was written ‘Clinetonians School Bus’. In front of the Law Courts a woman conductress stepped off, ushered the children onto the pavement and went through the motions of issuing tickets to more children as they clambered on board. Slowly the bus (with a life-size puppet in the driving seat representing the bus driver) and its bus-load of human passengers moved on, pushed by alternating teams of straining club members. The song which the Clinetown supporters became best remembered for singing that night was one in which the composer (a local musician famed for his catchy tunes and punchy lyrics<sup>22</sup>) castigated Foday Sankoh (the rebel war leader). Over the next couple of years the song became popular throughout Freetown.

By 8.30 pm more than half the lantern clubs still remained at the assembly points awaiting the signal to move forward along the route to the judging point. The Acting President of the YMMA, worried that the parade would extend far beyond the 9 pm deadline, conferred with the Inspector-General of Police and negotiated an extension of the parade time. In fact, the police had little option: to have turned the remaining *lantans* groups back would have caused havoc among the disappointed club supporters and watching spectators. As it was, the parade had so far passed without incident and everyone was happy for it to continue.

The varied *lantans* thus proceeded along the parade route followed by their waves of supporters. One *lantan* represented St George slaying the Dragon and two portrayed the Sierra Leone Coat of Arms. Another entitled ‘Animal Farm’ depicted a camel, a horse and a lion and several other *lantans* depicted aspects of the NPRC ‘Revolution’(App 13:8-13). Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s historic visit to Sierra Leone in 1961 was commemorated by one *lantan* that depicted a glistening black Rolls Royce containing puppet representations of the Queen, Sierra Leone’s first Prime Minister and a chauffeur (App 13:14-15). The themes of other *lantans* included a Funfair, complete with big wheel and merry-go-round (App 13:16), a popular type of musical ensemble from up-country (playing *bubu* music), and the crowning of a famous, late nineteenth century chief called Bai Bureh. Particularly exciting to the

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 7 for further information about the composer, Oba Koso.

watching crowds were three *lantans* each representing Madam Yoko (a famous female Mende chief of the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the performance of the Sande Society dancers and *debul*.<sup>23</sup> The most outstanding of the three (App 13:17) featured the puppet figure of Madam Yoko sitting at one end of the *lantan*, fanned by her messenger and flanked by her adviser blowing a horn. The puppet figure of a senior Sande dancer was mounted on a pole and a smaller puppet dancer performed at the front of the *lantan*. Three further puppets depicted Sande girls playing drums. The puppet figure of the Sande *debul* itself emerged from a hut on the *lantan*, performed in front of Madam Yoko and then retreated. All these figures were fully articulated, life-sized string and/or rod puppets wearing coloured cloth or raffia costumes in keeping with their characters. The *lantan* was preceded during the parade by three costumed members of the male Poro Society from the neighbourhood where the *lantan* was constructed.<sup>24</sup>

It was not until 11 pm that the last *lantan* and its retinue finally passed the Law Courts and the weary judges, guests, YMMA officials and the crowd gradually began to disperse. Not till the next day did the YMMA learn that in fact the last *lantans* were still being parked at the Youyi Building in the early hours of the morning and that many lantern club members either slept at the site or made their way back to their homes long after the curfew deadline. The police, however, took no action, relieved no doubt that the whole event - which must have brought tens of thousands of people onto the streets that night - had passed so successfully.

During the morning of 29 April hundreds of people crowded the grounds of the Youyi Building to view the *lantans* there. At the same time the nearby National

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<sup>23</sup> The Sande Society is a female secret society particularly associated with the Mende people. It is secret in the sense that it guards and transmits secret knowledge, values and ideals that regulate the lives of its members and engages in rituals known only within its membership. Its principal *debul* (called *sowe* in Mende) has a distinctive black wooden headpiece which is well-known among Western art historians. Formerly every Mende female was initiated into the Sande Society which was once also strong among the Sherbro, Temne, Vai and Gola peoples of Sierra Leone and Liberia. It is not known how active the Society currently is in post-civil war Sierra Leone. In English and Krio the Sande Society is known as the Bundu Society (derived from the Sherbro-Bullom term *bondo*) and is known by this name among its Temne practitioners in Freetown. See Phillips 1995: 188.

<sup>24</sup> The Poro Society is a male secret society that exerts/exerted considerable political and economic influence among the Mende and neighbouring ethnic groups; all Mende boys used to be initiated into Poro at puberty (Phillips 1995:190).

Stadium was packed with people attending the official NPRC First Anniversary celebrations presided over by the Head of State, and, at their conclusion, streams of visitors poured across to take a look at the *lantans*. A short cloud-burst wrought considerable damage to the more fragile *lantans* but, as a number of spectators were heard to remark, ‘*Lantans* are for the night’ so by morning their glory was in any case past.

In the afternoon the various lantern clubs began to prepare to return their *lantans* home. Many brought their musicians with them to the Youyi Building to provide accompaniment on the long trip back, and some clubs came with their members in full *aswebi*. One by one the *lantans* were dragged back onto the streets (which, given the fact it was a public holiday, were fairly free of traffic). Very soon crowds began to assemble at road junctions and along the pavements to watch the *lantans* and their retinues pass by. Those *lantans* which incorporated puppets performed along the way, to the delight of onlookers. By the late afternoon the *lantans* and the watching crowds were spread miles across Freetown but by nightfall all the *lantans* were back in their home neighbourhoods where they continued to provide enjoyment for their supporters till curfew time.

Throughout the day YMMA officials were congratulating each other on the success of the event. Unruliness, inter-group rivalry and fighting, as well as drunkenness had, apparently, become a hall-mark of lantern parades in recent years but no ugly incidents had marred the 1993 celebration. Although members of the NPRC government had not attended officially, it soon became known that the Head of State and his Deputy had both been present incognito at the evening parade, watching from the crowded roadsides. Moreover, on the day of 29 April several senior NPRC officials admitted good-humouredly that the *lantan* celebration had been the highlight of the three-day public holiday. By the evening of 29 April the YMMA had collated the judges’ marks and broadcast the names of the prize-winners of the various categories over the radio. All that remained was to organise a prize-giving ceremony (which customarily took place a few days after a lantern parade). However, this was impossible until the YMMA could raise more money, for while its fund-raising efforts had been sufficient to stage the event they had not produced a surplus to cover the quite substantial cash prizes which the YMMA had promised the winning clubs. The

problem of finding prize money unfortunately proved intractable because as soon as the *lantan* celebration was over and life returned to normal the fervour of the event was lost. The YMMA made desultory efforts to raise funds (but with little success) and consequently the winning clubs complained vociferously that they had been cheated of their due rewards.

### **1.5 Background to the lantern parade of 7 February 1997**

Despite the euphoria of the early months of 1993 the civil war in Sierra Leone dragged on and by November 1994 (when I returned for seven months to undertake more intensive fieldwork) the crisis had deepened. In March 1995 the rebels actually mounted an attack on the outskirts of Freetown where they were repelled only after heavy fighting. Against the background of continuing violence the elections scheduled for March 1996 managed to go ahead. The elected civilian government entered into negotiations with the rebel movement and in November 1996 signed a peace accord in Abidjan with its leader, Foday Sankoh. It seemed that the war, which had been ravaging Sierra Leone for nearly six years, was at last over and a period of reconstruction could begin.

Hoping as I did every year that a lantern parade might take place at the end of Ramadan, I arranged to visit Freetown in the month of Ramadan in January and February 1997. In the second week of January I received an unexpected telephone call from the Organising and Publicity Secretary of the YMMA: the YMMA executive was there and then holding a meeting and had taken the momentous decision to organise a lantern parade on the eve of Id-ul-Fitr - the customary date for lantern parades. The YMMA was, therefore, inviting me to come to Freetown as its guest to witness the parade. I explained that arrangements were already in place for me to fly to Freetown on 20 January.

### **1.6 Preparations for the lantern parade**

On 22 January I found myself meeting with the executive members of the YMMA in the offices of the National Council for the Prevention of Alcoholism and Drug Dependency - a non-governmental organisation run by the YMMA's Organising and Publicity Secretary. I was formally requested to assist the YMMA in producing a

brochure for the forthcoming parade and I agreed. Meanwhile, letters appealing for sponsorship from the business community and from private individuals were already awaiting distribution having been signed by the President of the YMMA.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the proposed lantern parade the YMMA had also decided to organise a series of sporting activities on Id-ul-Fitr day, culminating in a football match (between two first division Freetown football clubs) and in a cross country cycling race. The YMMA hoped thereby to revive its former custom of arranging sporting events over the Muslim holiday.

Two days later I returned to the same offices, which were situated on Kissy Road in the east end of Freetown. It was Friday afternoon and the streets were teeming with worshippers leaving the various mosques after Friday prayers. From the top floor office I was surveying the activity in the street when I became aware of a more strident noise above the traffic and seething mass of humanity below me - that of a group of approaching protesters. It transpired that a fundamentalist group of Muslims was demonstrating against the forthcoming lantern parade (which was already being widely publicised through the media). Their leader, Sheikh Mohammed Mujcabah was a native of Fourah Bay which is one of Freetown's original Aku Krio settlements dating to the 1830s.<sup>26</sup> Educated in Iran he had returned to Fourah Bay a few years previously and was well-known for preaching a stricter version of Islam than was generally practised by most Freetown Muslims. Not unsurprisingly considerable debate was generated by that Friday's demonstration which comprised the Sheikh and about one hundred of his young followers who paraded through Freetown holding a placard which stated "Islam says the Lantern Parade is prohibited". The demonstration was widely reported by the media and over the next ten days letters expressing a variety of opinions poured into the editorial offices of a number of local newspapers, and various radio stations carried news items and discussion programmes on the subject. One particular station (the Voice of the Handicapped) which was well known for its outspoken phone-in programmes featured the debate day after day.

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<sup>25</sup> The President of the YMMA was the same person who had assumed the position of Acting President of the YMMA in 1993. See page 18.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the phrases 'Aku Krio' and 'Muslim Krio' see pages 49-50.

The essence of the Sheikh's argument appeared to be that it was inappropriate to hold a lantern parade on the eve of Id-ul-Fitr, immediately at the end of Ramadan, since the parade encouraged behaviour (such as the drinking of alcohol) that was not only contrary to the tenets of Islam but was particularly damaging to the state of holiness achieved by anyone who had observed the fast. Moreover, the Sheikh claimed that the all-night celebrations left people too tired to attend the Id prayers the following morning. Sheikh Mujcabah then declared that he would lead a delegation to the government requesting that it should change the date of the lantern parade from the eve of Id-ul-Fitr (which is locally known as the Watchnight) to another date, such as Independence Day. He also declared that he would write to the YMMA executive asking its members to discuss matters with him.

The YMMA, however, remained undaunted. As one executive member explained, the 'flavour' of lantern parades could only be maintained if they coincided with the end of fasting. Furthermore, to change the parade date from the end of Ramadan would fly in the face of tradition and would imply that the fathers and forefathers of Freetown's indigenous Muslim community had been remiss in the practice of their faith when they introduced the lantern parade to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Another YMMA member claimed that the Sheikh's demonstration was generally unpopular: he was accompanied only by youngsters and by his students, and no one of any age or maturity (both of which are highly respected attributes in Sierra Leone) was with him. However, the situation clearly ruffled the wider Muslim community in Freetown and the government made it known over the week-end that the Minister of Social Services would hold a meeting of all registered Muslim groups at the beginning of the coming week. At the same time, the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress (which was recognised at the time as being the most authoritative Islamic body in Freetown if not in the whole country) decided to send a delegation to address the weekly Sunday morning meeting of YMMA officials and the representatives of all participating lantern clubs.<sup>27</sup> The situation was further complicated by the fact that the

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<sup>27</sup> It was usual during the month preceding a lantern parade for such weekly meetings to be held in the primary school attached to the Islamiya (Mandingo) mosque in the east end of Freetown. They served as the major, formal channel of communication between the YMMA and the lantern clubs. I attended the meetings in the run-up to the abortive 1991 parade, during preparations for the 1993 *lantan* celebrations and again in advance of the 1997 parade.

head of the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress was none other than a cousin of President Tejan Kabba. The Congress was subject to a number of pressures from other sections of the Muslim community, not least from the Board of Imams (drawn from all of Freetown's mosques). An influential body, it seemed unlikely to oppose the Sheikh since its headquarters were situated in his home compound.<sup>28</sup>

The leaders of the Congress duly addressed members of the YMMA and lantern clubs on 26 January and suggested a compromise: the forthcoming lantern -parade should be held on the evening of Id-ul-Fitr itself so that people could already have participated in the morning prayers which mark the Id festival. However, once the Congress delegation had departed the meeting agreed almost unanimously to reject the suggested compromise and to hold the parade on the Watchnight, which, depending on the sighting of the moon, was expected to fall on 8 February. It was further agreed that any modification to the date of future parades should only be considered after the conclusion of the 1997 event. However, throughout the next week the issue continued to be debated furiously by the media, creating uncertainty as to whether the much publicised parade would actually take place, and, if it did so, on what date it would be held.<sup>29</sup> Clearly the matter was a highly sensitive one within the Muslim community and had become the focus of considerable political negotiation.

Meanwhile, the YMMA continued with its arrangements. A high priority was to raise sufficient funds to sponsor all the lantern clubs (by now over forty) that had registered for the parade. The Organising and Publicity Secretary generously agreed to lend the YMMA a substantial sum of money and the YMMA President supplemented this with a personal loan of his own. Contributions from the business community were slow in coming, however, and this was blamed on the climate of uncertainty surrounding the parade. Fortunately, one prominent businessman saved the situation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sheikh Mujcabah's house in Fourah Bay had been burnt down in a suspected arson attack in the early 1990s and he had taken the opportunity to rebuild it and to create office accommodation, part of which he used for his own purposes and part of which he let out to the Board of Imams.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Expo Times*: 1 Feb 1997 ('Govt Says No Ban'); *The New Sierra Leonean*: 6 Feb 1997 ('Cow Skin and Lantern Parade'); *Standard Times*: 7 Feb 1997 ('Why our Imams are Angry').

<sup>30</sup> The businessman in question was Alfred Akibo-Betts, a former Minister and a leading politician in the All People's Congress party which had ruled Sierra Leone for the twenty five years preceding the 1992 military take-over. He was also a former Chairman of Freetown City Council and was responsible for

He made a major donation to the YMMA and personally earmarked which ten of the participating clubs he wished to sponsor.

My own concern was to assemble the material required for the proposed brochure. I found myself collecting, drafting, compiling and typing most of it, as well as contributing a short article on the history of the *lantan* tradition myself. At the same time my ownership of a portable word processor made me an ideal secretarial assistant for the Organising and Publicity Secretary who led an itinerant existence moving daily between the offices of the many organisations with which he had connections in Freetown. As a leading member of the Sierra Leone Chamber of Commerce he was able to find me a desk in their offices for several days and later I was installed in a room behind the main reception area of the First Foreign Exchange Bureau in the very heart of Freetown. It was at these unlikely venues that I typed letter after letter for the YMMA. Some requested and acknowledged donations; others invited the YMMA's selection of judges to attend and judge the parade and yet others invited selected VIPs to act as patrons of the event. Letters also had to be sent requesting permission from the appropriate authorities for use of the forefront of the Law Courts building on the part of the YMMA, invited guests and judges and, thereafter, organising for electricity and a public address system to be available there on the night of the parade. Letters were then sent to local hotels and soft drinks manufacturers requesting them to donate food and drinks for VIP guests and judges. Since the YMMA had agreed that clubs that so wished could, after the parade, park their *lantans* overnight in Freetown, a suitable venue, eventually the forecourt of the Youyi Building, had to be found. At the same time data on the clubs, *lantans* and parade route had to be supplied to the police and to the media, a series of press releases were issued and requests were sent to various newspapers and radio stations and to the national television network asking for full coverage of the parade. As the expected date of the parade approached so invitations had to be typed and distributed to people who were considered likely to be interested in attending, notes for the judges and score sheets were prepared, together with draft certificates - of merit (for the winners of prizes), of participation (for all clubs) and of appreciation (for all who had contributed to the success of the event). Letters of thanks

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organising a special lantern parade which marked the city's Bicentenary in 1987. (See page 88.) By 1997 he was generally thought to be harbouring further political ambitions.

were drafted in readiness to be sent out to sponsors after the parade and a table of results was prepared for completion and publication the day after the parade.<sup>31</sup>

Many of these matters were dealt with during the third week of Ramadan when speculation about the fate of the parade was still widespread. The President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Alhaji Tejan Kabba graciously declined an invitation to act as Distinguished Grand Chief Patron of the event but in his letter he expressed his gratitude to the YMMA '...for once again organising a traditional landmark in the Holy Month of Ramadan that was about to be lost sight of...'<sup>32</sup> In fact, it was only after the President himself spoke with YMMA officials and then with Sheikh Mujcabah that the timing of the parade was settled just a week or so before it was due to take place. The President made it clear that in a democracy such an event must be allowed to go ahead unhindered on whatever night its organisers chose, provided that there was no evidence it might endanger public security and that adequate forces were available to police it. As was pointed out by a leading Muslim (who was both a great friend of President Kabba and an executive member of the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress), anyone who objected to the parade could simply stay at home for its duration.<sup>33</sup>

Once news of President Kabba's stance became known, active interest in the forthcoming parade took a remarkable upturn. A number of businessmen who previously had refrained from any financial commitment agreed to provide sponsorship funds and several of the people whom the YMMA had invited to act as judges sent letters of acceptance. During the last week before the parade, activity on the part of YMMA officials became frenetic particularly when it became clear that the Watchnight was expected to fall a day earlier than anticipated, on Friday 7 February.

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<sup>31</sup> My own role as a volunteer secretary was never questioned by anyone, perhaps because soon after my arrival in Freetown in 1997 several newspapers mentioned in their reports on the forthcoming parade that a researcher from Britain had arrived to study the event (e.g., *Punch*: Monday January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1997, p 8). However, my ability to shed light on the history of the *lantán* tradition met with disdain on the part of the parade's chief business sponsor (Alfred Akibo-Betts) who let it be known that no foreigner could possibly be well-informed on the issue.

<sup>32</sup> Letter dated 29 January 1997 (Ref. No. Op. 1/49) from the Office of the President to the YMMA.

<sup>33</sup> Personal conversation with Alahji Dr. Ahmadu Fadlu Deen, then Acting Chairman of the Interim Electoral Commission.

This unexpected news inevitably had an impact on the lantern clubs which, by then, were making their final preparations for the parade. Some of the *lantans* I saw in the making seemed unlikely to get finished in time but by working day and night the *lantan* builders and their assistants proved equal to the task. By the evening of 7 February the moon had been officially sighted, the last day of the fast month was finally over and the first end-of-Ramadan lantern parade for seven years was underway as clubs situated miles away on the outskirts of Freetown began the laborious task of hauling their *lantans* to the city centre. As more *lantan* processions started out so neighbourhoods in different corners of Freetown began to assume a festive air as people paused to watch as their local *lantan*, surrounded by its club's members and supporters, musicians and well-wishers, slowly passed on its way.

### **1.7 The lantern parade and its aftermath**

Since the lantern parade was to be an all-night affair, invited guests did not start assembling at the Law Courts until about 10 pm in the expectation that the *lantans* would start processing past the judging point sometime during the next hour. Already the roads in central Freetown were crowded with eager spectators and a feeling of general excitement pervaded the city. Time passed and the crowds began to congest the streets leaving little room for the *lantan* processions to pass on their way. It so happened that many of the major streets were in the process of being resurfaced and huge new drains were being dug alongside the pavements. The crowds surged in front of the trenches in the roadway fronting the Law Courts and the police were reluctant to force them back, fearing that, if they did so, people might fall into the trenches behind. A number of VIP visitors watching from the Law Court steps were clearly apprehensive as they saw the crowds surging closer together. As the police half-heartedly attempted to control the crush, the Director of the United States Information Service (who was among the guests) constantly muttered 'Too late, too late' in a voice filled with trepidation. He clearly thought that the crowd was out of control.

At about this time, however, people appeared in front of the steps of the Law Court building carrying armfuls of the lantern parade brochure.<sup>34</sup> Sent for printing at

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix 2 for a photocopy of this brochure.

the very last minute the brochure's production had been further delayed by arguments between the YMMA and the printer when the latter realised that a Westerner had been involved in the brochure's compilation. Assuming that money was no object, the printer more than doubled the estimated cost of printing it and only at the very last minute was the dispute resolved and a compromise reached. Amazingly the brochures reached their intended destination just in time. On sale at Le1,000 the increasingly restless VIP guests began to purchase copies and peruse the contents as they waited for the procession of *lantans* to start arriving at the judging point.

Eventually, making slow progress through the pressing tide of onlookers, the *lantan* processions started to pass the Law Courts. Each lantern club procession stopped in front of the judges in the usual way and the club members performed their songs and their *lantan* before they slowly moved on, followed by their musicians and supporters. Often, because of the crush of spectators it was difficult to distinguish where one procession ended and the next began, but at other times the interval between one *lantan* and the next seemed interminably long.

A number of clubs paraded *lantans* that were identical to those they built in 1993. For example, Clinetonians Lantern Club built a double decker bus and Ishrine Lantern Club an aeroplane (App 13:18-19). Kissy PWD Lantern Club's *lantan* again represented St. George and the Dragon, but in 1997 they improved the performance by producing real flames from the dragon's mouth (App 13:20). In 1993 only one conventional ship *lantan* had been built but in 1997 several such *lantans* featured in the parade. In particular, King Tom Lantern Club (which had always been famous for its ship *lantans*) built a magnificent *lantan* in the form of a vessel named 'HMS Clarkson' after the first Governor of Sierra Leone (App 13:21 and App 14:3.1). It carried a crew of club members dressed in sailors' uniforms and when it stopped in front of the Law Courts the gang plank was lowered and the ship's captain descended from the bridge to the road below and saluted the judges.

Other themes used in 1993 were repeated in the 1997 parade, such as Madam Yoko and the Sande Dancers, Dance Troupe and Funfair (App 13:22-24) while other popular themes were re-introduced, such as Marriage Ceremony and Jolly Festival (App 13:25-26). One *lantan*, however, represented a topic never built before; it depicted the

Muppet Show (as seen in the TV puppet series) with all the animal puppets (three to four foot high representations of the muppets) playing musical instruments (App 13:27).

Recent political events in Sierra Leone (namely the Handing Over of Government to President Tejan Kabba, the Peace Conference and the Signing of the Peace Accord – all 1996 events) inspired a number of *lantans* (App 13:28). In view of the fact that the lantern parade marked the end of Ramadan it was hardly surprising that Islamic themes featured prominently. In addition to Aberdeen Ferry Road Lantern Club (which built the only mosque in the 1993 parade) a number of other clubs chose to build mosques with worshippers, and several clubs combined a mosque with the effigy of Al-Buraq.<sup>35</sup> Lion Mountain Lantern Club's *lantan* depicted the familiar pink-faced female human head of the horse adorned with long black hair and a crown. Its magnificent feathered wings pointed backwards along the sides of the animal, and across its back hung a replica saddle cloth beautifully inscribed with Arabic script (App 13:29). Babylon Lantern Club produced an equally stunning Al-Buraq but with a more elaborate crown and a long feather-like tail (App 13:30 and App 14:3.2).

Another Islamic theme which inspired a spectacular *lantan* was the story of Antar and the Kafiri.<sup>36</sup> Built by Vimto Lantern Club it featured a Muslim warrior on horseback wielding a sword over his heathen opponent, followed by a camel (led by a footservant and bearing a woman on its back). At each end of the *lantan* were placed six-foot high replicas of Vimto bottles, advertising the soft-drinks company that sponsored the club (App 13:31-32).

Altogether forty one *lantans* processed past the judging point during the night of 7-8 February. Sometimes they moved quite quickly but more often they progressed painfully slowly. It transpired after the parade that nearly every lantern club had experienced problems with the chassis and wheels of its *lantan* as a result of the long distances travelled over rough and pot-holed roads. One *lantan* - a mosque from

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<sup>35</sup> *al-buraq* (Arabic) is the winged horse that Muslims believe carried the Prophet Mohammed on his mystical night journey (*isra*) from Mecca to Jerusalem and then on his nocturnal ascent (*al-miraj*) to the dome of the seven heavens (Bravmann 1983:74). See page 155.

<sup>36</sup> Known also as Nfa'Ali and the Kafiri. See page 154.

Calaba Town on the very outskirts of Greater Freetown - suffered a major breakdown and failed to reach the Law Courts building at all. Despite everything, however, the spectators and judges remained in place until the last *lantana* procession passed by at 7 am on 8 February just as day broke. Thereafter the crowds melted away and the last lantern clubs pushed their *lantans* wearily towards the Youyi Building where the majority of *lantans* were already parked. There they remained on view to the public till the afternoon when the clubs reassembled their supporters, collected their *lantans* and dragged them through the city back to their home neighbourhoods.

For the YMMA, however, there remained much to do and on the morning of Sunday 9 February the marks from the judges' score sheets were collated, checked and cross-checked and then listed in winning order. The results were then despatched to the national radio stations and broadcast to the public. Inevitably some clubs, expecting a winning position and failing to achieve it, were bitterly disappointed, while others were surprised by their own unexpected success.

I learnt later that the 1997 results in some of the *lantana* categories were extremely unpopular among the clubs and I planned to investigate this further. The judges' selections, however, were not the only aspect of the parade that proved controversial. One lantern club from the Magazine Cut area of Freetown reported that on the night of the parade its *lantana* had been destroyed by members of the congregation at the Fula Mosque past which the *lantana* had to be taken en route to the Law Courts for judging.<sup>37</sup> The YMMA promptly contacted the Minister of Transport and Communication (who was a leading Fula politician) and requested his assistance in settling the affair. The club itself claimed to have exercised great restraint in the face of the loss of its *lantana* and had refrained from retaliating.

Similar restraint under provocation was apparently shown by another lantern club (Mighty Endeavour) which complained to the YMMA of harassment several days after the parade. Its builder (known as Tipo) had once been the apprentice of Eustace

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<sup>37</sup> In 1997 the Fula celebrated the end of Ramadan a day later than the rest of the Muslim population and hence were still fasting and praying at the time of the lantern parade. The Fula in Sierra Leone are part of the broader Fula diaspora in West Africa and have never fully integrated into the Sierra Leone national fabric and have never participated as a group in the *lantana* tradition. See Jalloh 1997 & 1999 and Bah 1998.

Yaskey who was the founder of a neighbouring club called Super Combo.<sup>38</sup> An expert *lantan* builder, Eustace had been beaten by Tipo the last time the two competed in a Freetown lantern parade in the 1980s. The rivalry between the builders and the two clubs was intense and much of the controversy surrounding the results of the competition derived from the fact that neither of Tipo's two *lantans* (one built for Mighty Endeavour and the other for Kissy Central Lantern Club) had won prizes, whilst Eustace Yaskey's *lantan* had won first prize for Super Combo Lantern Club. On the evening of 10 February at about 11 pm members of Super Combo paraded down nearby Patton Street, where Mighty Endeavour was based, shouting abusive language at Tipo and throwing missiles, damaging property and wounding some bystanders. Mighty Endeavour promptly complained to the YMMA and one of its co-opted officials, a lawyer, was asked to investigate the matter. Suggestions were even made that Super Combo should be disqualified as a result of its members' behaviour.

These problems had not been resolved by the time I left Sierra Leone on 15 February nor had a prize-giving ceremony been arranged. The YMMA had found it impossible to raise prize money in 1993 and was, therefore, doubly concerned not to fail in 1997. A letter, which arrived from Sierra Leone in early March proved that, indeed, the YMMA had been successful:

... Jenny, YMMA had done the presentation ceremony of awards, prizes to winners and sponsors of the 34 Annual Lantern Parade, which was held at Paramount Hotel on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> March 1997. Dr. Alhaji Sheku Tejan-Kamara is in Town for the ceremony. Dr. Alhaji Amadu Fadlu Deen was the Chairman for the ceremony and the distinguished guest speaker was Dr. Yembe Mansaray - Minister of Tourism and Culture and Mr. and Mrs. Akibo Betts witnessed this great ceremony. Dr. Alhaji Amadu Fadlu Deen declared the presentation ceremony open with a silent prayers in the Muslim and Christian faiths. He also told audience that this is a rich culture, that we should always preserve and have respect for, and in the future we should be preparing for a well bumper festival for touristic attraction. The Minister of Tourism and Culture congratulates YMMA and the lantern clubs and builders for this wonderful work in Cultural Arts and designing and he will take a message of proposal for his SLPP government to look after, so that they can plan to have a touristic attraction ... and the government should also attract their attention in helping the youths and encourage them to do more Arts work and designing for their future welfare. He

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<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 6, Figure 6 and Appendices 6 and 8 for information on Freetown *lantan* builders.

also said that they should establish this Arts in primary school and their institution of learning. The vote of thanks was given by Mr. Muctarru Williams - Chairman of Crojimmy Lantern Club. Dr. Sheku Tejan Kamara congratulates the lantern groups and builders for their comportments and what their critics are expecting to fail to expectation. He also said the date of the lantern parade will remain unchanged and they are determined to promote the lantern culture in Sierra Leone and extend profound thanks to the British born lady, Mrs. Jenny Oram for her tireless efforts promoting their lantern culture in Sierra Leone ...<sup>39</sup>

Clearly the YMMA had managed through its prize-giving ceremony both to salvage its reputation with the lantern clubs and, at the same time, make a statement regarding the future of the *lantana* tradition (and, by implication, the YMMA's own future) in Freetown. All seemed set for the lantern parade to re-establish itself in the role it had assumed over the past century as a major end-of-Ramadan celebration, and to carve for itself a new role as a national festival of international fame.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Letter to Mrs. J. Oram from Mr. M.S. Tejan Cole, postmarked 5 March 1997.

<sup>40</sup> However, the events following the overthrow of President Tejan Kabba's government at the end of May 1997 placed not just the future of the *lantana* tradition into jeopardy but the survival of Sierra Leone as a modern nation state in doubt.

## Chapter 2

### THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LANTAN TRADITION IN FREETOWN: 1895-1945

#### 2.1 Introduction

Celebrations in Freetown during or at the end of the month of Ramadan have a long history and have not always involved the practice of building and parading *lantans*. Parading *lantan*-type floats is not a specifically Sierra Leonean phenomenon and by using a combination of published, archival and oral sources it is possible to trace the introduction of the practice into Freetown to the early 1890s and to locate its origins within the *fanaal* tradition in The Gambia and Senegal.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores these wider origins of the *lantan* tradition, the emergence of the tradition in Freetown and the first fifty years of its history there. Chapter 3 then examines the transformation of the tradition in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The intention is to provide an historical framework within which to situate the main body of this thesis which is devoted to the *lantans* themselves (to *lantan* builders, *lantan* imagery and *lantan* evaluation) and to concepts of art and performance as manifested through *lantans* and through related cultural forms.

#### 2.2 The tradition's roots in nineteenth century West Africa

The earliest record of a *lantan* procession in Freetown dates to 1895. It took place on Lailut-ul-Kadri, a few nights before the end of the Muslim month of Ramadan<sup>2</sup> when

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<sup>1</sup> Gamble 1989:1. According to Gamble the Wolof word *fanaal* is of European origin, ultimately derived from the Greek words *phanos* or *phanarion*. 'In European usage it meant a fire or a lantern put on a high place to serve as a landmark or signal during the night, and the word was also used for a lantern hoisted on a ship to show its position, the light here often being in a grilled cage.' Gambians refer to floats in the plural as *fanaals*. I refer to the tradition of float building in both The Gambia and Senegal as the *fanaal* tradition. I use the phrase 'float tradition' to encompass both the *lantan* and the *fanaal* traditions in West Africa. For more information on Gambian *fanaals* see Appendix 3.

<sup>2</sup> *lailut-ul-kadri* (Arabic) is the most important and most holy night of the whole of the fast month and falls on or around the 27<sup>th</sup> night when Muslims commemorate the beginning of the revelation of the Koran to the Prophet Mohammed.

A vast congregation of Moslems of both sexes and of all ages and sizes, marched through the Streets of the city, with paper lanterns, large paper boats, curiously devised and splendidly lit up, singing low plaintive ditties all the time ...<sup>3</sup>

Newspaper reports in Freetown refer to similar end-of-Ramadan processions being held in various years in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but those reports prior to 1895 do not mention *lantans*.<sup>4</sup> The night processions were variously described as ‘marking the burial of the moon’, as ‘carrying the moon home’ and as ‘escorting the moon’.<sup>5</sup> They celebrated the departure (disappearance or death) of the moon towards the end of Ramadan and anticipated the appearance of the new moon that heralds the completion of the month of fasting. Coinciding with the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri these processions were already being criticised by some devout Muslims as inappropriate to the proper practice of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

The most detailed description of late 19<sup>th</sup> century *lantans* refers to paper representations of a mosque and of a ship. The mosque was

...made out of colored paper and mounted on wheels. It was about as large as an ordinary hut, with windows and doors complete; as well as the minarets and dome, as seen in the Mosque at Mountain Cut [a neighbourhood in Freetown]. This paper Mosque was brilliantly lighted and presented a most splendid appearance. Its size we should say was about fifteen feet by ten and the proportions were exact and admirable; the *tout ensemble* reflected intense credit on the artistic taste of the designer. The other turn out (the usual paper vessel) with masts, flags, *galore*, was not quite so attractive as the other - although it appeared to have drawn a much larger following than its more pretentious rival.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly the *lantans* were most impressive and their construction demanded a considerable degree of skill and organisation on the part of their makers. An intriguing question is how, when and where this float-building tradition originated. Oral sources

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<sup>3</sup> *SLT*: March 30 1895.

<sup>4</sup> *SLT*: April 22 1893; April 7 1894; March 14 1896; February 11 1899.

<sup>5</sup> The Krio expression *ker mun na rod* literally means ‘to take the moon on the road’. *Ker (go) na rod* means to ‘see a visitor off by going with him on the initial stages of his return journey’ (Fyle and Jones 1980:171).

<sup>6</sup> *SLT*: March 21 1896. See page 97.

<sup>7</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896.

in Freetown assert that the custom of building and parading *lantans* came from the Senegambian region and, given the existence of a float building tradition there during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the well-established sea trade that closely linked communities along this part of the West Coast of Africa, such a derivation seems most likely.

European travellers to Senegal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the first to comment on the tradition of parading *lanternes* there.<sup>8</sup> Edelestan Jardin who visited West Africa between 1845 and 1848 described '*la fête des lanternes*' one Christmas on Gorée Island: '*Aussitôt que le nuit arrive on les voit tous armés de lanternes en papier de diverses couleurs, représentant des maisons, des clochers etc.*'<sup>9</sup> He seems to be describing hand-held paper models (representing architectural forms like houses). Since he called them *lanternes* and they were paraded at night one can assume that they were illuminated. Some years later in 1862 an English traveller, W. Winwood Reade, visited Sedhu (in present day southern Senegal) arriving on Christmas Eve in time for the 'Feast of Lanterns'.

A few minutes after I had ridden up, sounds of music were heard, and a crowd of blacks came to the door, carrying the model of a ship, made of paper, and illuminated from within, and hollowed pumpkins also lighted up for the occasion. ...<sup>10</sup>

In The Gambia and in Senegal, a paper float like the one Winwood Reade saw (App 13:33) is called a *fanaal* in Wolof and several references to processions in Senegal that included such *fanaal* floats date to the 1870s. In 1877 M. Eugene Blanguernon wrote an account, accompanied by an engraving (App 13:34), of what is clearly a parade of *fanaals* and hand-lanterns. The *fanaals* in the illustration depict a mosque and a sailing ship.<sup>11</sup> The parade took place on the night of 24 December 1876 in St. Louis and, interestingly, coincided with, and jointly celebrated, the Muslim

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<sup>8</sup> See page 13, note 4 for use of the terms lantern, *lanterne* and *lantana*.

<sup>9</sup> Gamble personal correspondence. (Reference to *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines* (Université de Dakar) No 2, 1972:254.)

<sup>10</sup> Winwood Reade 1864:399.

<sup>11</sup> Schneider 1982:94 (from *Le Journal Illustré* 15 April 1877:126-127). See also Gamble 1989:4-8.

festival of Id-ul-Kabir.<sup>12</sup> A few years later L. J. B. Berenger-Feraud referred to the tradition (which, he implied, customarily took place every Christmas Eve) when individual hand-held *lanternes* and a *lanterne monumentale* were paraded through the streets of Gorée.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear then that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the tradition of building *fanaals* had become firmly established in different parts of Senegal although, according to Berenger-Feraud, this tradition was most popular in Gorée. The first reference to the tradition in Bathurst (Banjul) in the Gambia dates to Christmas 1893 where ‘There were athletic sports and the usual lanterns made in different shapes and sizes embellished with tissue papers of the most brilliant colours ...’<sup>14</sup> *Fanaal* floats were obviously a familiar Christmas spectacle by that date.

It is impossible to determine exactly how and when this *fanaal* tradition emerged in either Senegal or The Gambia. In his summary of written sources for the tradition David Gamble implies that it probably existed in Gorée and St. Louis by the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (at which time both settlements were occupied by the British, - the former from 1800 to 1817 and the latter from 1809 to 1817). On relinquishing their rule the British founded Bathurst and encouraged people from Gorée and St. Louis to settle there. Gamble suggests that these early settlers (some of whom were boat builders) brought with them from their former home areas the tradition of building and parading paper floats and hand-lanterns.<sup>15</sup> If Gamble is correct then the tradition probably existed in Senegal by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Only one scholar, Judith Bettelheim, has attempted to research the origins of the tradition further.<sup>16</sup> She dismisses as unlikely a northern Senegalese source associated with French colonialism, or a British colonial source in Gorée (given that no similar traditions ever existed in Britain or France). Nevertheless, she notes that 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>12</sup> *id-ul-kabir* (Arabic) also known as *tabaski* in Senegal and The Gambia and as *id-ul-adha* in Sierra Leone) is the Muslim festival that commemorates the Biblical (and Koranic) story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Ishmail). It coincides with the annual pilgrimage of Muslims to Mecca.

<sup>13</sup> Gamble 1989:9-10. (Reference to Berenger-Feraud 1879:24.)

<sup>14</sup> Gamble 1989:12. (Reference to *The Gambia Intelligencer*: 31 December 1893.)

<sup>15</sup> Gamble 1989:45.

<sup>16</sup> Bettelheim 1985:50-53, 95-97, 101.

parallels to the *fanaal* tradition occurred in the Caribbean (such as in the Jamaican Jonkonnu festival at Christmas-New Year) and that ship and house motifs in head-dress and float form were common there too. However, Caribbean documentation of Jonkonnu pre-dates the earliest known reference to floats in West Africa and so the former could not have originated from the latter. Bettelheim, however, is aware that the movement of peoples across the Atlantic was not all one-way and recognises that the cultural influence on 19<sup>th</sup> century coastal West Africa of returned African slaves from the Americas is an area requiring further research.<sup>17</sup> At best, then, one can say that important parallels and convergences may exist between some 19<sup>th</sup> century Caribbean festival traditions and the *fanaal* tradition in Senegal and The Gambia.

Bettelheim is less convincing in her attempt to trace the *fanaal* tradition back to a convergence of what she terms 'Islamic and African ceremonies' in West Africa. She draws on Westermarck's description of Ashura celebrations in Morocco in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and on documentation of Hosay festivals in the Caribbean.<sup>18</sup> The main feature of the Ashura festival in Fez was a procession involving a large toy house (resembling a saint's tomb, illuminated from inside by candles and carried by soldiers holding paper lanterns on bamboo canes), and a steamer with masts, sails and a smoking funnel, dragged along on wheels.<sup>19</sup> Westermarck himself drew attention to the resemblance between the toy house and the tomb of al'Husain and Bettelheim concludes that 'The parallels to the Senegambian celebrations, Lanterns, are too strong for a North African (at least) origin to be ignored. .... Is it possible that the North African Ashura festival is at least one direct source for the Senegambian celebration?'<sup>20</sup> Bettelheim admits that this theory is not without problems and more recently has

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<sup>17</sup> She stated she was reserving this aspect of research for a future project (Bettelheim 1985:101).

<sup>18</sup> *ashura* (Arabic) is the tenth day of the first month (*muhurram*) of the Muslim calendar and is celebrated by Sunni Muslims as a voluntary fast day and a day for mourning the dead. Sierra Leonean Muslims (apart from Lebanese Muslims who are Shi'ites) are Sunnis. Shi'ite Muslims celebrate *ashura* by commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed and a Shi'ite saint. (See page 154, note 57.) In many parts of the world they build a copy of the tomb of Hussein (for example in India and in the Caribbean *Hosay* festival). The replica tomb (*tabut*) is called *taziya* or *tadja* in the Caribbean. See Nunley & Bettelheim 1988:118-135.

<sup>19</sup> Westermarck 1933:150.

<sup>20</sup> Bettelheim 1985:96.

indicated that her thoughts about the origin of the float tradition in West Africa have developed further.<sup>21</sup>

Bettelheim's published work is useful in demonstrating apparent similarities between certain festivals in the Caribbean and others in North Africa and West Africa at different points in history. Her most important contribution is to demonstrate that '...the convergence of cultures in multi-ethnic environments has led to the development of basically secular festivals, and ... these festivals share structures and motifs'.<sup>22</sup> Certainly the 19<sup>th</sup> century *fanaal* tradition was significant for its association with multi-ethnic, coastal trading communities in the Senegambia region and it was this association that facilitated its transfer to Freetown.

### **2.3 Islam, trade and the emergence of the *lantan* tradition in 19<sup>th</sup> century Freetown**

One striking difference between the *fanaal* tradition in the Senegambia region and the *lantan* tradition in Freetown is its timing. While in Freetown *lantans* have always been linked with the end of Ramadan the weight of evidence indicates that, in Senegal and The Gambia, *fanaals* have till very recently been built exclusively to coincide with the celebration of Christmas and New Year.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Bettelheim has expressed a private opinion that there are actually two float traditions. 'One is most probably French derived and in fact creole. Therefore the West Coast Senegambian and the Haitian versions. The other is related to the cult which developed around Hussein and Hassan. To the best of my knowledge no-one has researched this, although I have heard it is strong in upcountry Sierra Leone. Perhaps the two traditions melded in Freetown, and perhaps the Muslim one never reached the Gambia.' (Personal communication, November 18, 1994.) Bettelheim did not identify any French or creole prototype for the one tradition nor indicate the sources on which she based her suggestion of a second tradition. During my research I never heard of any cult surrounding Hussein and Hassan in Freetown or up-country and I could find no evidence that Hussein's tomb has ever been part of the *lantan* repertoire in Freetown. (Though see Nunley 1985:49, Nunley & Bettelheim 1988:134-5 and Vogel 1990:104-5.) However, in seeking the historical origins of the West African float tradition I do believe that the possibility of cross-influences between North Africa and Senegal should not be discounted given the trans-Saharan trade (not least in slaves).

<sup>22</sup> Bettelheim 1985:97. She does not define the meaning of secular.

<sup>23</sup> The only record of a 19<sup>th</sup> century *fanaal* celebration being associated with a Muslim festival was in Senegal in 1876 when Christmas and *tabaski* coincided. (See pages 45-46; also Bettelheim 1985:102, footnote 16) As for The Gambia, the only source to claim that *fanaals* were '... originally built by rival factions – Mohammedan and Christians – to celebrate respectively Ramadan and Christmas' was Lady Bella Southorn, writing in the 1940s. According to her 'Later on, better counsel prevailed, the rivals amalgamated and agreed to display the ships at Christmas ...' Southorn 1952:243 in Bettelheim 1985:51). Southorn does not indicate the source of her information and it is possible she has confused the Gambian (Christmas) *fanaal* tradition with the Sierra Leonean (Ramadan) *lantan* tradition which

This difference in timing is understandable in terms of the circumstances surrounding the spread of the tradition to Sierra Leone. Freetown, of course, had been established in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a haven for a settler population comprising several thousand freed slaves from England and America, and was the capital of the Colony of Sierra Leone throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The product of Christian philanthropists, Freetown was regarded as a base from which to evangelise and civilise the indigenous African population in the region. After the abolition of the slave trade by the British in 1807 the population of Freetown and of the Colony of Sierra Leone (the present day Western Area) increased rapidly as Africans, off-loaded from slave ships which were apprehended on their way to the Americas by British naval patrols, were dispersed throughout the Colony (Fig 3). By 1864 about 84,000 such immigrants (known as Liberated Africans) had been added to the original settler population.<sup>24</sup> Of diverse ethnic origins these immigrants came from differing cultural backgrounds and spoke a wide variety of African languages. In time their descendants, and those of the original settler population, came to form a distinct group with its own Krio language (now the *lingua franca* of Sierra Leone).<sup>25</sup> A significant proportion of Liberated Africans came originally from the Egbado, Egba, Ijebu and Ife areas of what is now Nigeria, and spoke forms of Yoruba. They were known in 19<sup>th</sup> century Freetown as Akus.<sup>26</sup> While the majority of them adopted Christianity as their religion (in conformity with the original settlers who had been Christianised long before coming to Sierra Leone) a small minority of Yoruba-speaking Liberated Africans were Muslims. Some, at least, had probably been converted to Islam (as a result of the northern *jihad* activities in their

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Sierra Leoneans transferred back to The Gambia and may well have been actively practising there by the early 1940s., (See Appendix 3.) Until further research has been undertaken in The Gambia it is impossible to be sure whether Gambian Muslims ever built *fanaals* at the end of Ramadan during the 19<sup>th</sup> and earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In December 1999, however, I discovered a Muslim Gambian in Banjul, called Pa Ceesay, building a small *fanaal* in the shape of a mosque for the imminent end-of-Ramadan celebrations. He told me this had been his practice since 1989 (Interview dated 31.12.1999).

<sup>24</sup> Wyse 1989:2.

<sup>25</sup> It is a matter of debate as to when a self-identifiable Krio community (and sense of Krio-ness) actually emerged. See Skinner and Harrell-Bond 1977:305-319 & 1981:787, Wyse 1979:408-416, Fyfe 1980:422.

<sup>26</sup> The term *Aku* (*oku*) is thought to derive from the Yoruba greeting *okushe*. Lewally-Taylor 1976, Chapter 1. According to Clarke (who lived in Freetown between 1837 and 1842) 'Though known in this Colony [of Sierra Leone] by the name "Akoo" they are better known by the term "Eyees" or "Yarribeans". They are divided into tribes bearing the names of their native localities – Deholibah, or Joliba, Jebuh, Jessuh, Jffeh and Ebghwa – but all speaking the same dialect'. (Clarke 1843: Chapter 6 - 'Akoos'.)

homelands) prior to their shipment along the coast, while others were apparently converted '... due to the zeal of Fulas and Mandingoes ...'<sup>27</sup> They formed the nucleus of a tiny Muslim community of Yoruba origin in an overwhelmingly Christian Colony. This community held tenaciously to many Yoruba customs and retained its knowledge of the Yoruba language.<sup>28</sup> Although the term *Aku* originally referred to all Yoruba-speaking Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone, regardless of religion, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century the term had come to refer specifically to Muslims of Yoruba origin. In Freetown itself *Akus* still form an identifiable category of people and are known by the older generation as *Aku Mohammedans* (Muslims) or *Aku Krios*, and as *Muslim Krios* by younger people. When dealing with historical time and events in this chapter I prefer to use the term *Aku Muslim* but when referring to present day members of the *Aku Muslim* community I prefer the term *Muslim Krio* which is in current use in Freetown.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the *Aku Muslims/Muslim Krios* have retained a distinct identity despite the close inter-relationships (in terms of culture and even inter-marriage) that have always existed between themselves and the Christian (especially the Yoruba) descendants of the original settlers and Liberated Africans. As early as the 1830s the *Aku Muslims* had settled certain areas of Freetown (namely Fourah Bay and Fula Town) as well as the village of Aberdeen several miles to the west. They developed their own leadership and religious structures and quickly established a reputation for being shrewd traders. At the same time they forged ties with their original homeland (in present-day Nigeria) from whence they were joined over the years by a steady trickle of fellow *Aku Muslims*.<sup>29</sup> As already noted however, they did not comprise the sole Islamic community in Freetown. Interior trade had long drawn Muslim Mandingoes and Fulas to the coast and some of them settled particular areas of Freetown where they established themselves as landlords and catered for the needs of visiting traders from their home areas. The *Aku Muslims* looked to these

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<sup>27</sup> Clarke 1843:29. The Fulas and Mandingoes (*Mande* language speakers) are interior peoples (Fig 1) who are well-known for their trading activities and devotion to Islam. See Jalloh & Skinner 1999:1-63.

<sup>28</sup> Proudfoot discovered that Yoruba was still used in the conduct of mosque affairs in Fourah Bay in the 1950s (Proudfoot 1959:407). Christians of Yoruba descent, on the other hand, identified more readily than their Muslim brethren with Western ways, education and the English language.

<sup>29</sup> Wyse 1989:9. Some of my *Aku Muslim* friends keenly asserted their non-slave origins.

indigenous Muslims for religious training and some sent their sons away to study with them in the interior.

It would have been through their coastal trading activities that the Aku Muslims came into contact with the *fanaal* tradition further up the coast. The riverine region just north of Freetown had long played an important part in the coastal kola trade which the Portuguese had initiated centuries before between the area where kola grew in the greatest concentrations (between the Rokel and Scarcies rivers) and the region north of what is now Guinea-Bissau. Kola is, of course, highly valued in West Africa, not least among Islamic peoples, and though originally dominated by Afro-Europeans the kola trade came to be controlled during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the tightly knit community of Aku Muslims in Freetown.<sup>30</sup> The trade took them along the coast where they settled in small communities both in Bathurst and in Dakar, and even today it is not uncommon to meet Muslim Krios in Freetown who were either born in, or have lived in one or other of those cities, or whose relatives have traded (or are still trading) there. For wherever they went the Aku Muslim traders retained close links with their kin back in Sierra Leone.<sup>31</sup> It is generally agreed among older informants that these traders – particularly those from the Fourah Bay Aku Muslim community - were the people responsible for introducing the *fanaal* tradition into Freetown. By the time I conducted my research, however, the term *fanaal* was used in Freetown only to refer to the delicately cut paper decorations that adorned the original type of ship and mosque floats; the term *lantán* was used universally to refer to the float itself.

The exact date and circumstances of this introduction are unknown and it is a matter of regret that they seem to have passed out of the collective memory of the present day Muslim Krio community in Freetown.<sup>32</sup> In practice float-making involved the use of imported skills and materials: carpentered timber and finely cut paper were essential float components. Such skills and materials had long been available in West African coastal communities where European contact stretched back for several

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<sup>30</sup> Skinner and Harrell-Bond 1977:311.

<sup>31</sup> Bassir 1954:251-252.

<sup>32</sup> According to Lewally-Taylor (1976:108-112) one Alasmu Davies was linked to the introduction of the *lantán* tradition. Pa Maggay, the most prominent figure associated with the *lantán* tradition in the first half of the twentieth century, asserted in 1941 that the tradition dated back over 48 years. See page 64.

centuries. Furthermore, the original settlers of Freetown brought over with them from America a considerable fund of acquired skills and practices - not least a knowledge of carpentry which was fundamental to their distinctive style of architecture. During the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was a policy of the colonial government for Liberated Africans to be settled in rural villages (in order to pursue agriculture) or to be apprenticed in a variety of trades. The resulting core of skilled artisans played an important role in Freetown society. Exactly who among their number was the first to learn the specific techniques of float building - and where (Freetown or The Gambia) - will never be known.

The *lantan* celebrations in Freetown are distinctive in that they have always been associated with an Islamic festival - a fact that, at one level at least, is hardly surprising since Muslims were responsible for their introduction.<sup>33</sup> It is tempting to speculate that Freetown's Aku Muslim community was influenced by the *fanaal* celebrations that occurred in St. Louis in December 1876. That year the Muslim feast of Tabaski (Id-ul-Adha<sup>34</sup>) fell on Christmas Day and the huge parade of *fanaal* floats that took place on Christmas Eve seems to have jointly celebrated both religious festivals.<sup>35</sup> This event could easily have been witnessed by Aku Muslim traders from Freetown who might have been inspired to introduce a similar float celebration back home. However there is no evidence that *lantan* building and parading in Freetown has ever been associated with the festival of Id-ul-Adha: instead they have always been attached to the end of the fast month. Although Id-ul-Adha is considered the most important festival of the Islamic year it is also the most solemn. Writing about its celebration in West Africa in the 1950s Trimmingham states that 'Unlike other feasts there is little drumming and dancing ...'<sup>36</sup> The end of Ramadan, on the other hand, has come to be associated with a variety of revelries and 'The new moon is anxiously awaited for if it is not seen the clerics will insist on another day of fasting. Its

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<sup>33</sup> The alleged contradiction between the tenets of the Islamic religion and traditions that incorporate structural and figural representations is noted on page 153.

<sup>34</sup> See page 46, note 12.

<sup>35</sup> Gamble 1989:4-8. (Reference to *Le Journal Illustré* April 15 1877:126-7.)

<sup>36</sup> Trimmingham 1959:80.

appearance is greeted with bursts of firing, beating of drums, and general rejoicing.<sup>37</sup> Over fifty years earlier the leader of the Fourah Bay community explained to the colonial government that ‘At the end of the thirty days’ Fast the Festival of *Lesser Bairam [Id-ul-Fitri]* is celebrated and it is common for rejoicing to be kept up for a week or ten days.<sup>38</sup> Given that the end of Ramadan marks the conclusion of a whole month of fasting it is not surprising that it is greeted with enthusiastic relief and rejoicing of a type perhaps considered inappropriate to the sacrificial rites associated with Id-ul-Adha.

We know, moreover, that in Freetown it had been the practice since at least the late 1830s for Muslims to mark the end of Ramadan by processing through Freetown as far as Government House.<sup>39</sup> The following description of the street festivities enjoyed by Mandingo Muslims in Freetown in 1844 was written by a US naval officer and may refer to this same custom:

The Mandingoes ... hold the faith of Mahomet, and at the time of our arrival, were celebrating the feast of Ramadan. Several hundreds of them paraded through the streets in a confused mass, occasionally stopping before some gentleman’s house, and enacting sundry mummeries, in consideration of which they expected to receive a present. In front of the house where I happened to be, the whole body were ranged in order: and two of them, one armed with a gun, and the other with a bow and arrow, ran from end to end of the line, crouching down and pretending to watch against an enemy. At intervals, their companions or a portion of them, raised a cry, like those which one hears in the mosques of Asia. The above seemed to compose nearly all the ceremony; our liberality was in proportion to the entertainment, consisting merely of a handful of coppers scattered broadcast among the multitude.<sup>40</sup>

These appear to have been informal celebrations but much later, in 1879, formal recognition was given to the end of the fast month when Dr. Rowe (the Acting Governor) entertained over seven hundred Muslims at Government House at the end of

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<sup>37</sup> Trimingham 1959: 79.

<sup>38</sup> Sierra Leone National Archives (hereafter SLNA) 1901:MEDM.

<sup>39</sup> Clarke 1843:30.

<sup>40</sup> Hawthorne 1845:169.

Ramadan.<sup>41</sup> Given these precedents, parading (with or without *lantans*) to mark the disappearance of the old moon and the appearance of the new one and thus to herald the end of fasting, seems simply to have enhanced an existing celebratory tradition in Freetown rather than to have created a new one.

Finally, the particular historical circumstances in which the Fourah Bay Muslim community found itself in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century may well have fostered the adoption there of the Senegambian *fanaal* tradition.<sup>42</sup> During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Aku Muslims constituted a small, close-knit community distinguished by its resistance to Christianity and subjected as a result to periodic hostility from the authorities.<sup>43</sup> The Aku Muslim community generally shunned the Western-style missionary schooling available in Freetown and instead its members relied heavily for their own and their children's education on the indigenous Muslims of the hinterland (the Fulas and Mandingos) whose forefathers had been converted to Islam prior to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did their Koranic schools in Freetown serve the Aku Muslim population but a few Aku Muslims even sent their sons into the interior for instruction, to centres such as Futa Toro and Futa Jallon, which were famous for their Islamic learning. On returning to Freetown these men took up leading positions in the Aku Muslim neighbourhoods of Fourah Bay and Fula Town. In 1875 Amara, who had studied at Dinguiray, became Alimami of Fula Town<sup>44</sup> and between 1873 and 1902 the post of Government Arabic letter-writer and interpreter was held by Mohammed Sanusi who had studied in Futa Toro in the 1850s. A leading educator (and an associate of E.W. Blyden<sup>45</sup>) Sanusi taught Arabic at Fourah Bay College in the 1870s.<sup>46</sup> He was manager of Fula Town's

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<sup>41</sup> Fyfe 1962:414-5.

<sup>42</sup> The following historical survey of 19<sup>th</sup> century Fourah Bay relies heavily on Lewally-Taylor (1976:113-163).

<sup>43</sup> In 1839 the police pulled down one of the Aku Muslim mosques and the Governor even suggested that the Aku Muslims should be expelled from Freetown and only a limited number be allowed in to trade. Fortunately the Governor's proposals were not adopted and the mosque was rebuilt (Lewally-Taylor 1976:18ff).

<sup>44</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Fula Town and Fourah Bay each had a headman known as an Alimami (from the Arabic *imam*, note 47 below). See Harrell Bond et al 1978:42 & 172ff.

<sup>45</sup> Dr E W Blyden was a Liberian who became a CMS missionary in Freetown in 1871. Well-informed about Islam he did much to promote education among Muslims but was eventually dismissed from the CMS.

<sup>46</sup> Established in 1827 Fourah Bay College became affiliated to Durham University in 1876 and, after Independence, came to form part of the University of Sierra Leone.

first Muslim primary school (*madrassa*) between 1902 and 1907. Both he and Amara became renowned for their wise leadership and Fula Town has retained a reputation for moderation and unity down to the present day.

Not so Fourah Bay. Soon after its establishment in the 1830s it became divided by a dispute, the origin of which remains obscure. There emerged two major factions each of which claimed ownership of the land on which the mosque at Fourah Bay stood, as well as the right to name the Imam and his deputies.<sup>47</sup> In addition, each faction vied with the other for control of the office of Alimami (headman). The smaller of the two factions (known as the Tamba faction) was led by Mohammed al-Ghali Savage who belonged to Fourah Bay's founding family which in turn claimed the mosque as a family possession. Educated in Futa Jallon Savage was appointed Deputy Imam in the 1870s and was firmly supported by his elder brother the Imam, Alfa Suleiman (Alfaga) Johnson. In 1883, however, Haruna George became Alimami of Fourah Bay and, with his son Mohammed Gheirawani, led the larger faction comprising the Jamaa (the Muslim congregation). In 1889 Johnson and Savage were suspended from their posts and for the next ten years worshipped privately, away from the Fourah Bay mosque. Haruna died in 1892 and three years later, after a bitter struggle, his son Gheirawani was appointed to succeed him as Alimami. It was only on Gheirawani's death in 1902 that the Tamba faction regained control of the headmanship.

While it is too simplistic to portray the struggle between Fourah Bay's two factions as representing orthodoxy versus modernism it is certainly true that the Tamba faction managed to antagonise both the less strict Muslims within the community (who, for example, supported the role of secret societies) and the forces of modernisation. The latter were led by more progressive individuals who, for example, espoused the cause of western education and sought to make Fourah Bay Muslims more open to the changes which late 19<sup>th</sup> century Freetown was experiencing. Foremost among them was Mohammed Gheirawani who himself had studied at Fourah Bay College and had run the first western-type primary school for Muslim children in Fourah Bay in the 1890s. It was during this period, of course, when the more liberally-minded leaders of the Jamaa faction controlled the headmanship of Fourah Bay (and the Tamba faction

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<sup>47</sup> An Imam (Arabic *imam*) is the leader of congregational prayer in a mosque.

had even lost control of the mosque) that *lantans* were first reported as being part of the end of Ramadan celebrations in Freetown. I would suggest that in all likelihood the Jamaa faction introduced *lantan* building sometime during the period between 1883 and 1895, most probably after the suspension of Johnson and Savage in 1889. If we believe Pa Maggay Williams (a legendary supporter of the tradition) then the introduction of *lantan* building occurred between 1892 – 1893 during the struggle for the post of Alimami in Fourah Bay.<sup>48</sup>

## **2.4 The spread of the *lantan* tradition within Freetown: 1890s - 1945**

It is interesting that in 1896 two *lantans* were built for the end-of-Ramadan celebrations. One represented ‘... the usual paper vessel’ (which indicates that this was by no means the first time such a *lantan* had been seen) while the other represented a mosque.<sup>49</sup> The fact that the latter, though more attractive, drew a much smaller following than its ‘rival’ and resembled the mosque at Mountain Cut in Fula Town makes it tempting to conclude that the *lantan* tradition had, by then, already spread beyond Fourah Bay to the other major but smaller Aku Muslim settlement at Fula Town. The appearance of two competing *lantans* drawing unequal support was thought to require an explanation in 1896 and ‘It was suggested that there must have been a split between the two great Mohammedan sections of the community for there was not that combined demonstration that hitherto obtained.’<sup>50</sup> The implication here is that the Fourah Bay and Fula Town communities were for some reason at odds with one another, whereas in previous years they had combined in a united celebration at the end of Ramadan. It may simply have been the case, however, that the visually spectacular practice of parading *lantans* had been copied by Fula Town Muslims for themselves and given rise to a spirit of competition between Fula Town and Fourah Bay. The fact that the mosque *lantan* closely resembled the mosque in Mountain Cut (which belongs to the Fula Town Muslims) and that it was followed by a smaller crowd (the Fula Town

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<sup>48</sup> Pa Maggay Williams’ role in protecting and promoting the *lantan* tradition is discussed later in this chapter (pages 63-68).

<sup>49</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896. See page 44.

<sup>50</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896.

community being smaller than the one at Fourah Bay) is, in my opinion, convincing evidence that it was built by Fula Town Muslims.

This conclusion is further supported by oral tradition in Fula Town which maintains that while Fourah Bay traders were responsible for introducing the *lantan* tradition to Freetown, their Fula Town relatives very quickly adopted it as well.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, there is evidence that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the tradition was beginning to spread beyond the Aku Muslim population to other Muslim groups that were intent on promoting their own separate identities. What little we can trace of the history of the tradition's spread along religious lines and beyond ethnic boundaries substantiates what is already known about so-called tribal separatism as it existed in Freetown at the turn of the century.<sup>52</sup>

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the city's African population comprised a mixture of peoples of very diverse origins. The descendants (both Christian and Muslim) of the original Settler and Liberated African populations formed just one element. In addition to the Mandingo and Fula there were increasing numbers of Africans from Freetown's immediate and more distant hinterland. They included people of Temne, Mende, Loko, Limba and other ethnic origins (and were augmented by immigrants from neighbouring countries such as the Kru from Liberia). In 1905 an Ordinance established a separate administrative system for immigrants in Freetown based on officially recognised 'Tribal Rulers' (Alimamis), one for each immigrant community.

Within this context the Aku Muslims occupied a somewhat ambiguous position. On the one hand their religion distinguished them from the majority of people of Settler and Liberated African origin (who were fellow 'non-natives' but were Christian) while their adherence to the Islamic faith inevitably drew them close to those 'native' immigrant groups which professed Islam.<sup>53</sup> However, the Aku Muslims were wary of being classed with 'natives'. They asserted their special identity, for example by

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<sup>51</sup> Interviews 92/13 and 92/18.

<sup>52</sup> See Banton (1957), Proudfoot (1959) and Harrell-Bond et al (1978) for discussions of tribal administration and separatism in Freetown.

<sup>53</sup> In 19<sup>th</sup> century Freetown, people of Settler and/or Liberated African descent were classed as 'non-natives' while Africans from ethnic groups indigenous to Sierra Leone were referred to as 'natives'. Harrell-Bond et al 1978: 4-10.

refusing to be associated with the new administration system for immigrants, and dropped the title of Alimami for their headmen, preferring the term Alikali.<sup>54</sup> They also closed ranks within their mosques: they were reluctant to admit up-country 'native' Muslims on equal terms to their congregations and used the Yoruba language for as much mosque business as possible. The first government-recognised primary school for Muslims was established in Fourah Bay in 1891 (by Mohammed Gheirawani) and it remained the only one for eight years. When two more were opened in 1899, one was for Aku Muslims in Fula Town and the other for all 'native' Muslims.

The institutional separation of the 'native' Muslims from the Aku ('non-native') Muslims for educational purposes embodied a wider move on the part of both groups to maintain separate identities. It was in this context that the establishment of their own place of worship became a priority for the immigrant 'native' Muslims. A new mosque solely for their use was built at the turn of the century as an 'inter-tribal' enterprise and the primary school which opened in 1899 to serve all Islamic groups (other than the Aku Muslims) was attached to this mosque. The mosque, however, was situated in a predominantly Mandingo quarter of Freetown and the Mandingoes quickly assumed leadership of it. As for the school, its original name was actually the 'Mandingo Madrasa' and even after a change of name in 1903 (to Madrasa Islamia) it continued to be closely identified with the Mandingo community. The importance of the Mandingoes among Freetown's immigrant Muslims probably derived from a variety of factors, including the length of their association with Islam combined with their relative numerical strength, their status as long-distance traders and as landlords and their neighbourhood solidarity within Freetown.

From contemporary sources it is clear that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Mandingoes were adopting a number of practices common to the Aku Muslims despite their institutional separation from them. In particular, a secret society called *ogugu* (also known as *egugu*) began to make headway among them. Derived from Yoruba *egungun* practices in Nigeria<sup>55</sup> it has long been strongly associated with the Aku Muslims of Fula Town and Fourah Bay (particularly those of the Jamaa faction). In a

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<sup>54</sup> The term Alikali is from the Arabic *al-qadi* (judge). See Harrell-Bond et al 1978:42 & 172.

<sup>55</sup> Nunley 1987:24-26.

petition (presented in 1914 to the government by members of Fourah Bay's Tamba faction) protesting against the activities of *ogugu* practitioners the petitioners complained that '...the influence of the said society has, of late, extended to the Mandingo youths who have since organised a branch of their own and they are gradually gaining strength.'<sup>56</sup> Just as the Mandingoes adopted secret society practices from those Aku Muslims who engaged in them so, according to oral tradition, they also took up *lantan* building – a practice in which they were joined by Temne Muslims. There was probably a period of joint endeavour on the part of the Mandingoes and Temnes during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the momentum for 'native' Muslims to share mosque and school facilities and activities was strong. It is reasonable to suppose that it was sometime during this period that Mandingoes and Temnes together adopted the custom of parading *lantans* as part of their own end-of-Ramadan celebrations.<sup>57</sup>

The enthusiasm for co-operation among 'native' Muslims, however, soon evaporated and sometime before 1920 both the Fula and Temne Muslims had broken away from the Mandingoes and established their own separate mosques and congregations.<sup>58</sup> The fact that the Temnes were, by 1917, practising the *lantan* tradition in some form or another for themselves is confirmed by Robert Wellesley Cole. Referring in his autobiography to the period around the end of World War I Cole describes how the local Muslim Temne chief hosted huge feasts every evening during the month of Ramadan, the end of which '... was celebrated with ... a carnival procession of magic lanterns and paper objects in the form of ships, railways, giant dolls and charades.'<sup>59</sup> Seventy five years later Robert Wellesley Cole recalled that these 'lanterns' were relatively small and carried by hand.<sup>60</sup> According to oral tradition

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<sup>56</sup> SLNA 1914:PE 38/1914.

<sup>57</sup> As a result of attributing the introduction of *lantans* to the 1930s Nunley (1985:45) suggests that the tradition spread to the Temne and Mandingo communities during/after World War II and implies that it was during the 1940s that the co-operation between the two communities in *lantan* building, *debul* activities and mosque-building occurred. In fact it must have taken place about forty years earlier.

<sup>58</sup> Proudfoot 1959: 405-415 & SLNA 1918:CSO P20/35.

<sup>59</sup> Cole 1960:126. Robert Wellesley Cole was an eminent Krio medical practitioner who was born and brought up in Kossoh Town (a Christian neighbourhood in the predominantly Muslim East End of Freetown).

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Robert Wellesley Cole, 25 June 1994.

in Freetown the Temne and Mandingo practice of parading with objects during end-of-Ramadan festivities definitely derived its inspiration from the *lantana* tradition introduced and practised by the Aku Muslims, although the Temnes and Mandingoes clearly included a wider range of imagery than just ships and mosques.<sup>61</sup>

The growing fragmentation within the native Freetown population involved (or perhaps reflected) considerable dissension, at least between the Temnes and Mandingoes. This spilt over into the end-of-Ramadan celebrations in both 1915 and 1916. In 1915 a number of Christian residents (in an area of Freetown bordering both Fula Town and the Mandingo quarter known as Magazine Cut) complained that their property and persons had been assaulted when fighting broke out and stones were thrown when ‘... the Mohammedan section had their midnight watch’ and a number of young men from Fula Town were out parading their ‘lantern’ through the streets.<sup>62</sup> Those held responsible for the disturbances were Mandingoes and Temnes and their Headmen expressed regret and agreed to make good any damage. However, in 1916 it was again reported that on the 27<sup>th</sup> night of Ramadan:

Religious services were held in all the mosques and at midnight the usual processions, carrying fancy lanterns, did the round of the City up to the early dawn. The merriment was, however, unfortunately marred by several free fights between the Timni and Mandingo sections, who are said to have been nursing some deadly feud against each other. Many unoffending persons were wantonly wounded and early next morning several of the victims were seen returning from hospital with bandaged heads.<sup>63</sup>

While factionalism persisted within and between various Muslim groups in Freetown during the 1920s and 1930s<sup>64</sup> the few press reports of *lantana* celebrations of that time do not mention any further violence.

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<sup>61</sup> Interviews 92/2, 92/3, 92/5, 92/6, 92/7 & 92/15. The introduction of new imagery and the possible source of the imagery is discussed on pages 152-153 & 248-250.

<sup>62</sup> SLNA 1915:LM 244. It is not clear which of the groups were fighting against which.

<sup>63</sup> *Sierra Leone Weekly News* (hereafter *SLWN*): July 29 1916. Later a leading member of the Temne community described how in the latter part of 1916 ‘...a great uproar took place between the Mandingos and the Timminies [sic] which created a lot of bloodshed of which I with fourteen others were put into a cell for no reason ...’ SLNA 1918:CSO P20/35.

<sup>64</sup> See pages 65-66, 67-68.

By the mid-1920s the tradition of building and parading *lantans* had spread to the West End of Freetown, to an area called King Tom where people of many different origins resided. The dockyards at King Tom, used variously by the British Navy and by commercial companies such as the Elder Dempster shipping line, particularly attracted Temnes (who were renowned for their boat-building skills<sup>65</sup>) and King Tom became famous for producing magnificent ship *lantans*. A report on the end-of-Ramadan celebrations in 1924 described how Muslims from King Tom set off around 8.30 pm '...with lanterns and decorations and illuminations of Bamboo ships built in imitation of HMS Hood and the steamship Abinsi and other vessels ...'<sup>66</sup> They processed through central Freetown to Fula Town, only finishing their celebrations at 5 a.m. the next morning in time to attend prayers.

In 1932, however, an event occurred which had important repercussions for the practice of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown. After years of dissension a move was made towards the creation of an overall Muslim organisation to promote unity and mutual understanding among the various Muslim communities in Freetown. The Sierra Leone Muslim Congress (known originally as the All Muslim Congress - Sierra Leone Section) was registered under predominantly Aku Muslim leadership.<sup>67</sup> One of its early achievements was, according to a press report, to 'improve' the observance of Lailut-ul-Kadri (known locally as the 'Grand Night') when Muslims customarily processed with their *lantans*. On January 2 1935 the usual 'Watchnight' processions scheduled for the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri were stopped by the police who appeared on the streets around 8 p.m. to disperse the crowds - just as people were becoming lively with 'fairy lanterns' of all designs. There was to be '... no serenading, no parading of the wonderful lantern models which all quarters of the Mohammedan community had been at such pains to construct in keeping with tradition' but instead the Watchnight was to be spent in the

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<sup>65</sup> Inga 1921:61.

<sup>66</sup> *SLWN*: May 3 1924. These may have been hand *lantans*.

<sup>67</sup> Proudfoot 1961:149. It is perhaps significant that the dispute between the Tamba and Jamaa factions in Fourah Bay was settled (at least for the time being) in 1932. Proudfoot interprets the establishment of the Muslim Congress as an attempt on the part of the Aku Muslims in Freetown to maintain their primacy in the face of hugely increased numbers of immigrant Muslims from the provinces.

mosques.<sup>68</sup> While some people blamed the police for the sudden cancellation of the celebrations, the truth was that various Muslim religious leaders (identified later as the leaders of the Muslim Congress<sup>69</sup>) did not want the *lantan* processions (which encouraged considerable merry-making and unruliness) to take place on so solemn and sacred an occasion as the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri. Almost two years\* later (in November 1936) it was reported that Lailut-ul-Kadri

‘... is the holiest night of the whole year for Muslims ... but alas! It has always been desecrated by the mob here; however, thanks to the efforts and effective influence of the All Muslim Congress, the observance of the Grand Night last year [on December 22 1935] was about the best.’<sup>70</sup>

No mention of *lantans* was made in the press coverage of the Id festival in either December 1935 or in December 1936 but by December 1937 the *lantan* processions had been reinstated, not on the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri but on the eve of the Id Pray Day. The press reported that the Magazine Young Men’s Association constructed ‘...a fairly sized paper lantern ...’ in the shape of HMS Neptune to participate in the 1937 Watchnight Outing on the eve of Id-ul-Fitri.<sup>71</sup> The Muslim Congress had thus managed successfully to shift the end-of-Ramadan processions from the most sacred night of the fast month to the final night before the Id festival when the last day’s fast had been broken and the new moon had actually been sighted.<sup>72</sup>

In the late 1930s other threats to the *lantan* tradition emerged. In November 1938 the colonial government engaged in considerable debate as to whether permission should be granted for a Watchnight celebration to go ahead, in view of the political

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<sup>68</sup> *SLWN*: January 12 1935. The night processions marking the end of Ramadan used to be described as the ‘...ceremony of carrying or accompanying the moon commonly called watchnight.’ (*SLWN*: March 8 1930). See page 44, note 5. By the 1990s the phrase ‘escorting the moon’ had fallen into disuse but the use of the term ‘watchnight’ (referring to the eve of Id-ul-Fitr) was still widespread.

<sup>69</sup> *SLWN*: November 14 1936.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *DM*: December 1 1937.

<sup>72</sup> Sixty or so years later, during the course of my research, the very same issue, relating to the appropriateness of holding massive street celebrations at the end of Ramadan, again became the subject of fierce debate. See pages 96-103.

agitation taking place in Freetown at the time.<sup>73</sup> In the end the government gave its permission.<sup>74</sup> By 1939, however, war had overtaken political and religious considerations and the government refused permission for any celebrations to be held in connection with the feast of Id-ul-Fitr.<sup>75</sup> It was in connection with requests for permission to hold *lantán* processions during wartime that the name of Ibrahim Williams, popularly known as Pa Maggay, came to the government's attention.<sup>76</sup>

## **2.5 Pa Maggay and the emergence of informal *lantán* leadership in the first half of the twentieth century**

The earliest evidence of Pa Maggay's involvement in the *lantán* tradition is contained in a letter to the Acting Colonial Secretary which he signed as Ibrahim Williams of Argyle Street. He wrote on behalf of the Fourah Bay Islamic Society and sought permission from the colonial government to celebrate the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri in the customary way on August 9 1915.<sup>77</sup> According to the Commissioner of Police it was intended

... to place a large lantern on a truck and to parade it through the streets. The procession starts at 12 midnight and goes on to daybreak and this happens on two consecutive nights. The lantern is accompanied by a large crowd and there is much singing and shouting. All this is strictly against the provisions of Ordinance: 24 of 1913 but as the affair is apparently of a religious character I have no objection provided they confine themselves to the East Ward of the City. It has been allowed in previous years.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> SLNA: Governor to Colonial Secretary and Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary November 28 1938. The agitation at the time resulted from the demands made by Wallace Johnson a political activist and prominent trade unionist.

<sup>74</sup> *SLWN*: November 26 1938; *DM*: November 25 1938.

<sup>75</sup> SLNA: Correspondence between the Commissioner of Police and Colonial Secretary November 2 1939 and November 7 1939.

<sup>76</sup> Pa Maggay is the same person whom Nunley called Daddy Maggay (Nunley 1985:43). In Krio 'Pa' is used as an affectionate/familiar/respectful address term for a mature or old man (Fyle & Jones 1980: 280). Pa Maggay was also known as Chief Maggay. His real name was Ibrahim Williams.

<sup>77</sup> SLNA 1915: LM 238 19/5. Ordinance No 24, 1913 forbade anyone to organise any procession in any public street or road unless the Commissioner of Police had given a written permit beforehand.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

On the basis of these comments the Acting Colonial Secretary advised the Governor to approve the celebrations.<sup>79</sup>

No further records exist of any *lantans* group requesting government permission to parade at night until 1941 even though Ordinances or Acts were in force throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century regulating street processions and requiring prior police permission.<sup>80</sup> In 1941 Pa Maggay (by now known as Chief Maggay Williams and living at 38 Savage Square) sent two letters, one to the Governor and one to the Colonial Secretary, signed by himself and countersigned by S D George and two others. Given that there is plenty of evidence of *lantans* being paraded between 1915 and 1938 it is possible that permission under the appropriate Ordinances was generally given by the Commissioner of Police as a matter of course. In this respect it is significant that the letters from Pa Maggay in 1915 and 1941 were written during times of war (when security concerns were paramount) and were addressed to the Colonial Secretary of the day and, in 1941, even to the Governor. Perhaps Pa Maggay alone had the courage at such critical times to enlist the interest of a higher authority in the decision making process.<sup>81</sup>

Pa Maggay's letters of 1941 were written on behalf of the Muslim community at Fourah Bay and in them he requested permission '... for a procession with our lantern ...' on the eve of the Ramadan feast, starting from 38 Savage Square (his home in Fourah Bay) at 10.30 p.m.<sup>82</sup> According to Pa Maggay such processions had been taking place in Freetown for over 48 years (since before 1893) but in recent years, because of the rigid blackout order during the war, '... we cannot be able to go out with out different Patern [sic] of Lanterns which we usually built in the form of some of our large Ships in the Harbour.' Despite a promise on Pa Maggay's part that the participants

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. On August 9 the Governor minuted thus: 'The feast last year was apparently kept in as quiet a manner as possible and in the mosque. It should be so kept this year. I trust that the same monotonous chant will not be kept up tonight as we were treated to last night. I found sleep quite out of the question.' Sadly the celebrations ended in violence at least in one part of Freetown. See page 60.

<sup>80</sup> Ordinance No 24, 1913 was superseded by Ordinance No 9, 1935 which in turn was replaced by the Public Order Act, 1965.

<sup>81</sup> By 1941 there had been an interval of three years since the last *lantans* had been allowed to parade at the end of Ramadan in 1938.

<sup>82</sup> SLNA 1941: Correspondence between Chief Maggay Williams and the Governor and Colonial Secretary, October 6 1941.

would behave in an orderly way and abide by the Commissioner of Police's rules, permission was not forthcoming.

It is interesting that the letter of 1915 was written on behalf of an individual group whilst those of 1941 were written in the name of the Muslim community in general at Fourah Bay. It seems likely that in the intervening period the *lantán* tradition had spread throughout the community and that by the late 1930s there were possibly several groups in Fourah Bay building and parading *lantáns* each year. By 1941 Chief Maggay Williams appears therefore to have adopted a leadership role within the community as a whole rather than within a single association.

There is nothing within the archival evidence to suggest that Pa Maggay's leadership role extended beyond his home neighbourhood of Fourah Bay. However, older informants often told me that Pa Maggay was actually responsible for all *lantán* groups in Freetown in his time, not only supervising their behaviour (to avert any unruliness while the *lantáns* were being paraded) but also negotiating with the government a parade route that extended as far as Kissy.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the truth lay between these two alternatives and Pa Maggay's role vis-à-vis the government was specific to Fourah Bay but his reputation, and the respect and authority he commanded, extended to *lantán* groups in neighbouring areas.

At the same time, however, there is evidence that by the 1930s *lantán* activities had again become the focus of varying conflicting interests and that this had triggered government action to try and create some sort of *ad hoc* leadership structure embracing all *lantán* groups in the East End of Freetown. It appears that inter-group rivalry between the Temnes and Mandingoes was again intruding into *lantán* affairs at the very time that Muslim forces outside the *lantán* network (namely the Muslim Congress) were trying to inject greater discipline into the observance of Ramadan. Quite possibly the two were interconnected. According to Pa Ibrahim Kamara, an elderly member of Freetown's Mandingo community during the 1990s, a fight occurred sometime in the 1920s or 30s between the Temne and Mandingo *lantán* groups in the East End of Freetown and it resulted in serious injury to some of those involved. As a result the

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<sup>83</sup> Interviews 1992/9 and 1992/20.

colonial authorities threatened to stop *lantan* processions altogether but each “section” (tribal/ethnic group) sent a delegation to the government to negotiate a compromise. The Mandingos were represented by Alimami Sanusi Darami (1926-42), the Temnes by Alimami Santigi Koroma (1927-42) and the Fourah Bay and Fula Town communities by their respective Alikalis. Pa Kamara maintained that the government asked these headmen to find someone to ‘take responsibility for the *lantans*’ and Pa Maggay was selected.<sup>84</sup> The deterioration in the behaviour of those celebrating the end of Ramadan was, of course, the very reason underlying the efforts of the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress to shift the *lantan* celebrations from the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri. As we have seen the Congress achieved its objective between January 1935 and December 1937 and it is possible that the events recalled by Pa Kamara occurred during those years.

Pa Maggay’s status in Fourah Bay was such that he was nicknamed ‘chief’ and his role in *lantan* affairs there was clearly an attribute of this status. Pa Maggay and his wife (whose strength of character earned her the nickname Rokay Bully because ‘She liked a fight’<sup>85</sup>) were renowned for their wealth and generosity, particularly during Ramadan when dozens of people would congregate to build a *lantan* in their compound at 38 Savage Square. On the night of the parade Pa Maggay would designate someone to blow a bugle or cow horn to summon his supporters and announce the start of proceedings. People still remember singing Mammy Rokay’s praises as they passed her as she watched the procession from the garret of her home. Others recall how she would supervise the cooking of huge quantities of food so that people returning from as far afield as Kissy (the furthest point to which *lantans* were paraded) could eat before returning home. Days afterwards she would hire lorries to transport visitors from the provinces back to their villages. Besides Pa Maggay’s *lantan* group, however, there were apparently other subsidiary (or competing) groups also building *lantans* in Fourah Bay; it is likely that these comprised younger people building smaller *lantans* that followed the main Maggay *lantan* in the procession. However, one group that is well remembered had its headquarters around 168/172 Fourah Bay Road (in the heart of Fourah Bay) and was led by Yusufu Thomas (‘Pa Joe’) who is variously described as a

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<sup>84</sup> Interview 1994/111.

<sup>85</sup> Interview 1992/6. This paragraph is based additionally on interviews 1992/9, 92/10, 92/11, 92/14, 92/20, 92/33 and 92/40.

fisherman and a trader. Opinion varies as to whether his *lantan* operations were independent of Pa Maggay's or subsidiary to them but his group, like that under Pa Maggay, proved influential in the future development of *lantan* building in Fourah Bay.<sup>86</sup>

It is clear that Pa Maggay's leadership role in Fourah Bay extended beyond the annual parading of *lantans*. He is reported to have been an important member of the Jamaa faction whose dispute with the Tamba faction ran from the late nineteenth century to 1932.<sup>87</sup> The Tamba faction was virulently opposed to *egugu* but many members of the Jamaa faction were less hostile to this aspect of their Yoruba heritage and felt no contradiction between their Muslim faith and their membership of *egugu*.<sup>88</sup> Among them was Pa Maggay who was a leader of the Fourah Bay *oje* which was based at his compound in Savage Square, on the very edge of the neighbourhood.<sup>89</sup> According to one informant, once peace had been made between the Tamba and Jamaa factions the Fourah Bay *oje* divided: part of it remained under Pa Maggay's leadership and became known as Tourist Ojeh while a branch, called Awodie Ojeh, moved to the heart of Fourah Bay where members of the Tamba faction, who had so vehemently opposed *egugu* practices in the past, apparently learnt to tolerate them in their midst.<sup>90</sup> It is tempting to speculate that the *lantan* group associated with Pa Joe also only emerged after the peace of 1932 and that its *lantan* was perhaps supported by nearby members of Awodie Ojeh.<sup>91</sup> Certainly, though members of the Tamba faction had

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<sup>86</sup> The existence of a competing group in Fourah Bay in Pa Maggay's time was discussed by many informants: Interviews 1992/5, 92/9, 92/10, 92/11, 92/13, 92/14, 92/19, 92/20, 92/21, 92/23, 92/26, 92/27, 92/31, 92/34 and 92/53.

<sup>87</sup> See page 55. In 1932 a visiting Yoruba from Nigeria brokered a peace agreement between the two factions (Lewally-Taylor 1976:174-175). However, two new factions called the Trust and the Mass emerged in Fourah Bay in the 1950s and engaged in further disputes (Lewally-Taylor 1976:185-240).

<sup>88</sup> Muslim leaders in Freetown have generally opposed the society and in 1914 petitioned the Governor to ban it (see pages 58-59). In the 1920s a series of lawsuits were fought in Fourah Bay in connection with the compatibility of Islam with the Egugu Society (Lewally-Taylor 1976:166-173). The Egugu Society in Freetown (now known as the Ojeh Society – see note 89 below) is still one of several powerful secret societies each of which controls its own corpus of secret knowledge.

<sup>89</sup> The term *oje* refers to an individual lodge within the Egugu Society. By the 1990s the society itself was generally referred to as the Ojeh Society and the term *egugu* had been dropped.

<sup>90</sup> Interview 1994/111. Pa Maggay's home street (called Savage Square) leads to the old dock area in the East End of Freetown where tourist boats used to call - hence the name Tourist Ojeh. The word *awodie* in Yoruba means hawk.

<sup>91</sup> Interview 1992/15.

nothing to do with *lantans* prior to the peace they appear to have learnt to live with them (and even supported them) afterwards.<sup>92</sup> According to Pa Maggay's stepson, however, they never ever had anything to do with the Maggay *lantana*.<sup>93</sup>

Pa Maggay's support of the *lantana* tradition spanned many years and may well have dated back to the early 1890s when, as he claimed, *lantans* were first built in Freetown. In the period before World War II, the need to negotiate with the government for permission to parade *lantans* particularly in times of crisis, the multiplicity of *lantana* building groups especially in the East End of Freetown and the persistence of inter-group rivalry all contributed to the emergence of an informal pattern of leadership among the *lantana* building communities of the East End headed by Pa Maggay. The importance, too, of defending *lantana* practices from competing outside interests (like the Muslim Congress) may have been a further contributory factor. Pa Maggay died during or soon after World War II and it was not until over a decade later that an attempt was made to establish a more formal leadership structure for Freetown's *lantana* celebrations on a city-wide basis. Interestingly some of the same factors - the proliferation of lantern clubs and inter-club rivalry - are cited as fundamental to this development which led to the formation of the YMMA.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> One informant told me 'Had they got involved [prior to the peace] there would have been a big fight' - Interview 1994/111. Later Pa Joe's group apparently came to be associated with a younger *lantana* building group (called 'Yardee' which in turn developed into the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club) which was at one time based in the compound of a family that had been closely identified with the Tamba faction - Interviews 92/15 92/20, 92/26 & 92/27. From these two groups emerged the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club which, together with the successor of Pa Maggay's group (which was known as the Bubu Lantern Club) represented Fourah Bay *lantana* interests after World War II. See pages 114-116.

<sup>93</sup> Interview 1994/117.

<sup>94</sup> Interviews 92/25, 92/28 & 92/32.

THE POPULARISATION AND POLITICISATION OF THE LANTAN TRADITION: 1945-1997

3.1 Introduction

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when I undertook my research, the *lantan* tradition comprised a formal lantern parade consisting of a series of *lantan* processions each the product of a recognised lantern club. A century earlier, when the tradition was in its infancy in Freetown, there was no organised parade and in 1896 the press mentioned just two *lantan* group processions. Even in the 1930s there were never more than about six or seven groups producing large *lantans* in any one year. However, with the resumption of end-of-Ramadan *lantan* festivities after World War II the number of participating groups each processing with a *lantan* rose to twelve (in 1948) and thereafter increased to around twenty (in 1953). The 1950s proved a turning point for the *lantan* tradition in Freetown as the movement towards self-government increased in pace in Sierra Leone and political factors made the annual *lantan* celebrations and their constituent *lantan* groups prime objects of interest and targets for manipulation on the part of aspiring politicians. It was within this context that the YMMA forged a role for itself in terms of lantern parade leadership, and its emergence can be interpreted as a response to the realisation that the annual parade constituted a major political resource for groups and individuals seeking popularity and public support.<sup>1</sup> Control over that resource in turn provided the executive members of the YMMA with a powerful instrument with which to amass political capital for their own benefit within the emerging patrimonial state of Sierra Leone.<sup>2</sup>

The YMMA oversaw the transformation of the annual *lantan* celebrations between 1959 and 1997. Factors that enabled and encouraged the expansion and elaboration of *lantan* practices included the formalisation of the *lantan* celebrations into

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<sup>1</sup> See page 73, note 14 for the rationale behind the establishment of the YMMA.

<sup>2</sup> Richards has described the Sierra Leonean patrimonial state as one in which 'big persons' at the apex of political power compete to command some share of the nation's resources which they then redistribute as marks of *personal* favour to followers who are loyal to them as opposed to the institutions they represent. Patrimonialism is the ultimate patron-client relationship elevated to a national level (Richards 1996: 34-35). See also Reno 1995:26-27 & Bangura 2004:24-29.

a centrally-organised, competitive event and the impact of political and commercial interests on the *lantan* tradition. Despite setbacks in the 1970s and early 1980s over fifty *lantans* were built and paraded in Freetown in 1990. Perhaps the most paradoxical aspect of the increase in popularity of the annual lantern parade was the transformation of an end-of-Ramadan celebration from being an exclusively Muslim affair into becoming the most inclusive cultural event in Freetown's calendar.

By the late 1980s this transformation had given rise to a threat which the YMMA was finding increasingly difficult to contain. The proliferation of lantern clubs, the inclusiveness of the event, the increase in political and commercial patronage and the involvement of political sponsorship at club level had resulted in lantern parades becoming markedly less disciplined. Many parade participants simply regarded the event as an opportunity for uninhibited merrymaking and when rival *lantan* groups (often sponsored by competing politicians) met up on the streets fighting regularly broke out between their bands of highly volatile supporters. In consequence various influential Muslim groups were calling vociferously for the annual lantern parade to be moved to a different date unconnected with any Muslim festival. This was not a new demand by any means: the debate on whether a lantern parade is an appropriate way of celebrating an Islamic festival has been a feature of *lantan* politics throughout the recorded history of Sierra Leone's *lantan* tradition. However, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this demand was being voiced with an unprecedented degree of urgency. Given that the YMMA's constitution explicitly states that its activities are centred on '... Muslim Holidays, the Ramadan Lantern ...'<sup>3</sup> a change in date of the annual lantern parade threatened to destroy the YMMA's main *raison d'être* and seriously undermine its role as the event's organising body.

This chapter discusses the transformation of the *lantan* tradition in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culminating in the crisis facing its organisers in the 1990s. It does not however seek to explore the nature and activities of the various *lantan* groups which were actively engaged as agents in that transformation, and discussion of their role is the subject of Chapter 4.

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<sup>3</sup> Current constitution of the YMMA (Appendix 4).

## 3.2 The transformation of the *lantana* tradition in Freetown: 1947 – mid 1970s

### 3.2.1 The resumption of *lantana* activities in the immediate post-War era

*Lantana* processions were supposedly banned during World War II<sup>4</sup> but in August 1948 Freetown's leading daily newspaper provided two days of coverage of the ongoing *lantana* celebrations which by this time had obviously been firmly reinstated as an integral part of the end-of-Ramadan festivities in Freetown.<sup>5</sup> All the participating *lantanas* (of which twelve were specifically listed) had to process past the Eastern Police Station in Freetown and clearly some sort of assessment took place as the newspaper reported keen rivalry for the coveted position of first place. The two most impressive *lantanas* both represented ships; one was built in Fourah Bay by the Bubu Lantern Society and the other was built in the west end of Freetown by the King Tom Rovers Yankadee Society; it was apparently very difficult to decide between the two.<sup>6</sup> More evidence relating to the competitive nature of *lantana* celebrations dates to 1952 when prizes of five, three and two guineas were presented to the three best constructed *lantanas*.<sup>7</sup> The three judges on the occasion were the Town Planning Officer, an Executive Engineer and an Architect from the Public Works Department. Interestingly the prizes were presented by the Honourable M.S. Mustapha who besides being a member of Freetown's Aku Muslim community was also an active politician and a leader of the Muslim Congress.<sup>8</sup>

In 1953 Id-ul-Fitr fell over a week-end in the middle of June just eleven days after the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Most of the city's special decorations were left in position to add more colour to the Id festivities which also served as a Muslim celebration of the coronation.<sup>9</sup> That year's 'Grand Lantern Parade'

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<sup>4</sup> However, several informants indicated that during the war years *lantanas* were actually still made and paraded informally within their neighbourhoods. Interviews 92/29, 92/32, 92/36 & 92/52.

<sup>5</sup> DM: August 11 & 12 1948. In 1947 the actual day of the Id prayers was declared a public holiday for the very first time. (Section 2 of Ordinance 26/1947; SLWN Aug 9 1947 & Proudfoot 1961:150.)

<sup>6</sup> For more information about these clubs see pages 108-110 (King Tom Rovers) and pages 114-115 (Bubu Lantern Society). Appendix 5 contains a chronological list of references to *lantana* groups and their associated *lantanas*.

<sup>7</sup> DM: June 25 1952.

<sup>8</sup> See page 91 for more information about M S Mustapha.

<sup>9</sup> DM: June 9 & 15 1953.

seems to have been particularly well organised and its main features were outlined in advance in the *Daily Mail*. On the night itself the Governor and his entourage headed a distinguished audience of invited guests (including the Mayor of Freetown) who watched the twenty or so *lantans* tour the city, past the Law Courts (where the balconies were lined with European spectators) and on to the Eastern Police Station where the *lantans* were inspected and assessed by judges appointed by a panel of the Muslim Committee responsible for the event. Clearly, many of the standard features of modern-day lantern parades were by now firmly in place: a prescribed route for the *lantans* to follow, a judging point, as well as patronage of the event by senior government officials. On this occasion there was also a recognised organising committee for the event. The popularity of lantern parades was also increasing and we know that the 'Watchnight revelries' of the mid-1950s were regularly attracting thousands of spectators (estimated at 10,000 in 1955<sup>10</sup>) as well as groups of several hundred supporters participating in each *lantan* procession.

Although described in 1956 by one columnist (a certain Z A R Aderibigbe) as a '...unique occasion in our communal life ... [of which]...*Everyone, regardless of religion, should be proud ...*'<sup>11</sup> the annual lantern parade was still very much a Muslim affair. Writing in 1980 the late Sierra Leonean playwright Dele Charley stated that the *lantan* celebrations in the 1950s were referred to generally as the 'Marabu Wach Net and Lanterns' and were subject of conversation for days in advance, particularly among children (from Christian Krio families) who cajoled their parents to let them stay up and watch.<sup>12</sup> According to Charley

This annual one night fiesta of colour, sound and movement featuring Muslims as active participants and non-Muslims as enthralled spectators was always a family outing. Strategic spaces close to the kerb were occupied by benches and chairs, some of which had been brought over from four or even six streets away.

Recognising the enormous effort expended by the Muslims who built *lantans*

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<sup>10</sup> *DM*: May 25 1955.

<sup>11</sup> *DM*: May 11 1956 (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> *DM*: August 15 1980. In Krio *marabu* is an alternative term for a Muslim (Fyle and Jones: 1980: 237).

during the month of Ramadan. Aderibigbe called on the Muslim Congress in 1956 to institute a committee to plan the event and organise a public fund from which prizes and/or trophies could be awarded to the best *lantans* which in turn could be preserved in a future Sierra Leone Museum. It would then be possible to see the annual improvement in the quality of *lantans*. He recalled

the great Carnival Road March of Trinidad when popular calypsos, such as Kitchener's "Is Trouble" in 1955, are used. Why cannot we have an organised Lantern Night Parade in Freetown when ... popular local airs would be rendered in praise of the superb pieces of handwork done by our Muslim brothers during the Ramadan season? This is a challenge to the Muslim Congress in Sierra Leone; it is a call to action for all Muslims both as individuals and as societies and clubs.<sup>13</sup>

These exhortations urging the institutionalisation of the parade (and the incorporation of popular music within it) point to the more inclusive nature of the interest that *lantan* celebrations aroused in the 1950s. This interest became even stronger during the next decade, even though the *lantan* tradition remained rooted in Freetown's Muslim communities and controlled by certain members of the Muslim elite.

### 3.2.2 The YMMA and the formalisation of *lantan* leadership

The Young Men's Muslim Association (YMMA) was founded in 1959 and since its establishment it has taken upon itself responsibility for organising the annual lantern parades (as well as formal sporting activities on the afternoon of Id-ul-Fitr). According to its constitution

It [the YMMA] is made up of dedicated Muslims of all ages for the organisation of youths, to understand the Religion of Islam and to express their cultural heritage in Craftmanship. Most of their activities are centered (sic) on Muslim Holidays, the Ramadan lantern and other Fund raising activities to finance clubs building lanterns in any particular year for the amusement of the general public free of cost.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> DM: May 11 1956.

<sup>14</sup> Current constitution of the YMMA (Appendix 4). In a radio broadcast in the early 1970s the YMMA's Lantern Secretary declared that the founding members of the YMMA were motivated by '...the urgent need for the formation of a properly constituted body to guide and watch the overall interest of the *lantan* builders within Freetown and its environs ...' (Typescript of a Broadcast Talk by Alhaji I B Turay. See Appendix 4).

From its inception the YMMA was regarded as a buffer between the *lantan* groups and the government.<sup>15</sup> It was the government that was responsible, through the Commissioner of Police, for the issue of permits to individual *lantan* groups and it was clearly in police interests to deal with one negotiating agent. The latter could then act as a channel for all police instructions to the participating *lantan* groups, as happened to some extent in Pa Maggay's time. From the point of view of *lantan* groups it was felt to be of advantage to have a single body to represent *lantan* interests throughout Freetown for it was thought that, while the government would take little notice of the views of individual *lantan* groups, it might listen to a single, organised body like the YMMA.<sup>16</sup> Certainly some of the early executive members of the YMMA had long and sustained associations with particular *lantan* groups and were presumably able to represent grassroots opinion.<sup>17</sup>

The YMMA's most obvious achievement was the creation of a formal structure within which to situate both the *lantan* groups and the annual lantern parades. The YMMA's regulation of *lantan* groups (or lantern clubs as they had by now become known) was from the start enforced through a system of registration which required any club wishing to participate in a lantern parade to complete a YMMA registration form and pay the appropriate fee. Theoretically the YMMA had the authority to refuse to register a club or to expel one should it disregard YMMA directives. Under normal circumstances the registration exercise took place at the beginning of the month of Ramadan. Thereafter the YMMA arranged a series of weekly or twice-weekly general meetings at the Islamiya School (which is attached to the Mandingo mosque in Magazine Cut in the East End of Freetown). At these meetings the YMMA Executive and the representatives of each registered lantern club discussed arrangements for the forthcoming parade and the Executive passed on information from the police and any other interested parties. YMMA statements over the radio and in the press, as well as informal contacts between YMMA officers and lantern clubs, helped supplement these meetings but the latter were, nevertheless, the core point of contact between the lantern

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<sup>15</sup> Interview 1994/138.

<sup>16</sup> Interview 1992/8.

<sup>17</sup> For example, Chief Abdul Yenke Kamara, (a Temne sub-chief) who had connections with Kissy Road and Mighty Endeavour Lantern Clubs in the East End of Freetown. Other YMMA executive members, however, had little practical experience of *lantan* affairs.

clubs and the parade organisers and constituted their only channel of official communication. In the weeks preceding a lantern parade the YMMA Executive members would also meet regularly themselves to report on progress and make decisions for transmission to or ratification by the weekly general meetings of club representatives. It was by these means that the YMMA Executive managed the overall process of organising a parade and at the same time reinforced its authority as an intermediary between the participating clubs and the government as well as any other interest groups.

As far as the annual *lantans* celebrations were concerned, the YMMA's objective was, according to its longest-serving Vice-President, Alhaji Rashid of Fula Town, 'to modernise' the lantern parade.<sup>18</sup> The YMMA encouraged and formalised the already highly competitive nature of the parades and it devised a system of classifying *lantans* for judging purposes in an attempt to attract the interest of *lantan* builders and improve the quality of their *lantan* building.<sup>19</sup> In 1963 'The *lantans* ranged from horses, ships, planes, houses and figures representing certain features of the Koran' and were divided into two 'sections' - a Ship section and an Animal section.<sup>20</sup> Three prizes were awarded to the best *lantans* in each section. The winning Animal *lantans* were 'The Story of Islam' and two different versions of 'Prophet Ali and his enemies'. By 1965 the categorisation of *lantans* had been further refined with the introduction of a third section or group<sup>21</sup> and by January 1968 the YMMA was also awarding prizes to lantern clubs for their singing and for what was described as 'fancy dress'.<sup>22</sup> By 1969 the judging point had been moved from the congested area of the Eastern Police Station to the more spacious frontage of the Law Courts.<sup>23</sup> There is thus no doubt that by the end of the first decade of its existence the YMMA had firmly established its role in *lantan*

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<sup>18</sup> Interview 1992/2.

<sup>19</sup> Interview 1992/32.

<sup>20</sup> DM: February 27 1963. *Lantan* imagery is discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> DM: February 10 1965. This third category was, and still is, called 'Miscellaneous'.

<sup>22</sup> DM: January 8 1968. 'Fancy dress' later became known as *aswebi*. See page 24, note 18.

<sup>23</sup> DM: December 10 1969.

affairs thereby ostensibly hoping to broaden the popularity of the parades and to ‘...coax people to listen to it [the YMMA]...’ and support its activities generally.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2.3 The proliferation of lantern clubs in Freetown and the growth of political and commercial sponsorship

The establishment of the YMMA and its success in formalising the competitive structure of the parade probably helps account for the immediate increase in the number of lantern clubs in Freetown in the 1960s. The area of Freetown first affected was the western part of the city where the population was, historically, overwhelmingly Christian and where only one lantern club had previously existed – in King Tom. In 1960 three new clubs emerged in this area<sup>25</sup> plus a further club in the village of Murray Town which lies some miles to the west of the city. These clubs were all offshoots of King Tom Lantern Club which had previously drawn its support very widely and which had always boasted a membership drawn from both Christians and Muslims. By 1961 at least two further groups had set themselves up in the same vicinity<sup>26</sup> but with the exception of Congo Town Lantern Club established a few years later,<sup>27</sup> there was no further significant spread of *lantana* building in western Freetown and its environs till the 1980s. If anything the number of clubs building *lantans* in any one year may have declined as some clubs failed to build one year and others another.

Throughout the 1950s and into the early 60s the East End and the adjacent central area of Freetown – the stronghold of the *lantana* tradition – saw no significant increase in the number of clubs. While there were twelve known lantern clubs in the late 1940s there were only thirteen listed in 1960.<sup>28</sup> However, in 1966 twenty nine lantern clubs from the central and eastern parts of Freetown registered for the annual parade. Perhaps this increase constituted a reaction to the competition represented by the new clubs situated on the fringes (on the western side of Freetown) of the *lantana* tradition’s heartland. However, it was more likely a result of growing competitiveness

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<sup>24</sup> Interview 1992/8.

<sup>25</sup> In Brook Street, Naimbana Street and Jamburia Street (*DM*: 29 March 1960).

<sup>26</sup> In Brookfield and Congo Market (*DM*: March 21 1961).

<sup>27</sup> In an area between King Tom, on the western fringes of Freetown, and Murray Town.

<sup>28</sup> *DM*: March 29 1960.

in the national and municipal political arenas and the consequent political sponsorship of clubs.<sup>29</sup>

All the new clubs that emerged in Freetown during this period were informally related to the long-established clubs and were probably set up by junior members and younger *lantán* builders who had learnt the '*lantán* business' under the tutelage of their elders. However, over the years (as some clubs disbanded, new ones emerged and yet others changed their names) the process of fusion and fission blurred the network of relationships between different clubs most of which liked to claim independent origins rather than admit a genealogy that might imply they once occupied a position of dependency or inferiority.

Some of the long-established clubs split into two parts, each retaining the club's name.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand the process of fission sometimes reflected the 'coming of age' of junior clubs already in existence. In pre-Independence days each of the major clubs had a junior section comprising boys and young men who built and paraded a small *lantán* under the aegis of the parent club. This was only one step away from parading in their own right. Thus according to YMMA records the Fourah Bay Young Muslim Lantern Club registered separately in 1966 but later it adopted the name Mighty Red Lions after the Red Lion Bakery which took up sponsorship of it.<sup>31</sup> Other clubs that were still active in the 1990s and which could trace their origins back to the mid-1960s included Firestone (with Fula Town connections), Super Combo (which started as Bingo Boys and had both Fula Town and Vimto connections), Rainbow (which derived from Vimto), Bantus (which derived from Endeavour), Beatles (whose leader originally belonged to Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club) and Mighty Spear.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the new clubs of the '60s bore names (like Mighty Red Lion, named after Red Lion Bakery in Freetown) that reflected the increased links between the

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<sup>29</sup> The 1960s brought with them increasing political turbulence and in the elections of March 1967 the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party was defeated. This was followed by a military take-over and thereafter by the handover of power to Siaka Stevens, leader of the All People's Congress in April 1968. See Cartwright 1978:80-84.

<sup>30</sup> YMMA records for 1966 (Appendix 4) mention Foulah Town Muslim Clubs I and II as well as Endeavour I and II.

<sup>31</sup> Interview 94/40.

<sup>32</sup> Chapter 4 explores lantern club relationships in more detail.

*lantan* festivities and local business interests. In the more commercially confident and competitive environment of post-Independent Freetown a number of lantern clubs named themselves after popular products as a means of attracting (or acknowledging) sources of funding. Guinness, Seven-Up, Star Beer and Pepsi, Whitex (a local brand of soap powder), Nataco (a brand of biscuits) and Tutik (a brand of mineral water) were all used as lantern club names. Newspaper reports sometimes commented on the slogans used to decorate floats – such as ‘Feel like new – Seven Up’<sup>33</sup> and ‘Whitex on show’.<sup>34</sup> During the 1960s and early 1970s commercial firms also sponsored many of the clubs that took part in the YMMA’s annual Id sporting events and regularly presented the YMMA with trophies to award to those lantern clubs which were judged the best in the lantern parades.<sup>35</sup>

Other lantern clubs chose to identify with new political developments that emerged during the 1960s. For example, in the late 1960s President Siaka Stevens started his dalliance with the communist bloc and lantern clubs with names such as Russia State and Mighty Moscow emerged. Yet other clubs chose names which indicated an appreciation of imported culture, as opposed to their own cultural background, as when the youthful members of one new club in the 1960s adopted the name of the Beatles music group.<sup>36</sup> Another club, Mighty Spear, found inspiration in Lance Spear, a character from a Nigerian magazine (that was later banned in Sierra Leone because it was considered to encourage ill discipline).<sup>37</sup> Some clubs changed their names as circumstances and imagination dictated or, perhaps more accurately, groups of *lantan* enthusiasts registered differently named clubs in different years at the same address (e.g., Bingo Boys, Sudan National, Super Combo and Foamex Clubs, all

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<sup>33</sup> DM: January 24 1966.

<sup>34</sup> DM: November 22 1971

<sup>35</sup> DM: December 30 1967; December 24 1968; December 18 1969; November 22 1971; November 9 1972. Prior to the 1980s lantern clubs and their commercial sponsors appear to have had a direct, one-to-one relationship. Thereafter the YMMA tried to exploit commercial sponsorship in an attempt to revive the annual *lantan* celebrations and increasingly acted as a broker between clubs and commercial donors. See pages 86-87.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 91/1.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 92/54.

of 3 Annie Walsh Street).<sup>38</sup> It is clear that when naming themselves clubs drew on a variety of sources for inspiration. The ease with which they manipulated ideas and identities using local, national, African and international icons and imagery is one of the hallmarks of so-called popular culture and recurs again and again in the history of the *lantana* tradition and in the development of urban culture as a whole in Freetown.<sup>39</sup>

There seems little doubt that increases in parade participation constituted an interesting indicator of the political climate in Freetown. After the initial proliferation of lantern clubs, numbers remained fairly stable (between thirty and forty) for a decade but in 1976 forty five clubs registered for that year's parade. This increase probably resulted from the fact that aspiring and established politicians were keen to sponsor new clubs in the run up to the 1977 elections and it represented at that time the highest ever total of lantern clubs seeking to participate in any single lantern parade.<sup>40</sup>

Given the highly competitive environment of *lantana* processions, group rivalry had always been strong and on occasion had spilt over into episodes of street violence.<sup>41</sup> In the 1960s the large numbers of participant clubs and the spread of political patronage served to increase the possibility of physical conflict breaking out on the streets of the city between rival clubs during the course of lantern parades. Tensions ran particularly high in 1967 when in the March elections the victory of the APC (All People's Congress) over the SLPP (Sierra Leone People's Party) led to an army take over. The month of Ramadan fell in December when the military (National Reformation Council) was still in power. The Commissioner of Police felt it necessary to issue an eleven-point directive three days before the lantern parade was due to take place outlining the rules to be observed. Clubs were forbidden to parade *lantans* bearing political emblems

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<sup>38</sup> Eustace Yaskey, a leading *lantana* builder, lived at 3 Annie Walsh Street and was active in all these clubs. Super Combo was the name of a well-known Sierra Leonean pop group in the 1970s but the *lantana* club changed its name to Foamex when a company of that name started to sponsor it. It later reverted to the name Super Combo. For more information on Eustace Yaskey see pages 172, 190-192.

<sup>39</sup> Nunley has noted the inspiration that Freetown youth have drawn from film, photography, the printed word and the music industry (Nunley 1982: 42-46, 92). See also Abdullah 2004:46.

<sup>40</sup> The 1970s had brought more political upheaval and in the general elections of 1973 violence and voting irregularities ensured that the ruling APC won every parliamentary seat. Nevertheless the opposition SLPP mounted a robust challenge in 1977 and won back fifteen seats in parliament. (In 1978, however, after a referendum, the APC adopted a single party constitution and Sierra Leone became a one-party state.) For a spirited description of political events in the 1970s see Roberts 1982: 250-281.

<sup>41</sup> For example, in 1915 and again in the 1930s violence between rival processions broke out on the night of the *lantana* celebrations. See pages 60 & 65-66.

and symbols or to sing songs likely to cause a breach of the peace. Similarly, any group of supporters wearing red or green (the colours of the opposing APC and SLPP parties) had to ensure that they did not provoke any disturbance, and anyone who attempted to destroy the *lantan* of any group would be liable to immediate arrest.<sup>42</sup>

Oral and published sources agree that inter-club violence had become a fairly regular occurrence by the late 1960s. For example, in 1969 Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club won first prize for its *lantan* and went dancing in the main streets of its neighbourhood to celebrate. On meeting a number of supporters of Bantous National Lantern Club a fight broke out and Endeavour's silver trophy was seized and smashed.<sup>43</sup> Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club had a reputation for provocative behaviour which may well have been related to the large number of lantern clubs it spawned (including Bantous, Guinness, Russia State, Mighty Moscow and Tutik) and to the especially strong sense of rivalry among them, situated as they were within a very confined neighbourhood. In addition, Mighty Endeavour always maintained competitive relations with nearby Kossoh Town where residents had been active in the *lantan* business since at least 1917. One of the worst incidents that was recounted to me occurred in the 1960s when Endeavour's *lantan* procession met up with the Guinness and Kossoh Town processions during the course of the parade. Endeavour's *lantan* was burnt down and a number of people received serious injuries in the ensuing fighting. When the police reached Kossoh Town to investigate, one of Kossoh Town Lantern Club's leaders threw battery acid from an upstairs window onto some of the Endeavour supporters below. His action led to arrests and a court case.<sup>44</sup>

Both the foregoing incidents were difficult to research because consultees were reluctant to identify the people and possible political rivalries involved. However, they adamantly maintained that the introduction of politics into Sierra Leone in the post-war period had led to lantern parades becoming far more volatile.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> DM: December 30 1967 & Nunley 1985:46.

<sup>43</sup> DM: January 2 1969 & Nunley 1985:46.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews 92/17, 92/52 & 92/74.

<sup>45</sup> This is demonstrated by a major disturbance that occurred during the *lantan* preparations in 1989 between Mighty Endeavour and a neighbouring lantern club called Sorsoh National. Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club was striving to win first prize for its *lantan* for a second consecutive year in the face of

### 3.2.4 The 'popularisation' of the *lantán* tradition: inclusion versus exclusion

It is clear from the historical sources relating to the lantern parades in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that a fundamental shift in the character of the *lantán* tradition was taking place during this period. The organisational, economic and political factors at work in increasing lantern club participation, facilitating commercial sponsorship and generally politicising *lantán* events were part of this shift but by no means its sum total. In a newspaper article in 1980 Dele Charley compared lantern parades over a twenty year period and he commented that it was the ideals and ethos of young people in post-Independent Sierra Leone that had brought about the transformation<sup>46</sup>. From being events generated exclusively by Muslims and attracting exclusively Muslim participation *lantán* celebrations had by the 1960s become open to all. Paradoxically, of course, the process which rendered the lantern parades more inclusive took place at the very time when the parades were being formalised under the leadership of a Muslim organisation (the YMMA) set up specifically to manage *lantán* affairs.

Dele Charley pointed out that whereas in the 1950s there was a sharp distinction between Muslims (who participated in *lantán* celebrations) and non-Muslims (who merely observed) a decade later it was impossible to tell Muslim, Christian or pagan apart. 'Sierra Leone's youth had already set out on the road to UNITY.' Children of

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stiff competition. Rivalry between Endeavour and Sorsoh National Lantern Clubs was particularly fierce because they were each supported by rival APC politicians seeking election within the same constituency (within the one-party system). Chernor Maju supported Endeavour and Musa King (who had ousted Chernor Maju as MP for East End I constituency in which both clubs were located) supported Sorsoh National. A few nights before the end of Ramadan Endeavour supporters were practising their songs in the street where their *lantán* was being built when a brawl developed between themselves and a driver of a vehicle who tried to force a way through the crowd. This led to numerous police arrests including that of the chief *lantán* builder who had been identified by the driver as his assailant. Without the builder, however, Endeavour's *lantán* (which was called 'Fula Cultural Display' and was technically very complicated) would almost certainly be a failure for only its builder had the necessary skill to complete it. Chernor Maju (himself a Fula) eventually managed to use his influence and resources to obtain the *lantán* builder's release, but only at 2 p.m. on the day of the parade. The builder thereupon shut himself in the *lantán* house and eventually at around 4 a.m. the next morning when the lantern parade was well underway Endeavour's *lantán* appeared and set off for the judging point; en route its supporters sang a song about the builder's misfortunes. The judges apparently made the *lantán* perform for a long time before ultimately awarding it marks that allowed it to tie for first place. When the *lantán* builder related this story he claimed that the attack on the vehicle driver had been engineered by members of Sorsoh National who had infiltrated the crowd. The driver was then encouraged to identify the *lantán* builder as his attacker by certain 'witnesses' who wanted to prevent Endeavour's builder from producing a winning *lantán*. Fortunately for Endeavour supporters (and for local enthusiasts who had, apparently, placed bets on the outcome of the *lantán* competition) this sabotage attempt failed. Interviews 95/87 & 95/133.

<sup>46</sup> The rest of this paragraph is based on the article entitled 'Cultural Chit Chat with Dele Charley' (*DM*: August 15 1980).

secondary school age were no longer content to stay by windows, on verandahs or at the kerbside to watch 'those MARABUS as their parents still called them'. Instead, putting on their school uniforms they '... shoved aside ideas of provincialism conditioned into them by their parents and uninhibitedly joined the procession FOR GO LEF LANTAN NA ROD.'<sup>47</sup> According to Charley 'Independence had come and with it a desire for unity pervading an atmosphere of cultural awareness. It was fiesta time [and] underlying ...the glittering splendour of the MAN o' WARS [*lantans* in the form of warships] ... was a spirit of PEACE, LOVE ... and ADVENTURE'. Whereas in the past it was unthinkable for non-Muslims to join in the *lantan* processions, by the 1960s anyone could 'dance with the *lantans*' and this represented a significant change in attitude and practice.<sup>48</sup>

This change was evidenced in a new kind of *lantan* celebration that was quite independent of the normal end-of-Ramadan parades. On Saturday 21 May 1960 a lantern parade was held in honour of the Premier, Sir Milton Margai and other delegates who had just returned to Freetown after their successful pre-Independence constitutional talks at Lancaster House in London. It is unclear whether the YMMA (or perhaps a government department or Freetown City Council) was responsible for organising this celebration, which is the first reported use of *lantans* to mark a national political event rather than the end of Ramadan. The parade clearly indicated a shift in people's perception and practice of the *lantan* tradition and most importantly set a precedent for future, occasional *lantan* celebrations unconnected with any religious festival.<sup>49</sup>

One of the factors underlying the transformation of the *lantan* tradition, as Dele Charley pointed out, was the growing sense of cultural and political awareness

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<sup>47</sup> Meaning 'to accompany the *lantan* on the road'. See page 44, note 5.

<sup>48</sup> The late Dr. Robert Wellesley Cole was horrified when I asked him in an interview on June 24 1994 whether he had joined in the *lantan* celebrations he witnessed as a young boy (in about 1917) while living in the East End of Freetown. He replied 'We were Krios' - meaning 'We were Christians' and as such his family could only watch the celebrations from the window of their home in Kossoh Town. They could not possibly participate nor even be obvious spectators. See Cole 1960:125-126.

<sup>49</sup> DM: May 21 1960. Such parades were also organised to celebrate the pre-Independence constitutional talks held in May 1960, the Queen's visit to Sierra Leone (October 1961), the change in status of Sierra Leone to a Republic (1971), the birthday of President Siaka Stevens (1984), the handing over of power between President Siaka Stevens and President Joseph Momoh (1986), the Bicentenary of Freetown (1987) and the first anniversary of the NPRC 'Revolution' in 1993. See Appendix 5.

especially among urban young people. The YMMA was clearly in touch with this trend and several of its officials acknowledged that the *lantan* tradition could be interpreted in broad cultural terms that coincided with a sense of national rather than religious identity. Thus in 1973 the YMMA's President described the annual lantern parade as '... the biggest indigenous festival in Sierra Leone.'<sup>50</sup> The broadening of the impact and appeal of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown from the 1960s onwards was, therefore, a process that the YMMA itself actively recognised and in which it participated. It was part of the wider process of urban cultural empowerment which found public expression in inclusive street processions and performances not only of *lantans* but also of *ode lay debuls*.<sup>51</sup> Participation was not exclusive to members of any particular organisation or group: it was open to all.

At the same time, however, the tide of enthusiasm generated among young people was easily open to manipulation by the country's new political elite who quickly recognised that the *lantan* tradition (as well as the emerging *ode lay* practices) represented a huge political resource out of which they could make considerable capital. Not only did the sponsorship of individual lantern clubs offer rival politicians opportunities to foster public support and election votes, but, as discussed later in this chapter, the lantern parade itself provided a high profile stage on which leading political figures (including YMMA founder members) could act out their roles.

### **3.3 The fluctuation in *lantan* tradition fortunes: mid-1970s-1997**

#### **3.3.1 Constraints and challenges in the 1970s**

The early 1970s probably represented the apogee of lantern parades in the immediate post-independence era.<sup>52</sup> During the rest of the 1970s they had to contend with an increasingly depressing economic situation and with environmental factors beyond their control. As a result the fortunes of the *lantan* tradition declined. Lantern clubs were deterred from participating in lantern parades partly because it became increasingly difficult to raise the necessary funds to build *lantans* and partly because the end of Ramadan fell during the height of the rainy season.

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<sup>50</sup> DM: October 30 1973.

<sup>51</sup> Nunley (1987) provides extensive information on the *ode lay* tradition among the youth of Freetown.

<sup>52</sup> See page 94.

Tied as it was to the Muslim calendar the end-of-Ramadan lantern parade moved forward each year by about ten days. The rainy season in Freetown lasts from May until October with the heaviest rainfall between June and September and it was during these months that *lantans* were at their most vulnerable. Made from a framework of cane or raphia pith and covered with paper, heavy rain could reduce a *lantan* to tatters in a matter of minutes. We know that the end of Ramadan fell in July in 1916 and again in 1949 but records are patchy and there is no mention in those that exist of the rainy season interrupting the attendant celebrations. However, *lantans* were fewer in number and *lantan* celebrations were less structured than in the post-Independence era.

In October 1973, though preparations were well in hand and over thirty six participating *lantans* had registered with the YMMA, unseasonably late showers of heavy rain broke out just as the parade was due to start and most of the *lantans* were destroyed before reaching the judging point.<sup>53</sup> Over the next few years the annual *lantan* celebrations continued amidst considerable uncertainty as the end of Ramadan consistently fell during the worst period of the rainy season. In 1977 the YMMA actually called off the parade because of heavy rain, but five clubs decided to go ahead as a result of the intervention of Sierra Leone's Acting Vice President through a former President of the YMMA who donated Le200 as assistance to the clubs.<sup>54</sup> Again in 1979 rain disrupted the parade and in August 1980 only seven groups registered their participation (and of those groups only three built large *lantans*).<sup>55</sup> Clearly the *lantan* tradition was in crisis compared with the early 1970s and it was this situation that understandably led John Nunley to infer that the *lantan* tradition was in terminal decline.<sup>56</sup> Other observers had reached the same conclusion, notably Dele Charley who wrote that by the 1970s very few families still went to watch the parade: there was little new to see and

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<sup>53</sup> DM: October 31 1973.

<sup>54</sup> DM: September 14 1977. Le=Leone (the currency of Sierra Leone). In 1977 Le2 = £1 sterling. The exchange rate (2006) is currently Le5,000=£1.

<sup>55</sup> DM: August 11 1980.

<sup>56</sup> Nunley 1985:97.

sporadic outbursts of fighting were not unusual.<sup>57</sup> The young people who so wholeheartedly supported lantern parades in the early 1960s had become too educated or too old to participate; it was no longer 'the thing to do' and they would only join in the spirit of things passively if they were unable to find something better with which to occupy themselves - like going to the cinema. 'Then, of course, came the rain.' Few revellers wanted to dance in the rain and large *lantans*, which were particularly costly to build, were easily damaged by water so smaller ones that could be finished in a couple of days became the answer. 'The fiesta lost its glitter. The magic began to wear off.' On the eve of Id-ul-Fitr many people watched the *lantans* from their windows if they happened to live along the parade route, but at the same time the night clubs and other indoor city attractions in Freetown did roaring business well away from the *lantan* processions.

Despite this bleak prognosis the *lantan* tradition managed, nevertheless, to survive in Freetown. The fact that it did so - and that, by 1990 it had come to attract an even greater level of participation - was undoubtedly due in part to the efforts of YMMA officials to revive interest and support generally and, in particular, to raise funds and distribute subsidies to the lantern clubs.

The high cost of building *lantans* was mentioned by a newspaper columnist in 1980 in an article entitled 'Help Keep The Lantern Floats Going'.<sup>58</sup> A few days earlier the annual lantern parade had attracted only seven clubs of which three alone built large *lantans*. According to one builder the cost of paper, *poka*<sup>59</sup> and other materials had gone up five times in three years and the sources of capital on which clubs could draw had not shown a corresponding increase. A year later the same newspaper column lamented the same 'sordid facts'.<sup>60</sup> Out of thirteen *lantans* participating in the 1981 parade only two or three were considered to be of a standard equal to those built a decade earlier.

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<sup>57</sup> See 'Cultural Chit Chat with Dele Charley', *DM*: August 15 1980. The rest of this paragraph is based on his article.

<sup>58</sup> *DM*: August 14 1980.

<sup>59</sup> *Poka* is the material from which the frames of *lantans* were built. See page 142, note 21.

<sup>60</sup> *DM*: August 6 1981.

### 3.3.2 The revival of lantern parades in the 1980s

Nevertheless within a decade the situation had been retrieved and the annual lantern parades were attracting increasing numbers of participants. It is probably significant that in the early 1980s the YMMA Executive had recruited several new members, one of whom was particularly active in Freetown affairs and was well known for his involvement in a range of educational and welfare projects, commercial organisations, charities and sports associations. He assumed an increasingly important role within the YMMA, placing at its disposal his not inconsiderable organising skills and network of contacts. The YMMA began to target commercial enterprises more systematically, presumably with success: it was able to introduce the practice of distributing subsidies to lantern clubs to provide core funding towards the cost of their *lantans*.<sup>61</sup> In the 1990s I was able to observe the YMMA in action as it endeavoured to raise funds to support the parades of 1993 and 1997.<sup>62</sup>

In return for a donation towards its central fund the YMMA allotted each commercial donor a lantern club which then became responsible for publicising the donor's business on the night of the parade. The YMMA always tried to match the most generous donors with lantern clubs that were particularly popular and that were renowned for building successful *lantans*. Alternatively, it sometimes selected an appropriately themed *lantana* and matched the club responsible for it with a suitable donor.<sup>63</sup> There were also a few companies that directly supported particular clubs on a regular basis and in these cases the YMMA neither approached the companies for a cash donation for its own fund nor provided a subsidies to the clubs concerned.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> DM: June 30 1984. This undoubtedly encouraged participation on the part of lantern clubs and remained standard practice for all subsequent parades.

<sup>62</sup> See pages 21-22, 34 & 36.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Sierra Leone Brewery Ltd used to help maintain the Clock Tower (a well-known landmark in the East End of Freetown) in return for placing advertisements on it. In both 1993 and 1997 Bombay Stars Lantern Club built a *lantana* depicting the Clock Tower and the YMMA matched it with the Brewery (which made a donation to the YMMA on each occasion). The Brewery provided the club with advertising materials which the club then displayed on its *lantana*.

<sup>64</sup> A good example was Freetown Cold Storage Company (FCSC) which manufactured the soft drink called Vimto and which for many years directly sponsored Vimto Lantern Club. In 1997 FCSC helped Vimto Lantern Club to build a very sturdy chassis and platform for its *lantana*. On the night of the Parade FTCS provided club members with bottles of Vimto which they held aloft as they paraded through the streets. The *lantana* (which depicted an Islamic theme) included two huge representations of Vimto bottles.

The advantage of making a direct donation to the YMMA lay in the additional publicity which the YMMA could provide. This was well illustrated by the case of Alfred Akibo Betts who donated Le 1,000,000 to the YMMA for the 1997 parade. This made him by far the most significant public sponsor and in return the YMMA linked his name to ten different lantern clubs (which he personally selected) so that whenever the club's name was mentioned so was its sponsor's. Akibo Betts' generosity was regularly mentioned in YMMA announcements over the radio and in the press during the week preceding the parade (partly in gratitude and partly in an effort to encourage other potential donors). The YMMA also gave Akibo Betts considerable coverage in the 1997 parade programme which included acknowledgement of his sponsorship, a whole-page congratulatory notice from him and his family to the entire Muslim community on the occasion of Id-ul-Fitr and a public message written by him in support of the *lantana* tradition. Mr Akibo Betts was also accorded VIP treatment on the night of the parade and was invited to the prize giving ceremony held a few weeks after the event.

The practice of producing a printed brochure containing information about the year's lantern parade, articles and messages, liberally interspersed with commercial advertisements (for which the YMMA charged a fee) seems to have been introduced in 1983. Brochures were subsequently produced in 1984, 1986, 1987 and 1997.<sup>65</sup> The proceeds were intended to cover production costs as well as help meet parade expenses. However, despite its best efforts, evidence suggests that the YMMA's dependence on senior politicians for patronage was still the mainstay of its operations. In the lantern parade programme for 1987 thirty nine individuals (and four commercial companies, the Fire Brigade and the World Lebanese Cultural Union) were officially thanked for their contribution towards that year's parade. Of the thirty nine individuals, eighteen were Ministers of State or ordinary Members of Parliament, and included both Vice Presidents as well as President Momoh himself.

Executive members of the YMMA also used the media to help shape public opinion and raise the profile of the YMMA and of its lantern parades. It is interesting that while the YMMA professed to have been formed specifically to organise end-of-Ramadan festivities (namely the lantern parades and athletic

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<sup>65</sup> I have been unable to locate any for other years.

sports meetings) YMMA officials were well aware of the broader appeal that *lantans* practices held. By the 1970s when the tradition was encountering increasing problems, the YMMA seemed intent on projecting the role of the *lantan* tradition as a pre-eminent cultural event irrespective of people's religious identity. In 1973 (the year when most of the *lantans* were destroyed by rain) the YMMA's President had described the annual lantern parade as the '... biggest indigenous festival in Sierra Leone.'<sup>66</sup> Eight years later Manso Dumbuya (the Organising Secretary of the YMMA) proclaimed that 'The lantern procession and 'carnival night' has become a National Cultural heritage for Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the country'<sup>67</sup> and a newspaper editorial praised the harmonious relationship existing between people of different religions, commenting on the fact that side by side with Muslims there would be Christians and people of other religions joining in the singing and dancing of the *lantan* processions.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to emphasising the lantern parade's significance as a unifying force within Freetown society the YMMA was also keen to project the parade's role as a creative endeavour. Manso Dumbuya described it as '...an ordinary art and an exhibition of skill and techniques'<sup>69</sup> and a newspaper columnist agreed: 'It's a deeply meaningful portrayal of Sierra Leonean skill, creativity and cultural awareness.'<sup>70</sup> It is unlikely, however, that such rhetoric provided serious encouragement to *lantan* builders. Far more important were the financial incentives offered by the YMMA and by commercial and political sponsorship.

A further boost in interest, however, resulted from the decision in 1987 by Freetown City Council to mark the anniversary of Independence with its own lantern parade (as part of the city's bicentenary celebrations). This event is remembered by clubs as being highly organised and well funded, so much so that it spurred a number of enthusiasts to establish new lantern clubs in different parts of Freetown and its

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<sup>66</sup> *DM*: October 30 1973. See page 83.

<sup>67</sup> *DM*: August 1 1981.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *DM*: August 5 1981.

environs. Neighbourhoods several miles out of the city, west and south, began to participate in the Freetown end-of Ramadan parade for the first time<sup>71</sup>.

Lantern club numbers thus steadily improved throughout the 1980s. In 1984 the number of participating clubs stood at twenty three but reached record heights in 1989 and 1990 when between fifty and sixty clubs took part in the lantern parades. In 1991 the expected parade attracted almost fifty entries<sup>72</sup>. Unsurprisingly these peak years coincided with important political developments, notably the referendum on a return to multi-party democracy and the subsequent impending elections. In the course of our discussions, members of lantern clubs and of the YMMA Executive constantly reiterated their opinion that 'politics' was the root cause of the proliferation of clubs in the late 1980s and one political aspirant readily explained in 1991 that by sponsoring a new lantern club in his constituency he hoped to improve his chances in the forthcoming local elections.<sup>73</sup>

Yet amidst this proliferation of lantern clubs the YMMA itself had by the late 1980s become an enigma. In 1991 my research revealed that although it was supposed to embrace various categories of membership (honorary president, patrons, the Executive, individual membership and organisational membership) in practice the YMMA was its Executive and vice versa. The annual registration of those lantern clubs which wanted to participate in the annual lantern parade was the only form of organisational membership in existence, and while individual advisers (usually former YMMA officials) used to be drawn in as required by the Executive it is doubtful whether they paid any membership subscription although they contributed in other ways (through their time, effort and contacts). The YMMA Executive itself comprised a core of officers, supposedly re-elected every two years (at the YMMA's annual general meeting at the end of Ramadan) but, to my knowledge, no such AGMs were held in the 1990s.

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<sup>71</sup> For example, Aberdeen Ferry Road neighbourhood to the far west of Freetown (Interviews 93/89 & 93/93), and areas like Kissy (95/87) and Portee (93/83 & 93/84 and 95/84 & 95/85) on the main road leading up-country. Clubs in the latter two areas had previously participated in *lantana* celebrations in the neighbouring suburb of Wellington in the late 1960s. See pages 120-122 and page 11, Fig 3.

<sup>72</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>73</sup> Interview 91/4.

However, this had not always been the situation. Under its original constitution the YMMA seems to have comprised not only an executive committee but also a number of sub-committees. Around 1965-1966 the officers of the YMMA comprised a President, Vice-President, a General-Secretary and Assistant General-Secretary, Chairman of the Lantern Committee, a Financial Secretary, a Treasurer, a Lantern Secretary and Assistant Lantern Secretary, a Sports Secretary, and a Religious Secretary.<sup>74</sup> By 1983, however, there had been a shift in emphasis within the Executive and the 1983 and 1984 lantern parade programmes indicate that the last four offices had disappeared. Instead the posts of Organising Secretary (and Assistant), a Social Secretary and a Publicity Secretary had been created. By 1986 a second constitution had been introduced and in 1987 the published list of officers included two Vice-Presidents, two Assistant Secretaries-General and a single, combined post of Organising and Publicity Secretary (with an Assistant).<sup>75</sup> There were three ex-officio members, one of whom (Dr. Sheku T. Kamara) was Chairman of the Lantern Committee. In addition to a number of advisers the YMMA boasted three Honorary Members.

Thus over a period of twenty seven years the YMMA Executive had lost its original balance between *lantana* and sports affairs and the post of Religious Secretary had disappeared. At the same time the Executive had clearly become more politicised as indicated by the inclusion as Honorary Members of J S. Mohammed (a long term associate of President Stevens and one of the richest and most powerful businessmen in Sierra Leone until 1987) and of A. B. Kamara (Member of Parliament for Port Loko North II Constituency and 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-President of Sierra Leone in the 1980s).<sup>76</sup> Although Honorary Members almost certainly never attended YMMA Executive meetings their mere existence on paper allowed the YMMA to claim access to the most powerful people in the country.

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<sup>74</sup> Documentation from Alhaji I B Turay. (See Appendix 4.)

<sup>75</sup> Lantern Parade Brochure for 1987.

<sup>76</sup> An Afro-Lebanese by birth Jamil Said Mohammed was implicated in a failed coup plot in 1987 and fled to London (Reno 1995:160). A B Kamara was an older brother of Dr. Sheku Tejan Kamara who was Chairman of the YMMA's Lantern Committee from the 1987 until 1993 when he assumed the role of YMMA President.

The situation in which the YMMA found itself was a direct consequence of its continuous need for funds, the absence of any formal grant-giving and sponsorship mechanisms in the country, the overriding influence of political patronage and the notion of the lantern parade itself as a political resource. Together these factors played a vital role in shaping the *lantana* tradition during the second half of the twentieth century.

### 3.4 The lantern parade as a political resource

It is clear that the *lantana* tradition's political potential, as a vehicle for the exercise of conspicuous patronage, was first recognised long before the YMMA was established. Indeed, the leadership role that Pa Maggay assumed in relation to the tradition in Fourah Bay was rooted in the notion of patronage. Sceptics might argue that the eventual establishment of the YMMA simply represented the culmination of ongoing attempts on the part of aspiring, post-World War II politicians to harness the *lantana* tradition's political potential in the run-up to the country's independence.

The post-World War II period was one of great constitutional change and intense political activity. A leading figure at the time was M.S. Mustapha, a founder of the SLPP who had long been active in political and Muslim affairs. In 1951, as Legislative Council member for Freetown East constituency, he took up responsibility for Works and Transport. In 1958 he became Minister of Finance in the new all-Sierra Leonean Executive Council. Several years later he attended the all-party talks in London which preceded the country's independence, and was appointed Deputy Premier in June 1960.<sup>77</sup>

In the early 1950s M.S. Mustapha became the first person to exploit the lantern parade's political potential by starting the practice of awarding small cash prizes to those groups responsible for building the best constructed *lantanas* and he is well remembered for the 'encouragement' he gave clubs on parade nights.<sup>78</sup> It must be remembered, of course, that during the 1950s the lantern parade was still very much a Muslim affair and, as an Aku Muslim from Fula Town, M. S. Mustapha had been

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<sup>77</sup> See *Sierra Leonean Heroes* 1988: 92-3.

<sup>78</sup> Interviews: 92/2, 92/6, 92/25, 92/36, 92/64, 92/66, 95/134 & 95/138.

'born' into the tradition. He no doubt recognised the fact that he could gain popularity by encouraging a tradition enjoyed by large numbers of his constituents and that, in return for a display of generosity on the parade night, he could expect to further his good-standing as an able patron within his community.

M. S. Mustapha's example is considered by some to have inspired those who later established the YMMA.<sup>79</sup> Those responsible for the initiative included a number of prominent politicians, notably S. A. Fofanah. He is said to have been supported by Kande Bure who was a Temne from Mange Bure (near Port Loko) and who had long played an important part in political and religious affairs.<sup>80</sup> S. A. Fofanah was also a Temne (from a ruling Port Loko family) but had only returned to Freetown in 1955 after a sixteen year absence in the UK. He became active in the Youth Section of the SLPP, some of whose members joined him in setting up the YMMA. Like him, they had predominantly northern roots. S. A. Fofanah became the YMMA's first President and he also became a founder member of the All People's Congress (APC) when it was established in 1960.<sup>81</sup> Several other prominent members of the YMMA transferred to the APC in the early 1960s including Muktar Kally who came from a leading Mandingo family in Freetown and who had previously supported another opposition party (the UPP).<sup>82</sup>

The YMMA's first Executive under S. A. Fofanah was thus predominantly northern-Muslim in composition and biased politically towards the APC. While the predominance of Temnes and Mandingos among YMMA founder members reflects the strength of the *lantán* tradition within their communities the lack of strong Aku Muslim leadership within the YMMA cannot be explained so easily, particularly in view of M. S. Mustapha's example in the 1950s. Perhaps the re-emergence of Aku Muslim factionalism in Fourah Bay in 1956 was partly to blame for the inability of Aku

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<sup>79</sup> Interview 1994:145.

<sup>80</sup> Originally a school teacher Kande Bure had been appointed Alimami (Tribal Headman) of the Temne community in Freetown at the end of World War II and only resigned the position when he won a parliamentary seat in the 1957 elections for the main party in Sierra Leone (the SLPP) and was appointed Minister of Works and Housing. See *Sierra Leone Heroes* 1988:84-85.

<sup>81</sup> By 1960 the SLPP was becoming strongly identified with the Mendes from the southern part of Sierra Leone. The most important of the founding members of the APC were all northerners of Temne or Limba origins (Cartwright 1970:130-131).

<sup>82</sup> Muktar Kally later became Alimami (Tribal Headman) of the Freetown Mandingo community.

Muslims to capitalise on the formation of the YMMA.<sup>83</sup> This fact was still bemoaned by some Krio Muslims in the 1990s who felt that, with the 'advent of politics', control over the lantern parade effectively passed from the Aku Muslims in Freetown to the non-Aku Muslims (mainly of Mandingo and Temne origin) who had adopted the tradition, albeit half a century earlier, from their Aku Muslim brothers.<sup>84</sup>

With the YMMA established under largely northern, pro-APC leadership it was only a matter of time before the annual lantern parade and, by extension, the YMMA itself were absorbed into the matrix of the patrimonial state over which the APC came to preside. In the early 1960s, as in colonial times, the parades were regularly attended by leading dignitaries and politicians. Pre-Independence they included M S Mustafa and the Governor; post-Independence, the Governor-General, members of the diplomatic corps, various cabinet ministers and even the Prime Minister.<sup>85</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that in the early 1960s these VIP guests were the direct source of the prizes which the YMMA distributed to winning clubs or, indeed, were responsible for giving the YMMA any financial support at all.<sup>86</sup> However, in 1968 after the APC assumed power, the YMMA's President, S. A. Fofanah, became Minister of Housing and Country Planning.<sup>87</sup> That same year a trophy for the overall winning lantern club was donated to the YMMA by a commercial company and the prizes were presented at the Ministry of Housing and Local Planning by the wife of the President of Sierra Leone. Interestingly every participating lantern club (twenty in all) received an award

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<sup>83</sup> Two new factions (the Trust and the Mass) emerged and disputed both the Imamship of the mosque and control of the Aku Muslim cemetery in Fourah Bay. The struggle continued into the 1970s (Lewally Taylor 1976: 185-240). Of the few prominent Aku Muslims who have held posts within the YMMA Executive, most have originated from Fula Town e.g., Alhaji Dr. Ahmadu Fadlu Deen (President of the YMMA in the early 1980s).

<sup>84</sup> This view was strongly held by the late Salami Coker, an Aku Muslim from Fourah Bay, who was prominent in his local community (in *lantán* and secret society affairs) and in national politics once he returned (at the request of President Siaka Stevens) from twenty-five years' sojourn in the UK.

<sup>85</sup> *DM*: June 15 1953; April 11 1959; February 27 1963; February 17 1964.

<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, in 1969 Mrs G Sheriff (wife of the leader of the SLPP, Jusu Sheriff) donated a trophy to the YMMA (*DM*: December 18 1969). This was the first occasion reported in the press when a leading SLPP personality actively patronised the lantern parade in the post-Independence era and it occurred only after the SLPP had lost power.

<sup>87</sup> S. A. Fofanah was not the only YMMA official to achieve office after the APC came to power. Sorsoh Conteh, who was Secretary General of the YMMA from 1961 to 1968 was appointed Ambassador to Guinea in 1968.

as if, thereby, receiving the seal of the APC's approval.<sup>88</sup> Thereafter senior members of the APC elite were reported periodically in the press as having given support to the parade, either in the form of financial assistance or in the form of gifts of trophies. The most frequently mentioned name is that of S. I. Koroma, who in his capacity as Minister of Agriculture and Natural Resources (in 1969) donated a trophy to the YMMA for presentation to one of the winning clubs.<sup>89</sup> In later years he made contributions to the YMMA in various capacities (as Vice President and Prime Minister, as Acting President and then as 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President).<sup>90</sup> Like S. A. Fofanah, S. I. Koroma was a Temne from Port Loko and a founder member of the APC. He maintained his position as second in the party hierarchy until his retirement from politics in 1986. He was ideally placed to dispense patronage when, in the early 1970s, he headed the Ministry of the Interior with which all mutual-aid and 'friendly societies' had to register in order to obtain official recognition. He was thus able to decide which associations could be registered (and thereby to control patronage to them). As a leader of more radical elements within the APC he was renowned for using his links with grassroots associations and secret societies to encourage alliances among associations for political purposes and to strengthen his political influence. His patronage of the YMMA was clearly an extension of this practice.<sup>91</sup>

The increasingly high profile accorded the annual lantern parades is well reflected in the reports of the 1972 *lantana* celebrations which were attended by S I Koroma and the President's wife together with cabinet ministers and members of the diplomatic corps. The parade was led by members of the YMMA in procession (with their President at their head) and preceded by a two-hour recital of the Koran by two distinguished Muslim visitors from Cairo. Competition among the thirty-one participating clubs was very keen, not only in *lantana* building (which was 'considerably improved') but also in the singing of 'Arabic' songs and in 'the colourful displays of

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<sup>88</sup> DM: December 31 1968. The lantern parade took place on 21 December 1968. (When referring to it Nunley (1985: 46) confused the date of the parade with the date of the prize-giving).

<sup>89</sup> DM: December 18 1969.

<sup>90</sup> DM: November 7 1972; DM: October 31 1973; DM: June 30 1984.

<sup>91</sup> See Reno 1995: 97-99. I learnt in the course of my own fieldwork that, after his retirement from politics, S. I. Koroma became head of the Ojeh Society in Freetown and was responsible for the spread of this secret society among the Temnes in the Port Loko area.

ashoebis'.<sup>92</sup> There were three categories of judges to assess each category of performance (*lantans*, songs and costume) and the parade was given both radio and TV coverage. In retrospect 1972 possibly marked the apogee of lantern parades in the immediate post-Independence era.

As the patrimonial control exercised by the APC political elite over the nation's economic, financial and political resources increased between 1968 and 1992, so the regulation and organisation of the annual lantern parades became intensely political processes both at the overall organisational level and at the individual club level. Since *lantana* celebrations involved clubs with hundreds of supporters and brought thousands of people out onto the streets of Freetown it is hardly surprising that the parades and the participating clubs became a focus of intense political interest and patronage. The YMMA relied on the political elite for support; indeed it could hardly do otherwise since no-one un-allied with the ruling elite was likely to have the means and/or the inclination to provide alternative support. Paid-up membership of the YMMA became meaningless because people assumed that politicians would patronise the lantern parade and its individual clubs. The realities and dangers inherent in the YMMA's situation only became evident after the overthrow of the APC government in 1992 when the YMMA's long standing source of patronage suddenly disappeared. YMMA records show that in April 1993 when the YMMA staged a special lantern parade to coincide with the first anniversary of the 1992 coup, not one member of the NPRC government contributed financially (or otherwise) towards its success.<sup>93</sup> Since promised donations from commercial concerns were slow in coming in, the YMMA had no alternative but to look to an interested foreign resident to provide a loan to enable the Association to meet its initial commitments and, in particular, distribute subsidies to the participant clubs. Even when all the promised contributions had been collected they were not sufficient to repay the loan and also provide prizes for the winning clubs. A similar situation occurred in 1997 when the YMMA started planning the first end-of-Ramadan lantern parade for seven years: it proved even more difficult to raise funds from the business community at a time of deepening economic crisis. The political elite showed

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<sup>92</sup> DM: November 9 1972. 'Ashoebi' = *aswebi*. See page 24, note 18.

<sup>93</sup> I was unable to research why the NPRC leaders (and the ruling SLPP politicians in 1997) chose not to extend any financial patronage to the lantern parade.

no interest in making donations to the YMMA and the situation was only rescued when a prominent local businessman offered financial support.<sup>94</sup>

So far this chapter has outlined the transformation of Freetown's *lantana* tradition from a local, community-based celebration on the part of Muslims in the first half of the twentieth century, to a city-wide, inclusive parade in the second half of the century. The transformation was effected by and through Sierra Leone's patrimonial state. The future revival of the *lantana* tradition will partly depend on whether the current political elite deems lantern parades a safe and useful means of securing political advantage through the exercise of patronage, or whether *lantana* enthusiasts can identify an alternative way of securing a source of funding.

Another challenge that is critical to the tradition's revival and that re-emerged very forcefully in the 1990s was the strong body of minority religious opinion opposed to lantern parades in their established form. The rest of this chapter examines the way in which the lantern parade engaged religious controversy within Freetown's Muslim community during the twentieth century and the culmination of this controversy in a serious threat to the very existence of the YMMA and the *lantana* tradition.

### 3.5 1997: lantern parades as the focus of competing religious interests

From the time *lantanas* first started being paraded at the end of Ramadan there had been sporadic debate among Muslims in Freetown as to the appropriateness of this custom which, some claimed, was detrimental to the good name of Islam. By the second half of the twentieth century the lantern parade was being transformed from an exclusively Muslim affair into a highly competitive, inclusive cultural event into which political patronage had introduced additional strains. Criticism of its appropriateness became more marked in the 1980s when the fortunes of the *lantana* tradition were revived, and by the 1990s the media had spread the debate beyond the Muslim community to the wider public. For years it had been apparent that inter-group competitiveness, neighbourhood friction and personal rivalries were apt to lead to a

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<sup>94</sup> See page 34, note 30 for more information about the businessman, Alfred Akibo-Betts. Even then the YMMA faced a shortage of funds and two of its own executive members had to provide it with substantial seed loans to allow the parade arrangements to get underway. One of them informed me after the event that he was keen to enter local politics and saw the act of subsidising the lantern parade as a way of gaining popularity.

degeneration in behaviour on the streets during parades and this situation was often worsened by the drinking and revelling in which many supporters indulged. It is clear that the use of patronage on the part of politicians particularly at grass roots club level allowed political and party rivalries to exacerbate the tensions which the lantern parade already generated and embodied. Among more single-minded Muslims lantern parades had always had a bad reputation and by 1997 the *lantana* tradition was facing a serious challenge from adverse religious opinion which threatened to destroy it in its existing form.

Few (if any) people in Freetown in the 1990s realised that the arguments surrounding the lantern parade had been raging for over a century. As early as 1895 a newspaper report commented that while the behaviour of those participating in the Watchnight processions was generally good, there was evidence of some participants copying 'the indecency and lewd behaviour' which characterised the festivities associated with New Year's Eve.<sup>95</sup> In 1896 it was reported that the 'order' and 'decency' that used to mark end-of-Ramadan celebrations was lacking that year and scenes in the streets '... especially from the girls and lads who followed the processions ...' were again '...equally as objectionable as those we are all so familiar within our own *christian* Christmas and New Year's Eve's serenades.'<sup>96</sup> These remarks elicited a response from 'A Foulah-townian' whose letter was published in the next edition of the newspaper.<sup>97</sup> He claimed that the previous week's article had caused considerable dissatisfaction among Muslims and he stated that in Islam '... there is no room for such an absurdity as what is termed "Burial of the moon"'. This dismissal of the Watchnight processions by a fellow Muslim, in 1896, as an un-Islamic 'absurdity' was a portent of things to come. So too was the allegedly undisciplined behaviour of parade goers.

Archival evidence dating to 1915 indicates that, in the course of consultations with the colonial government, the leaders of the Muslim communities in Freetown dissociated themselves from the practice of parading *lantans* largely on the grounds that

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<sup>95</sup> *SLT*: March 30 1895. Original italics. The report did not explain exactly what it meant by 'indecency' and 'lewd behaviour' but I suspect it is referring to unruly and obscene merrymaking on the part of some participants.

<sup>96</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896. Original italics.

<sup>97</sup> *SLT*: March 21 1896. The term 'Foulah-townian' refers to a resident of Fula Town.

the people involved '... are young men who do not wish to listen to good advice.'<sup>98</sup> Precisely the same sort of opinions prevailed in 1941 when Pa Maggay's letter of request to the Colonial Secretary received the comment that 'The orthodox Muslims are all against this [lantern] procession and always have been. It is composed usually of the rowdy element, most of them are members of the Agugu [sic] Society and the Muslim religion means nothing to them.'<sup>99</sup> The Commissioner of Police concurred claiming that 'The signatories [of Pa Maggay's letter] are persons of no consequence and the Imams are against having a procession.'<sup>100</sup>

These criticisms of rowdy behaviour on the part of parade participants, and the allegations that the latter were insincere Muslims who would not submit to the authority of their elders, sound remarkably familiar; indeed I heard identical complaints levelled against lantern club members in the course of my research. The 'youths' from whom the lantern clubs of the 1990s drew their active support constituted a partly educated underclass which was blamed for many of the ills (drug taking, theft, violence etc) of contemporary urban society.

Despite the opinions of the Muslim elite in 1915 the annual *lantana* celebrations went ahead then and in the years that followed.<sup>101</sup> However, by the 1930s (as described in chapter 2) there had emerged within the Islamic community in Freetown a new force which was influential enough to enlist the support of the government in a bid to control the timing of the *lantana* celebrations. This force was the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress.<sup>102</sup> According to Skinner 'It represented the "enlightened" British-educated [Muslim] population, and its aims were to promote orthodoxy, modern education and

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<sup>98</sup> SLNA LM238: 1915.

<sup>99</sup> SLNA 1941: Correspondence between Chief Maggay Williams and the Governor and Colonial Secretary, October 6 1941. Oral sources have confirmed that Pa Maggay was indeed a leading member of the Egugu (Ojeh) Society. See page 67.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Newspaper and archival sources as well as Wellesley Cole's autobiography refer specifically to *lantana* celebrations in 1915, 1916, 1917, 1924, 1930 and 1933. Oral sources maintain that the tradition was practised continuously throughout this period.

<sup>102</sup> According to Proudfoot the Muslim Congress was founded in 1932 although the idea of setting up a body to represent the various Muslim communities was first floated ten years' earlier. (Proudfoot 1961: 148) According to M S Mustapha a Sierra Leonean branch of an organisation called the Muslim Congress (officially known as the All Muslim Congress - see *SLWN*: December 21 1935) with its headquarters in Jerusalem was founded in Freetown in 1928. It soon became independent. See also Skinner 1997: pp. 140-144.

the unity of all Muslims.’<sup>103</sup> Congress was successful in mobilising government support to help it suppress the parading of *lantans* on the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri in 1935 as Muslim leaders apparently did not want an outdoor celebration on the holiest night of the year. They considered the latter far too sacred to be associated with merry-making during which ‘Ill disposed people indulge in immoral conduct during the watchnight promenades.’<sup>104</sup> However, by December 1937 *lantans* were again being paraded to celebrate the end of Ramadan - but solely on the eve of the Id festival.<sup>105</sup> This was clearly considered acceptable and as one commentator noted a year later: ‘The parade of artistic paper lanterns is really objectionable in the Grand Night, [Lailut-ul-Kadri] but, there is no harm, if it is relegated to the eve of the Feast as was observed last year.’<sup>106</sup>

It appears that the strongest criticism of the *lantan* celebrations was directed against the behaviour, and in particular, the type of singing and dancing, associated with the *lantan* processions. Because of the sacredness of the Grand Night it was incumbent on Muslims to revere it, rather than ‘... go about dancing and singing songs which bear no meanings’.<sup>107</sup> It was the ‘meaningless songs’<sup>108</sup>, and the noise, the frantic crowds and the dancing that they generated, which gave most offence to the Muslim leaders of the day. These leaders were quick to disown the *lantan* tradition altogether when confronted by senior members of the colonial government in 1941, even though the celebrations had, by then, been divorced from the most holy night of Ramadan.

During the 1950s (at the time when M. S. Mustapha was actively patronising the *lantan* celebrations) thousands of ordinary Muslims continued to enjoy the annual revelries marking the end of Ramadan and it was customary for street to street dancing and merry-making to continue from early evening till morning.<sup>109</sup> In 1955 it was

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<sup>103</sup> Skinner 1997: 140

<sup>104</sup> *SLWN*: January 12 1935. The writer of the report suggested that one solution to the problem might be to restrict promenade vigils to men only.

<sup>105</sup> *DM*: December 1 1937.

<sup>106</sup> *DM*: November 19 1938.

<sup>107</sup> *DM*: December 11 1936.

<sup>108</sup> *DM*: November 19 1938.

<sup>109</sup> *DM*: 7 June 1954.

estimated that 10,000 Muslims enjoyed the *lantana* celebrations.<sup>110</sup> Inter-group rivalry certainly led at times to some disorder<sup>111</sup> but nevertheless the YMMA considered that one of its major achievements during the 1960s was to have improved the organisation of the annual lantern parades and instilled discipline and order into the festivities and particularly into the singing.<sup>112</sup>

Nevertheless, once the lantern parade began to widen in appeal and to be used increasingly as a focus of individual political rivalries the problem, of how to control the behaviour of huge crowds of spectators and participants caught up in a night-long street celebration, again became an issue. The revitalisation of the parade in the 1980s and the phenomenal increase in the number of participating clubs stretched the organisational skills of the YMMA to their limit and, despite the YMMA's intentions, the parade served as an opportunity for people to indulge in all kinds of behaviour abhorrent to devout Muslims. At the same time the government started to become uneasy as lantern club members and supporters increasingly made use of the parade to voice widespread dissatisfaction with the government's performance in a period of rapid economic decline. While lantern clubs were not in the habit of building *lantans* that incorporated imagery of a politically inflammatory nature, some of them did insert political messages into the songs they composed and sang for the occasion.<sup>113</sup> Despite its endeavours, the YMMA had few means by which to enforce good behaviour. Club members were at times adept at evading regulations and were themselves powerless to control the behaviour of supporters from outside their clubs' known circles.<sup>114</sup> The YMMA instituted the practice of appointing selected members from each club as marshals to assist in the policing of the parade but this could not solve the long-term problem.

In the 1980s the *lantana* debate was given additional impetus by the marked increase in Sierra Leone of Islamic influences from outside the country. These were manifest both in the activities of Sierra Leonean scholars who had studied overseas as

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<sup>110</sup> DM: May 25 1955.

<sup>111</sup> Interview 92/29 & 92/30.

<sup>112</sup> Interview 92/28.

<sup>113</sup> Appendix 7 discusses the extent to which *lantana* songs have been used as a vehicle of political expression. Even when a song was banned because of its lyrics a lantern club could still hum its melody.

<sup>114</sup> Interview 95/140.

well as in the activities of various Middle Eastern missionary agencies and governments - especially those of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and Libya.<sup>115</sup> In particular, a new Islamic movement called the United Muslim Community (whose members are known unofficially as Bashariyyas) emerged in Freetown in the 1980s under the leadership of Imam Basharr Fofanna. A Temne, who studied in Saudi Arabia, Alhaji Basharr Fofanna was acting Imam of the Temne mosque in the 1970s until he split away to form his own movement which quickly spread throughout Freetown and into the Northern Province. The Bashariyyas held strict views derived from *wahhabiyya* doctrines and they were eager to purify the Islamic religion in Sierra Leone. In particular, they opposed the *lantans* celebrations at the end of Ramadan (although, I was told, individual members of the movement often went out onto the streets to dance with the *lantans*<sup>116</sup>). Given their strength among the Temne the Bashariyyas constituted an embarrassment to the YMMA which entered into dialogue with them on a number of occasions.<sup>117</sup> During the 1990s a new voice - that of Sheikh Mohammed Mujcabah - joined in condemning the end-of-Ramadan *lantans* celebrations and added considerable weight to the various factions opposing the YMMA.<sup>118</sup>

By contrast, in the 1930s when the date of the parade was previously (and successfully) contested by the Muslim Congress, there was no overall parade leadership and the Congress was the only Muslim body in existence other than the various individual mosque congregations. By the 1980s and 1990s, however, the YMMA was the well-established intermediary body responsible for organising the annual lantern parade on a city-wide basis and a large number of other Muslim organisations existed in the country.<sup>119</sup> These two factors considerably complicated the issue. On the one hand the YMMA fought to protect the lantern clubs and the lantern parade from interference from outside interests, but on the other hand, the dispute over the date of the parade

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<sup>115</sup> The Muslim Congress first sent students to study outside West Africa (at Al-Azhar in Egypt) in the late 1940s and since the 1960s Sierra Leonean Muslims have also studied in Saudi Arabia. It is only since the late 1970s that other Muslim countries have taken an active interest in the development of Islam in Sierra Leone. (See Skinner 1997: 144-153.)

<sup>116</sup> Interview 95/145.

<sup>117</sup> A past president of the YMMA, Alhaji Manso Dumbuya, took part in a TV discussion with representatives of the Bashariyya movement soon after it was formed, and in 1990 the YMMA organised a workshop in which the leaders of various Muslim organisations aired their differing views on the lantern parade.

<sup>118</sup> See pages 32-34.

became absorbed into the much wider contest that existed among Muslim organisations and factions generally in Sierra Leone.

In 1997 all the members of the YMMA Executive were opposed to any change in the date of the lantern parade and their opposition over-rode any personal or religious affiliations.<sup>120</sup> While the YMMA's resolve was undoubtedly stiffened by the concern of its Executive members to retain their positions within the fields of political and religious power play in Freetown, they were also genuinely concerned that the lantern parade should not be divorced from what they considered to be its traditional context. They maintained that its connections with the month of Ramadan were vital to its success as a grassroots event, but, inevitably, they had to admit that the *lantana* tradition was in no way an intrinsic part of the Islamic religion. They and their supporters appealed to a nationalistic sense of culture and argued that the Watchnight lantern parade was an integral part of Sierra Leone's unique cultural tradition and should not be tampered with. By reasoning thus, the YMMA made a clear distinction (that was widely recognised among *lantana* enthusiasts) between religion and culture. Religion was understood to refer to a globally organised religious faith (usually Christianity or Islam) that was, by definition, foreign, with its power base situated outside Sierra Leone. Culture, on the other hand referred to local beliefs and customs practised within Sierra Leone without obvious reference to outsiders or to outside influences. The opponents of the parade argued that it fostered ill discipline and even violence which were repugnant at the end of the fast month during which Muslims were enjoined to devote themselves to the pursuit of godliness. Opposition to the parade was focused on the timing of the event (to coincide with a religious festival) rather than on the parade itself and was further justified by the assertion that the *lantana* tradition was not Islamic as such and had no place in Muslim dogma or specifically Muslim practice. No one therefore disputed that the parade was cultural rather than religious in nature. However, the YMMA differed in that it sought to promote cultural nationalism (which, as Chapter 5 will demonstrate, permeated important aspects of *lantana* imagery) over religious sensitivities. Parade supporters argued that the parade was a cultural practice handed

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<sup>119</sup> See Skinner (1999) and Proudfoot (1961).

<sup>120</sup> I was told that the YMMA's Organising and Publicity Secretary was a member of the Bashariyya movement and that another, ex officio member of the YMMA Executive was closely associated with Sheikh Mujcabah.

down through generations and it should not be subject to outside interference.<sup>121</sup> By appealing to a sense of national loyalty and identity the YMMA hoped to outmanoeuvre its opponents and preserve the lantern parade in its existing form.

### 3.6 Concluding remarks

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, the YMMA had, throughout its history, constituted a focus for a number of competing political and religious interests. On the one hand it had functioned within the framework of national politics and of political circumstances and relationships pertaining to its times. On the other hand it had operated as an Islamic organisation within the matrix of specifically Muslim politics and practice. However, in promoting the *lantana* tradition, which has no connections with Islamic dogma, the YMMA had found itself embroiled in religious controversy and power play that have been going on since the late nineteenth century.

This controversy highlighted what was clearly a fundamental anomaly in the YMMA's position as an Islamic organisation: it was responsible for promoting (as a way of celebrating the end of the holiest month in the Muslim calendar) an event that had no foundation within Islamic teaching and that was regarded by some Muslims as undermining the very virtue of the fast month itself. The debate in 1997 generated fierce positional manoeuvring within Freetown's Muslim community and assumed broader political dimensions when the President himself became involved in resolving the immediate dispute. Following the lantern parade in February 1997 it seemed certain that the debate would recur in future years and that the YMMA would have to negotiate its way through fresh alignments and realignments of those who opposed the annual Watchnight lantern parade. If it failed to retain support and the parade shifted from the eve of Id-ul-Fitr to an alternative date, then it would be questionable whether the YMMA could survive in its present form. Chapter 9 explores the possibility that the *lantana* tradition itself might change dramatically if it were divorced from the month of Ramadan.

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<sup>121</sup> While people in Freetown were well aware that the practice of building and parading of *lantanas* originated outside their country they considered the *lantana* tradition peculiarly Sierra Leonean. Those who opposed the parade (as an end-of-Ramadan practice) were generally perceived by *lantana* enthusiasts as having lost their sense of cultural nationalism as a result of the influence of fundamentalist Islamic ideas from the Middle East.

## Chapter 4

### THE *LANTAN* TRADITION AT GRASS ROOTS LEVEL: LANTERN CLUBS

#### 4.1 Introduction

The *lantana* tradition comprises a mix of different organisational components and artistic media which combine and interact to create a unique performance event, namely the lantern parade. The last chapter has examined the way in which the practice of parading *lantans* led to the emergence in 1959 of a recognised leadership structure in the form of the YMMA which simultaneously played the roles of organiser, broker and protector in *lantana* affairs. This chapter focuses on the lantern parade's other organisational component - the participating *lantana* groups (lantern clubs) which were the units responsible for the *lantana* processions out of which each lantern parade was constructed. Mounting a *lantana* procession was a costly and time-consuming business: it was a group not an individual enterprise and required collaborative decision-making to be a success. Each procession was a composite production comprising inter-relating performances that were the responsibility of different sets of people. The producers of each procession were the lantern club leaders who orchestrated the whole enterprise. Given that so many elements (the *lantana*, instrumental music, songs, costume and dance) were being articulated simultaneously it was impossible for the procession to be a purely individual creation, or to be wholly predictable.

By the 1990s when I undertook my research lantern clubs formed a loose organisational network which functioned only in relation to *lantana* celebrations. The existence of a lantern club was officially recognised only when it responded to the YMMA's call for clubs to register for any particular lantern parade and even though some club leaders used to claim that their clubs engaged in other activities on a regular basis a good many lantern clubs seemed to act as organised units only for the duration of the parade period itself. A few, however, did seem to have wider functions, or – conversely – organisations other than lantern clubs engaged in *lantana* building as just one element in their programmes of activities.

YMMA registration procedures required each lantern club to declare the names

of the leaders who formed the club's executive body. These officials, whose responsibility it was to organise club affairs, bore familiar titles of office (president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, organising secretary, publicity secretary and often a chief whip to maintain discipline). In 1995 club membership numbers varied greatly: some clubs claimed no more than a dozen members while others boasted several hundred. It is likely that in the absence of annual lantern parades to galvanise them into regular action, during the 1990s those lantern clubs which devoted themselves solely to the *lantana* business simply comprised a core of *lantana* enthusiasts who could mobilise wider support when required. At a very basic level, a group of such enthusiasts might simply get together, agree official titles for one another and register themselves as a lantern club for the purposes of a parade; people volunteering to help with the *lantana* and its procession would then be 'taxed' (charged a subscription). However, other clubs which registered themselves as lantern clubs but which (possibly under different names) organised other types of activities at other times of the year often had a more formal membership structure. One club that boasted a membership of over a hundred people claimed that prospective members had to purchase an application form for Le400 and, once accepted by the club's executive, had to pay a subscription of Le500 per month.<sup>1</sup> Even where clubs clearly operated in a very informal way their officials always tried to promote an impression of formality and of democratic leadership.

I discovered that membership of lantern clubs was open to both men and women and some even had Mammy Queens to organise their female members and supporters.<sup>2</sup> However, clubs varied greatly in the degree to which women took an active part in their affairs. I never met a female *lantana* builder, although women and girls often helped with the building process by preparing materials for use. They also supported the club members during the build-up to the lantern parade by cooking food for them. Women were usually responsible for arranging the club's *aswebi* and very often formed the core of the singing group that accompanied the *lantana* on parade.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Montego Bay Lantern Club. Interview 94/62.

<sup>2</sup> Mammy Queen is the title often given in Freetown to the leading female within a club or society.

<sup>3</sup> As in the case of Aberdeen Ferry Road Lantern Club. Interviews 93/89 & 95/121. A woman member composed the club's *lantana* songs and another was its lead vocalist on the night of the parade.

Many clubs had local patrons who were usually older, retired *lantana* enthusiasts who had been active in *lantana* affairs in their youth. These patrons were often self-employed businessmen or were in formal employment and so had some level of income and status. A few were sufficiently wealthy to rank as major sponsors. For the most part, however, their role was confined to providing advice, helping find a space for the club to build its *lantana* and providing initial financial support to enable the club to mobilise itself.

## 4.2 Lantern clubs and the notion of neighbourhood loyalty

### 4.2.1 Methodology

When attempting to explain to me their enthusiasm for *lantana* affairs lantern club members in the 1990s often focused on the opportunity that organising a *lantana* procession provided for them to work together as a group. They claimed to derive considerable pleasure and pride from working on their *lantana* project and then celebrating its realisation together on the night of the parade. They perceived the lantern parade as an opportunity to ‘show their qualities’ and achieve recognition for themselves and their club.

On a personal level many different factors undoubtedly influenced individuals in their decision to join a lantern club. At club level, however, my research suggests that it was notions of status and group identity that lay at the heart of lantern parade participation. Club members always regarded their own club as distinctive, not just in terms of membership, but also in terms of its inherent superiority. They considered it uniquely different from all others, and herein lay part of the significance of the lantern parade as a competitive event. When a club competed it was asserting its difference from other clubs; its success in winning a prize reinforced its sense of uniqueness and achievement, and the act of receiving its prize constituted public acknowledgement and acclaim. In the course of my research I became interested in learning wherein lay the distinct identity of different clubs. To an outsider, group identity might appear to reside simply in the historical attributes and present-day characteristics of a particular club. However, from the point of view of lantern club members themselves lantern parades and their clubs’ individual *lantana* processions might serve as a means of forging and reinforcing specific and general notions of club identity through the activation and

expression of members' shared loyalties and aspirations. If this were the case then I needed to learn what these notions were and on what values they were based.

In the 1990s many lantern clubs claimed that their distinctiveness derived from their relationship with a particular neighbourhood. Time and again people told me that lantern club participation in the lantern parade was a matter of neighbourhood pride: it was necessary in order to 'promote our area' and to 'boost morale'. The process of organising and undertaking a *lantana* procession helped to unite an area 'to know itself again' and to 'build up relationships' within it.<sup>4</sup>

John Nunley has suggested that neighbourhood mosque associations were the original patrons of *lantans* in Freetown.<sup>5</sup> It is true that in the early years of the tradition *lantans* were built exclusively by Muslims and were sometimes taken to the local mosque prior to being paraded.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the early spread of the *lantana* tradition among Freetown Muslims seems to have followed the establishment of independent mosques by different ethnic groups (particularly by the Mandingos and Temnes) and this could be interpreted as implying that formal mosque associations actually took a direct role in initiating *lantana* building within their communities. However, older informants insisted that this was not so.

My informants usually referred to the early *lantana* groups by the name of their organisers (as in the case of the Maggay *lantana* group at Savage Square in Fourah Bay) or by the locality or ethnic group involved. A newspaper report of the 1948 *lantana* celebrations clearly demonstrates this practice: it contains a list of twelve main *lantans* grouped into four categories – Mandingo and Temne (ethnic groups) and King Tom and Fourah Bay (localities). The report further identifies ten of the twelve *lantans* by their addresses and, in some cases, by the group leader's name. Just two *lantans* were

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews 91/9, 92/41, 92/52, 93/78, 93/79, 93/80, 93/81, 94/17, 94/53, 94/62, 94/64, 95/87, 95/105, 95/121.

<sup>5</sup> Nunley 1985:45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews 92/20 & 95/118.

reported as having been built by named groups: the Bubu Lantern Society in Fourah Bay and King Tom Rovers Yankadee Society in the West End of Freetown.<sup>7</sup>

Given the existence of this comprehensive record of the *lantan* celebrations in 1948, and given the transformation that the *lantan* tradition has undergone since then it seemed useful to compare the neighbourhood affiliations of *lantan* groups in the late 1940s with those of lantern clubs almost half a century later. Firstly, such a comparison should demonstrate the extent to which neighbourhood and ethnic loyalties were still used in the 1990s to draw boundaries between individual lantern clubs. Secondly, it should indicate whether, in recent years, other shared loyalties and aspirations have been used by *lantan* groups to reinforce members' sense of neighbourhood and/or ethnic solidarity or to forge alternative notions of collective identity.

#### 4.2.2 King Tom and the western area of Freetown (See Fig. 5)

One of the largest *lantans* built for the 1948 end-of-Ramadan celebrations came from the neighbourhood called King Tom on the western side of the city. It was built by King Tom Rovers Yankadee Society. According to the press report

At 10.30 p.m. The H.M.S. Ajax left 'dock'. Here is the description; It must be brought to mind that the H.M.S. Ajax of British fame defeated the German Ship *Grasfpee* [sic] and this was an imitation.

Length 26 ft. width 4 ft. depth 8 ft. 1 Funnel 4 guns by the Captain's bridge 2 at stern. There were 14 bulbs lighted on board each 12 volts 2 mast lights. The ship rested on 4 wheels of 8 inches in diameter and was directed by a steering wheel. The whole thing was designed and by the K.T.R. Yankadee Society. There were two anti-air craft guns in midship. The delicate handwork with hard and tissue papers presented an object of beauty. There were 10 men on board. By ingenuity and skill the ship fired shots ... as those fired at Parades. Six were fired as she left the 'dock'. After the European Officer of B.D.O inspected the ship ... Price Street 21 guns were fired as a Salute immediately the Officer Stepped down from on board.

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<sup>7</sup> *DM*: August 11 1948. Before this date some named groups were involved in supporting or initiating *lantan* building efforts. For example, Fourah Bay Islamic Society in 1915 (see page 63) and Magazine Young Men's Association, which in 1937 built a 'fairly sized' paper *lantan* depicting HMS Neptune, the flagship of the Africa Naval Station (*DM*: December 1 1937 & *DM*: November 24 1938). Both names, however, were based on neighbourhood affiliations. The names of all known recorded *lantan* groups and lantern clubs are listed in Appendix 5.

At Central Police Station 5 shots were fired. Along the route to central Police Station at every ship shots were fired to a total of 60 shots. Inspector Roberts inspected the lights at Eastern Police Station and 5 shots were fired. Everywhere, the H.M.S. Ajax along Kroo Town Road, Kissy Road, Mountain Cut, Circular Road, Brook Street, Krootown Road and to 'Dock' again at 5.50 a.m. next day, was admired for the beauty of the lighting system, the signalling, the airships including 7 mail carriers, with the captain Mr Samuel Cole in "glossy" white on the bridge. The President Mr Santigi Kamara of 3 Byrne Street and the Secretary Mr P.J.M. Elliott and others are to be congratulated for the magnificent display of skill and taste. The builders were Messrs Morlai Bangurah and Momoh Kamara.<sup>8</sup>

The foregoing description gives an indication how impressive this ship *lantan* was. King Tom was the site of a British Naval base which provided considerable employment in the area and most of the *lantan* builders there had sea faring connections. Not surprisingly they continued to specialise in building ship *lantans* throughout the next fifty years and, during the lifetime of the naval base, could rely on the support of the officers and men stationed there. In particular, the latter provided strong materials for the *lantan's* chassis (thus enabling ever larger ship *lantans* to be built), generators and batteries for the lights, towing equipment and even a semaphore kit; they also lent full naval uniform for the *lantan* crew.<sup>9</sup> Mr Samuel Cole (whose father was English and whose fair complexion enabled him to pass as a European) regularly captained the *lantan* which in addition to him would also carry a chief officer and at least six crew men. Besides miming aspects of the ship's progress along the route the crew would serve drinks to spectators and to VIPs who sometimes boarded the lantern.<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s the club was still famed for its ship *lantans*. Although it did not build one in 1993 it produced a spectacular *lantan* in 1997 called 'HMS Clarkson' which easily won first prize in the Ship category.

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<sup>8</sup> DM: August 12 1948.

<sup>9</sup> Interview 95/152. By the 1990s the base had long been closed. According to Mr Samuel Cole other ship *lantans* built at King Tom included 'HMS Limpopo', 'HMS Neptune', 'HMS Oxfordshire' and 'HMS Vindictive'. The latter two were British training ships for African ratings (Interview 92/18).

<sup>10</sup> Mr Cole told the tale of how Alhaji M S Mustapha (then Minister of Finance) once boarded a King Tom float. Mr Cole as captain saluted him and asked a steward on board to bring coffee with milk and sugar on a silver tray. Nearby spectators jested that it could only be water, but when Mr Cole deliberately tipped the cup so that some of the coffee spilt over a bystander (proving it was black and hot) people changed their minds (Interview 92/18).

In the 1990s King Tom Rovers was described to me as ‘mixed group’ whose members claimed different ethnic backgrounds. I was informed that Temne and Susu were in the majority (and the club’s builders have invariably been Temne). In 1948, however, the title of the club (King Tom Rovers Yankadee Society) indicated that Mandingo influence predominated as *Yankadi* societies belong to an earlier twentieth century Mandingo cultural tradition. Clearly ethnic loyalty as well as neighbourhood solidarity served to create a collective identity for King Tom Rovers in 1948 but in the 1990s ethnicity had ceased to be significant.

King Tom Rovers Lantern Club originally drew support from an area now comprising the western wards of Freetown.<sup>11</sup> These stretch from the border with central Freetown in the east (around Sanders Brook) to the far end of Congo Town in the west and embrace Tengbeh Town, Congo Market and Brookfields in the south. It was in this broad area (and even further west in the village of Murray Town) that new lantern clubs had emerged by the early 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Most looked to King Tom as their parent club (with the possible exception of the new clubs on the fringes of central Freetown) and all drew on immediate neighbourhood loyalties for their core support. In the 1990s *lantans* were built by clubs in Tengbeh Town and Congo Town (in 1993) and in Murray Town, King Tom, Ascension Town and Congo Market (in 1997). All these clubs could trace links to King Tom Rovers Lantern Club and four of them built ship *lantans*.

A new neighbourhood-based lantern club emerged in the far west of Freetown (on Aberdeen Ferry Road) in 1987. It quickly established a reputation for its *aswebi*, singing and comportment and it specialised in building mosque *lantans*. It claimed no links with King Tom but its leaders had participated in lantern clubs elsewhere in Freetown.<sup>13</sup> They informed me that before 1987 people in the area had to join distant lantern clubs in order to enjoy the lantern parade each year and hence it was decided to build a *lantan* locally even though this meant hauling it about five kilometres to the start of the parade route in the centre of Freetown in order to participate. All the

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<sup>11</sup> People in Freetown frequently refer to localities as falling within the western, central or eastern wards of the city. See Nunley 1987:39, 235-238. See also Fig. 4.

<sup>12</sup> See page 76.

<sup>13</sup> The president of the club was from Fula Town and had supported Firestone for years. See pages 129-130.

members of the club were Muslims who wanted to 'boost the morale of the area', put it on the map and show that 'we can do what others are doing'.<sup>14</sup> Shared neighbourhood loyalties were clearly very strong and were utilised by club officials as a basis for encouraging club membership as well as general support on the night of the parade, but like other lantern clubs in western Freetown, shared ethnic affiliation was not a factor.

#### 4.2.3 Lantern clubs in central Freetown (See Figs. 4 & 5)

The part of Freetown now falling within the two central wards of the city is bounded to the west by Sanders Brook and to the east by Bambara Spring. It includes the commercial centre of the city as well as some of the earliest residential areas (on the north and western sides of Tower Hill) which had been settled by the early Christian inhabitants of Freetown. A lantern club was established in the vicinity of the Hamdala Temne Mosque on Upper Brook Street probably in the 1950s, and in the 1990s its descendant, Habanita Lantern Club, was carrying on its tradition of *lantan* building. Otherwise lantern clubs in central Freetown have generally been situated on the eastern and north eastern side of Tower Hill where there are predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods with 19<sup>th</sup> century origins. It was in this area that four *lantan* groups were operating in 1948. Three were identified in the press as Mandingo groups and the fourth group was identified as a Temne group.

The three Mandingo *lantans* were built at 8 Sackville Street, 12 Sibthorpe Street and 33 Lumley Street and represented 'Two Men shaking hands', a ship and a fish respectively. The area in which they were built is still widely referred to by its inhabitants as the 'Kissy Road' area and in the 1990s Alhaji Momodu Boye Deen Conteh (the oldest Mandingo *lantan* activist there) confirmed to me that *lantan* building had spread to this locality by the 1930s when as a small boy he supported the then single 'Kissy Road' *lantan* which his older relatives used to help build.<sup>15</sup> Alhaji Deen

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<sup>14</sup> Interview 95/121.

<sup>15</sup> The area stretches from Fisher Street in the north to the roundabout on Kissy Road in the east and south to Frederick Street. It includes the neighbourhood called Bambara Town (which is an early Mandingo settlement). It is known, certainly by residents, as the 'Kissy Road' area because Kissy Street was formerly an extension of Kissy Road. It is easy for a stranger, however, to mix up this Mandingo 'Kissy Road' area with present-day Kissy Road (which is closely associated with Temne-dominated *lantan* building groups). See Fig. 4.

Conteh was actually born and brought up at 12 Sibthorpe Street (where one of the 1948 *lantans* was based) and his older cousin who also lived there introduced him to the building of hand *lantans*.<sup>16</sup> During the war years the 'Kissy Road' *lantan* group spawned a new group called Sunderland - named after the Sunderland flying boats which were stationed in Freetown harbour during the war and which the group copied in *lantan* form<sup>17</sup>. As a young man, like many other followers of the pre-war 'Kissy Road' *lantan* group, Alhaji Deen Conteh supported the new club but soon left it to establish another *lantan* group which he called Vimto (after the popular soft drink of that name). The agency for this drink was originally held by one Pa Cole who, on hearing about Vimto Lantern Club, agreed to help it financially and to provide free drinks. On Pa Cole's death a major company (Freetown Cold Storage) started to produce Vimto locally from its own soft-drinks factory and it took up sponsorship of the club, helping build its truck as well as providing items (like T shirts, caps, pens and ash trays) for publicity purposes. This sponsorship still continued in 1997. Over the years Alhaji Deen Conteh himself became so strongly identified with the Vimto Lantern Club, as its builder and leader, that he became universally known among *lantan* enthusiasts as Pa (more recently Alhaji) Vimto. Although he had long retired from *lantan* building he still advised Vimto Lantern Club in 1997 when it built its *lantan* opposite his home at 12 Sibthorpe Street.<sup>18</sup>

Another branch of Alhaji Vimto's family lived at Lumley Street where in the past his grandmother resided (at Number 45) and his cousin (at Number 33). After World War II Alhaji Vimto's younger brother, Mr Daddy Mammy Deen Conteh, who was also a *lantan* builder, helped form an offshoot of the Vimto Lantern Club and drew support from people in the Lumley Street area. It is likely that this was the group that built the fish *lantan* in 1948. The group later called itself Rainbow Lantern Club and

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<sup>16</sup> This cousin was Banja Tejan-Sie who lived at Sibthorpe Street in the 1930s when he was attending the Prince of Wales Secondary School. He later became a barrister, a leading member of the SLPP and the second Governor-General of Sierra Leone. He was knighted by HM Queen Elizabeth II. (See *Sierra Leonean Heroes* 1988:90.)

<sup>17</sup> The club apparently built its *lantans* despite wartime restrictions on *lantan* processions. Alhaji Deen Conteh recalls how the officers and crews of the flying boats joined in the *lantan* celebrations with the Sunderland Lantern Club (Interview 91/7).

<sup>18</sup> Except where otherwise stated, all the information on the Vimto Lantern Club and on early *lantan* building by Mandingos in the Kissy Road area was supplied by Alhaji Deen Conteh (Interviews 91/7, 95/89, 95/92, 95/97, 95/108, 95/113 & 95/143).

also formed an *ode lay* group of the same name. Alhaji Vimto taught *lantans* building to his cousin's son, Abi Jawara, who became a leading member of the Rainbow group and in the 1990s was still building *lantans* at his home at 33 Lumley Street.<sup>19</sup>

In 1997 Vimto and Rainbow Lantern Clubs, though based only a few streets apart, still drew on fairly separate, densely populated localities for support. Situated between them Ishrine Lantern Club claimed support from mainly young people in Vimto Lantern Club's locality. Ishrine's leadership informed me that in the 1980s they felt constricted by the older, rather conservative elements that dominated Vimto Lantern Club and therefore decided to branch out on their own.<sup>20</sup> In this case generational differences in age and outlook seemed to be a defining factor in addition to neighbourhood ties.

In 1948 the fourth *lantans* in the 'Kissy Road'/Bambara Town area depicted a train and was built at Frederick Street by a Temne *lantans* group. Described in the press as 'The Flying Scotsman 152', this *lantans* must have been built by the legendary Orthan Rokor lantern club, set up in this very area by Bashir Kamara.<sup>21</sup> Established during or soon after World War II Orthan Rokor's club specialised in *lantans* depicting trains, and one of its *lantans* builders, Alhaji Alim Kargbo, worked for Sierra Leone Railways.<sup>22</sup> Orthan Rokor was an Arabic teacher and his lantern club built its reputation not only on its particular *lantans* speciality but also on the quality of its music. According to the Orthan Reko's leading singer and composer, the late Foday London, the Temnes of Bambara Town introduced a boisterous style of dancing into Orthan Rokor's *lantans* processions: the dance movements were very energetic and differed from the more usual style of slow and respectful 'Islamic' dancing. Nonetheless, the club's songs were purely religious in praise of the Prophet and were performed in Temne and in Arabic without any form of instrumental accompaniment. Orthan

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<sup>19</sup> The club which he led and for which he built was variously known as Lumley Strikers (1993) and Rainbow Lantern Club (1997). Its membership had links with the defunct Rainbow *ode lay* group. (See Nunley 1987:96-101.)

<sup>20</sup> Interview 94/57.

<sup>21</sup> Bashir Kamara's nickname was Orthan Rokor which means 'unbeatable' in Temne.

<sup>22</sup> Interview 92/37. Sierra Leone's railway was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but was closed in the early 1970s.

Rokor's lantern club survived until the 1960s when musical innovations of which Orthan Rokor as a devout Muslim disapproved precipitated his retirement from the *lantana* business.<sup>23</sup>

In the 1990s I did not discover any lantern clubs claiming direct descent from Orthan Rokor's group but several areas in central Freetown outside Bambara Town supported neighbourhood based lantern clubs. One of these was Big Wharf (where Temne traders used to land the goods they brought by boat from across the Sierra Leone river). Situated on the mudflats adjoining Susan's Bay it was a densely populated settlement of shanty dwellings. Another club, Mighty Spear Lantern Club was located in the southernmost part of central Freetown, around Mends Street and Berry Street. It had been established in 1967 and participated regularly in lantern parades for thirty years. In the 1990s it was run by a YMMA executive member of part-Limba origin who was also a *lantana* builder. Other central Freetown clubs participating in 1997 included Baimbrace-Block Lane (located between Circular Road and Regent Road), Malamatonians (at the southern end of Malama Thomas Street) and Idara (in Fisher Street, overlooking Big Wharf). All these clubs were organised on a neighbourhood basis and drew their core support from people associated with their immediate localities.

#### **4.2.4 Lantern clubs in the East End of Freetown: Fourah Bay and Fula Town (See Figs. 4 & 5)**

The East End of Freetown was first settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and comprises the area between Bambara Spring to the west and Cline Bay in the east. It includes Mountain Cut, Fula Town and the streets running up from Kissy Road towards Mount Aureol. The East End forms a grid of densely populated streets settled historically by people of different ethnic backgrounds often grouped into tightly knit neighbourhoods.

The newspaper report of 1948 mentioned two *lantana* groups operating in Fourah Bay (the area bounded by Savage Square and Kennedy Street and originally settled by Aku Muslims) in the East End of Freetown. One was the Fourah Bay Muslim group

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<sup>23</sup> Interview 92/37. Orthan Rokor Lantern Club, like Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club, did not approve of the use of musical instruments to accompany Islamic songs. For further information on *lantana* music and on the musical styles of different lantern clubs, see Appendix 7.

and the other was the *Bubu Geng*. The latter derived from the *lantan* group that operated before World War II from Pa Maggay's compound and which was taken over at the end of his life (in the early 1940s) by his sons and their contemporaries. Like the Maggay group before it, the *Bubu Geng* built fine ship *lantans* which in the post-war era were particularly impressive owing to the use of mechanisms (which imparted a degree of animation to the *lantan*) and the skill with which club members (who actually travelled on board the *lantan*) acted out the functions of a ship's crew. In 1948

... when the Ship of the Bubu Lantan appeared on the scene with the Captain on the Bridge, the signaller sending ... messages, a column of smoke from the funnel, buglers sounding fanfare, the crowd involuntarily gave an applause. The great length of the Ship, the mail carriers, the contrivance by which an airship moved up and down the masts, the garlands and decorations made the Ship to dwarf the others into insignificance.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to its magnificent ship *lantans* the *Bubu Geng* also earned long-lasting fame for its innovative use of musical instruments and its robust processional style which marked the *Bubu Geng* off from rival *lantan* groups in Freetown.

Its main competitor in Fourah Bay supported the more traditionalist view that musical instruments were inappropriate to *lantan* celebrations and unsuitable for accompanying processions marking a religious occasion. The group adopted the name of Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club to reinforce its more conservative religious image. One elderly informant in the 1990s actually described the club as fighting to preserve the good name of Fourah Bay's *lantans* because it felt that the *Bubu Geng* was risking the reputation of the neighbourhood (which, after all, was the cradle of Freetown's *lantan* tradition).<sup>25</sup> Sheka Gabisi, another former stalwart of the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club (who was named as one of its leaders in 1948 and who was its leading composer and singer in the 1940s and 1950s) was also quick to criticise the *Bubu Geng* to me on account of the rough, rude and often drunken behaviour which characterised its processions.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, during its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s the *Bubu Geng* attracted by far the biggest crowd of followers on parade nights and its

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<sup>24</sup> DM: August 11 1948.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 92/23.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 92/19.

innovations set in motion a series of musical developments within the *lantan* tradition which have had a profound effect on the cultural life of Freetown.

For its part the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club was also adept at building ship *lantans* although it diversified at times (as indeed did the *Bubu Geng*) and is known to have built *lantans* representing a house, a mosque, a railway engine and coaches and even animals (such as a giraffe).<sup>27</sup> In 1948, however, it built 'M.V. Worcestershire', a 2,900 ton ship which was described as 'not behindhand'. Clearly it did not match the ship *lantans* built by the *Bubu Geng* and King Tom Rovers. The last *lantan* the club built was in 1987 and depicted the original Fourah Bay College building. Unlike the *Bubu Geng* which, while under Maggay family leadership operated from Savage Square on the edge of Fourah Bay, the Muslim Lantern Club never had a permanent base but built in a variety of different locations. However it is still remembered for its strong association with the Agosheke neighbourhood in the very heart of Fourah Bay.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1990s five lantern clubs were active in Fourah Bay. Of them only two, Beatles Lantern Club (formed in the early 1960s) and Mighty Red Lions (formed in the 1950s) claimed to draw their membership from their immediate vicinity. One of the leaders of Beatles Lantern Club also emphasised that his club was predominantly composed of Muslim Krios.<sup>29</sup> Beatles had always been based at Ingham Street/New Street and one of its founder members and best builders was Ade Gabisi who had learnt his skills with the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club. Mighty Red Lions was located at the other end of Fourah Bay in Lower Savage Square and was a direct offshoot of Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club. Known originally as Young Muslim Lantern Club it changed its name in 1959 when Red Lion Bakery started to sponsor it. The three other lantern clubs that were active in Fourah Bay in the 1990s (Bronx, Babylon and Mandela Youth Organisation) were much more broad based than either Beatles or Mighty Red Lions Lantern Clubs and the alternative notions on which these clubs sought to construct their collective identities will be explored later in this chapter.

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<sup>27</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 92/34.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 92/4.

The report of the *lantana* celebrations in 1948 makes no mention of Fula Town which comprises the areas either side of Mountain Cut to the south of Kissy Road and which constitutes the East End's other Aku Muslim neighbourhood where the *lantana* tradition spread very early on. This omission may represent a gap in the reporting but this seems unlikely. Presumably Fula Town did not produce a *lantana* in 1948 (perhaps because no one there had yet set about reorganising *lantana* building after the interruption of the war years). The situation was rectified in 1949, however, when a 'new' *lantana* group was reported at Fula Town called the Muslim Lantern Society based at 1 Wilson Street, and for that year's end-of-Ramadan celebrations it built a replica of the passenger ship the 'Queen Elizabeth'. Thereafter the group continued to produce *lantanas* on a regular basis under its builder Gaffa Carew.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1950s and 1960s various of its supporters set up new lantern clubs in Fula Town including Bingo Boys, Black Arrow and Seven Up. Bingo Boys (based in Annie Walsh Street at the bottom of Mountain Cut) eventually became Super Combo Lantern Club; in 1967 a section of Black Arrow created Firestone (which based itself at the top of Mountain Cut) and in the 1980s Seven Up developed into Montego Bay Lantern Club (across Mountain Cut from Super Combo in Lawson Lane and its environs). All three clubs competed in both the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades, by which time both Super Combo and Firestone had long built up formidable reputations in Freetown *lantana* circles.

#### 4.2.5 Lantern clubs elsewhere in the East End of Freetown (See Figs. 4 & 5)

On the East End's western boundary lies the area known as Magazine which was originally settled by Mandingos. Bounded by Nicol Brook, Fourah Bay Road and Magazine Cut it is where the British once stored military arms and provisions. Here in 1948 a Mandingo group was active in the *lantana* business and used the Islamiyya School (attached to the Mandingo mosque in Magazine Cut) as a base for its *lantana* building activities. Older members of the Mandingo community told me that the earliest Mandingo *lantanas* were actually built at the compound of the Mandingo Chief in Cardew Street (which lies in the adjacent Mandingo-dominated neighbourhood

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<sup>30</sup> DM: July 21 1949; DM June 9 1953. Interviews 92/2, 92/4 & 92/38.

known as the Fourah Bay Road area).<sup>31</sup> From there Mandingos in Magazine and Bambara Town (in central Freetown) took up the tradition.<sup>32</sup>

In 1948 the Mandingo *lantán* group in Magazine produced a *lantán* depicting an armoured car. I was informed that over the ensuing years Mandingos regularly built *lantáns* in both the Magazine and Fourah Bay Road neighbourhoods and that the latter group was supported by a number of leading Mandingos (including the Lascaff, Swarray and Fadika families).<sup>33</sup> The Mandingos are credited with being the first in Freetown to build *lantáns* depicting animals, a development that possibly took place as early as the 1930s. In the 1990s I met Alhaji Sankoh a retired Post Office employee and head of a thriving Arabic school at his home in Magazine Cut. A former *lantán* builder, Alhaji Sankoh retired from *lantán* building in the late 1970s.<sup>34</sup> He continued to give advice to local *lantán* clubs and taught his son, Aliyu, the skills involved in *lantán* building. In the late 1980s and in 1993 Aliyu built *lantáns* for his father's school, Madrassat Abdullah, which paraded them with support from the Magazine Cut neighbourhood.

The tradition of *lantán* building flourished in the Magazine and Fourah Bay Road areas throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Magazine Development Association and Moa Wharf participated in the 1993 lantern parade (as well as Madrassat Abdullah), and four clubs took part in 1997: Magazine Stars, Union de Magazine, Independent Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club and Moa Wharf Lantern Club.

Freetown's East End is also home to a large number of Temne immigrants who are particularly but not exclusively associated with the area known as Kossoh Town (between Patton Street and Savage Square).<sup>35</sup> In 1948 four Temne *lantán* groups in the

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<sup>31</sup> This area is bounded by Magazine Cut and Lower Mountain Cut, Jenkins Street, Cardew Street, Patton Street and Moa Wharf. See Fig. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Interview 95/113.

<sup>33</sup> Interview 95/138. In 1948 S I Swarray was associated with the Magazine *lantán*.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews 92/47 and 95/81.

<sup>35</sup> Historically this area is also associated with Christian Krios. It is where the young Robert Wellesley Cole lived until 1917 and where he saw local Temnes parading small *lantáns* during their end-of-Ramadan celebrations. Within Kossoh Town (in the eastern section bounded by Easton Street, Savage

East End were reported to have participated in the annual *lantan* celebrations. One, which produced a *lantan* in the form of an eagle, was based in Gheirawani Street (in Kossuh Town/Crojimmy) and two others were located on Kissy Road.<sup>36</sup> One group, based at 71 Kissy Road, built 'MV Apapa'.<sup>37</sup> The other, based at 58 Kissy Road built "The Endeavour" comprising of three men, one sitting'.<sup>38</sup> It is not clear exactly what this *lantan* was meant to represent but we know that around the beginning of the World War II Temnes living in the neighbourhood of Kissy Road established a Games and Lantern Construction Club which they named Endeavour (after the British warship HMS Endeavour).<sup>39</sup> Known to older supporters as Heavyweight Endeavour it originally concentrated on social and sporting activities, especially football, but quickly took up *lantan* building, at first producing ship *lantans* in competition with the *Bubu Geng* of Fourah Bay. I was told that among its founder members was a certain Bai Maru Sankoh and in 1948 it was he who was reported in the press as the leader of the *lantan* group based at 58 Kissy Road. Endeavour Lantern Club went on to become famous for building *lantans* depicting animals, religious themes and, latterly, cultural subjects. At first the club drew on the skills of a number of *lantan* builders from the provinces<sup>40</sup> but increasingly it came to depend on builders (albeit of provincial origins) based in Freetown.

Originally Endeavour drew its support predominantly from Muslims of Temne and Temne-Krio origins and claimed a number of distinguished members at various times (such as A. B. Kamara a former Vice President of Sierra Leone and once Secretary-General of Endeavour). From the start it attracted some Christian members, including Shanu Wilson (a former Secretary of the club), Chuku Paul (who learnt to build *lantans* under Endeavour's builders) and members of the Benjamin and Macaulay

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Square and Malta Street – see Fig. 4) is a neighbourhood known as Crojimmy which was originally settled by Yorubas (of neither Christian nor Muslim persuasion).

<sup>36</sup> Kissy Road as it is today (leading from the junction with Kissy Street to UpGun roundabout).

<sup>37</sup> The Elder Dempster shipping line ran regular services to the West Coast and one of its vessels was called after Apapa (the port area of Lagos, Nigeria).

<sup>38</sup> *DM*: August 12 1948.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews 92/26, 92/59, 92/65, 92/68 92/71, 93/72, 93/73, 93/74, 93/76, 95/81, 95/114 all provided me with historical information on Endeavour Lantern Club.

<sup>40</sup> Interview 94/66. See page 14 for mention of the *lantan* tradition in the provinces.

families. Its membership reflected the cosmopolitan nature of the neighbourhood in which it was situated and the club always commanded an enormous following in the East End of Freetown where its only serious rival in its early years was the *Bubu Geng*.

In the 1990s Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club was still one of the most popular in the East End. However, other neighbouring lantern clubs also competed - namely Kossoh Town, Krojimmy and Russia State, as well as three clubs (Bombay Stars, Bantus and Bod Water/Lion Mountain) located south of Kissy Road where none had existed in 1948. Kossoh Town, Krojimmy, and Bod Water/Lion Mountain all refer to specific localities, while Bombay Stars, Russia State and Bantus Lantern Clubs were associated with Upper Bombay Street, Jenkins Street and Will Street respectively. Both Russia State and Bantus were originally off-shoots of Endeavour.<sup>41</sup>

In 1948 a fourth Temne *lantana* group was based in Clinetown which borders Cline Bay. It built a ship *lantana*, 'HMS Queen Elizabeth', under the leadership of Lamin Koroma. It is probable that this group represented a combination of supporters from the neighbouring areas of Clinetown and Upgun (which also lies to the east of Fourah Bay). *Lantana* building later lapsed in Clinetown but was revived in the 1980s with the formation of Clinetonians Lantern Club. The club participated in both 1993 and 1997, when on both occasions it built a double decker bus. The neighbourhood of UpGun also had a long history of *lantana* building and boasted a famous builder of animal *lantanas* (Lamin Cham) in the 1950s and 60s. UpGunners Lantern Club competed in both 1993 and 1997 when it built the 'UpGun Roundabout' and the 'Holy Kaaba' respectively.

#### 4.2.6 Lantern clubs located south east of Freetown (See Figs. 4 & 5)

A number of lantern clubs located south east of Freetown participated in the *lantana* celebrations of 1993 and 1997 but the press report of 1948 makes no mention of any *lantana* groups in this area and it is unclear exactly when *lantana* building spread there.<sup>42</sup> However, by the mid-twentieth century both Kissy and Wellington (about six

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<sup>41</sup> Interview 93/76.

<sup>42</sup> I refer to the area south of the junction between Kissy Road and the main Wellington highway (Bai Bureh Road) as south east Freetown.

and ten kilometres respectively from Freetown) were well-established settlements.

Annual *lantana* celebrations were introduced to Wellington in the late 1960s by Alhaji F B Turay (the APC Member of Parliament for Wellington from 1967 to 1975) and a number of neighbourhoods built *lantanas* which they took to Wellington to be judged on the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri each year.<sup>43</sup> The club which claimed the longest history was named after the neighbourhood in Kissy where the Public Works Department had a depot (Kissy PWD); its leaders told me it was first established in the 1950s but only started participating in Freetown lantern parades at a later date (presumably after the *lantana* festivities in Wellington fell into abeyance).

YMMA records indicated that during the 1980s several localities south east of Freetown started organising *lantana* processions which participated in the city's lantern parades. The first to do so (in 1984) was a club situated at Ashoebi Corner (off Blackhall Road close to Freetown).<sup>44</sup> Thereafter various clubs sprung up in settlements along the dual carriageway (opened in the 1980s between Freetown and Waterloo) which helped improve access to the city for lantern clubs located along its route. Nevertheless it was still a monumental task to haul a *lantana* from a distant suburb or village to Freetown and then participate in an all-night parade. In 1987 the number of participating clubs from south east of Freetown reached six but by 1989 it had doubled to twelve: Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club, New Site and Amalgamators, Sedom National (Kissy PWD), Suluku (at Kissy Brook, Kissy), The Broom and Fisher Lane (both situated on the Kissy Bye Pass) and Kissy Central. Further still from Freetown were Portee Lantern Club, and De Ghetto (also known as Boiling Pot), Village People and Brimah Lane. The last three clubs were all situated in or near Wellington. In 1993 six clubs managed to make the journey to Freetown and in 1997 eight made the attempt but one *lantana* (belonging to Calaba Town Lantern Club) arrived in the city on the morning

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<sup>43</sup> Interview 93/88. Groups that participated in the Wellington *lantana* celebrations came from such places as Calaba Town, Allen Town, Maila Town, Thunder Hill, Kissy, Wellington, Portee and Kissy PWD/Fisher Lane.

<sup>44</sup> So named because it is located in an area where there is a stream used by lodges of the Bundu Society for washing new initiates and dressing them in their finery (*aswebi*) to mark the end of their initiation period. See Fig. 5.

after the parade having broken down on the way.<sup>45</sup> As their names indicated all the eight clubs were identified with specific neighbourhoods and several club leaders explained that they regarded the act of participating in a lantern parade to be a means of fostering neighbourhood pride and solidarity.<sup>46</sup> The fact that so many lantern clubs situated a considerable distance from Freetown were prepared to undertake this expensive and unpredictable enterprise pointed to the esteem in which these values were held.

#### 4.3 Lantern clubs and the use of alternative notions of group identity

Ethnicity has historically coincided closely with neighbourhood settlement in Freetown, particularly in the East End, and, as indicated in the foregoing, both were prime indicators of *lantan* group identity in 1948.<sup>47</sup> During the last fifty years, however, immigration from up-country (culminating in the influx of refugees displaced by the civil war in the 1990s) has rendered all parts of Freetown increasingly cosmopolitan. This, combined with the inclusive nature of post-Independence lantern parades, helps account for the fact that, while the majority of the lantern clubs I researched still utilised the notion of neighbourhood solidarity to construct their own particular sense of identity, they all claimed to be multi-ethnic. Nevertheless, I discovered that in one locality notions of ethnicity were still being acknowledged and manipulated. This was in Fourah Bay where neighbourhood and Muslim Krio ties could still serve to reinforce each other.<sup>48</sup> But this seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. On the whole, neighbourhood solidarity – a notion on which so many

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<sup>45</sup> The 1993 clubs were Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club, New Site Amalgamators, Kissy PWD, Kissy Central, Portee and Brimah Lane/Kuntoloh. In 1997 they were joined by Wellington Industrial Lantern Club and Calaba Town.

<sup>46</sup> Interviews 94/17 & 95/87.

<sup>47</sup> It is clear, nevertheless, that the boundaries between some *lantan* groups (especially those dominated by Temnes and Mandingos) were porous in the post-war years. People and skills did at times pass around by networks of relatives and friends associated with different clubs. For example, Umaru Kamara, one of Endeavour's early *lantan* builders, was related to Lamin Cham who excelled in making animal *lantans* for a lantern club in UpGun in the 1950s and 1960s. Lamin Cham in turn had learnt the art of building animal *lantans* from Modu Conteh, the brother of Sampha Conteh (the Mandingo *lantan* builder in Magazine who is reputed to have been the first to build an animal in *lantan* form). Modu Conteh had learnt under his brother and then joined the *lantan* group at UpGun where he passed on his skills to Lamin Cham (Interviews 92/15 & 92/64).

<sup>48</sup> For example, Beatles Lantern Club was neighbourhood based and claimed to have a largely Muslim Krio membership. The manipulation of ethnic loyalties by Babylon Lantern Club (to justify a change in leadership) is referred to on page 132.

lantern clubs relied for their sense of difference – did not coincide with ethnic solidarity. Some clubs, however, did make use of other notions or loyalties to reinforce their shared neighbourhood ties or, occasionally, to create very specific identities for themselves. The rest of this chapter explores the nature and use of these additional or alternative means of developing group solidarity and separateness.

### 4.3.1 Personal and family loyalties

For some clubs, notably Super Combo and Mighty Spear Lantern Clubs (see Fig. 5) personal and family loyalties provided an important resource with which to create a sense of group identity. Super Combo was totally identified with the Yaskey family, particularly with Eustace Yaskey a renowned *lantana* builder who taught his brother Andrew and a number of younger builders to build *lantanas*. The Yaskey family home was at 3 Annie Walsh Street, where a series of clubs were based over the years. The first lantern club at that address appeared in YMMA records in 1966 under the name of Bingo Boys (which built a *lantana* representing a bus). By 1970 a club called Sudan National had taken its place.<sup>49</sup> By 1975, however, Super Combo Lantern Club had been established and had won first prize in the Miscellaneous category of *lantanas*.<sup>50</sup> This club was still building its *lantana* at the same address in 1997 (when it again won first prize in the same *lantana* category). The name Super Combo derived from a Sierra Leonean music group that was popular in the early 1970s but for some years the club registered with the YMMA under the name of Foamex Lantern Club to reflect the sponsorship Eustace Yaskey managed to obtain for it from a local foam manufacturer. Super Combo and Foamex were synonymous with Eustace Yaskey whose strong personality, acclaimed *lantana* building skills (in the Miscellaneous category) and determined leadership in *lantana* affairs were legendary in Sierra Leone *lantana* circles by the 1990s.

The other well-established club which benefited from the sustained, experienced leadership and personal commitment of a well-known *lantana* builder was Mighty Spear. In the 1990s it was the only *lantana* building group situated in the area just south of

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<sup>49</sup> DM: December 1 1970.

<sup>50</sup> Appendix 5 contains the list of 1975 prize winners which was included in the YMMA's brochure for the 1983 lantern parade.

Circular Road (where Tetinah and Sukuma *ode lay* groups once drew support<sup>51</sup>). Sammah Sesay, the club's long-time builder and president was a leading builder of animal *lantans* and had trained other members of his family in much the same way as Eustace Yaskey had done so that Mighty Spear Lantern Club like Super Combo was something of a family concern. Sesay was also an executive member of the YMMA and held the position of financial secretary. He was the only person in Freetown who was a YMMA official, a club leader and a *lantan* builder at one and the same time.

#### 4.3.2 Original Bronx and city 'style'

It must be remembered that however strong peoples' commitment to the *lantan* tradition might have been, lantern clubs and processions were not the sole means whereby people within a particular locality could identify and assert themselves as a group. Competitive football, social events, self-help projects and, in the past, *ode lay* performances all tended to be organised on a community basis and to act as a vehicle for expressing a sense of neighbourhood solidarity. Local club networks interconnected to such an extent that the fortunes of some lantern clubs actually depended on the strength of the competing commitments of their members whose attention might be focused in varying degrees of intensity on any number of different activities in their locality. The future of *lantan* building in any particular area was likely to be better protected when the local lantern club was well established and the neighbourhood was large. However, where there was a multiplicity of different clubs in an area and/or where *lantan* building was just one of a club's interests, *lantan* affairs might be subordinated to other activities and a particular lantern club might cease to build *lantans*. This happened in the case of Bronx Lantern Club which participated in the 1989, 1990 and 1993 lantern parades but failed to build in 1997.

Bronx Lantern Club was based in the East End of Freetown (see Fig. 5) where there has been a consistently high concentration of lantern clubs since their proliferation in the 1960s. Located originally in Kossoh Town (in Pownall Street) the club had moved its base by 1995 to Fourah Bay. The vicissitudes affecting club allegiances and priorities

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<sup>51</sup> Nunley 1987:238.

are well illustrated by its history.<sup>52</sup> Created in the 1980s and called Danger Diabolic Squad (after a detective film called Danger Diabolic) the club was formed by 'young guys' who had formerly 'danced' with the Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club. The Squad 'behaved like a gang', stealing rice to eat and eloping with girls. Its members built *ode lay debuls* under the name DIA Squad and generally acquired a bad reputation. They did not build *lantans*. Those who wanted to 'dance' in the annual lantern parades did so with Babylon Lantern Club.

In time, however, the Squad 'decided to change for the better' and started to organise weight-lifting for their members to improve their health and image. In the late 1980s they organised themselves into a club called Original Bronx, became involved in a variety of activities and from 1989 onwards organised annual fund-raising discos at various of Freetown's major hotels and restaurants. With the profits the club helped members to pay funeral expenses or to go overseas. In 1995 the club was organising football games every Sunday and in the past, prior to its annual disco, members arranged a football gala competition for gyms and clubs in the area. The club's own gym was the venue for the first National Weightlifting Competition in Sierra Leone and Bronx members considered their 'gymming school' to be one of the best in Freetown.

In the late 80s and early 90s the club was fortunate in obtaining support from two local sponsors; one, Pa Hoodie, contributed towards the cost of organising some of Bronx's discos and was Grand Chief Patron of the Bronx gym. Another, a wealthy businessman called Kasor Macrae (who died in 1994) was the major sponsor of the discos and of Bronx's *lantans*. In 1989 the club decided to participate for the first time in the lantern parade and did so again in 1990 and 1993 even though its members had no particular *lantan* expertise and had to hire builders. In 1995, however, club membership had declined and *lantans* were no longer a priority: the gym and fund-raising discos were far more important. The club's leaders claimed that the YMMA's inefficiency was demoralising, but it was clear that the death of its major sponsor was a severe blow to the club and rendered participation in any non profit making venture (like *lantan* building which consumed rather than generated funds) unviable. When the

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<sup>52</sup> The following construction of Bronx's history was supplied by one of its leaders, Alpha Babatunde Lewally, in 1995 (Interview 95/70).

most recent end-of-Ramadan lantern parade was held in 1997 Bronx Lantern Club failed to take part.

In its heyday Bronx boasted a diverse membership dispersed through different parts of the East End (Fula Town, Kossoh Town and Fourah Bay). The club's leaders claimed to have a reasonable educational background (beyond 'O' levels) and to 'think better' than their peers. They deliberately chose to name themselves after the New York Bronx because the members 'wanted to portray an image relating to it and to imitate the life style of the U.S. Bronx'. Having decided to eschew the gang activities that characterised the Danger Diabolic Squad they reinvented themselves as Original Bronx, withdrew their support from Babylon's *lantans* and took a conscious decision not to imitate Babylon's 'style'. According to my informant (a Fourah Bay 'boy' who in 1995 was attending an Arabic Institute and claimed to be 'a true Muslim now') Babylon was a 'ragamuffin' group with a lot of rough members who were alcoholics and drug addicts. Bronx boys, he claimed, did not indulge in smoking marijuana and in drinking; instead they concentrated on their gym and on physical fitness. Thus from being a gang involved in petty criminal activities, alcoholism and drug abuse, Bronx members had reinvented themselves as a group of clean-living, 'civilised' city dwellers pursuing a lifestyle based on physical fitness and with a leadership aspiring beyond the limits of their peers ('thinking better than others'). Bronx members deliberately marked out a group boundary for themselves by borrowing, mixing and matching cultural elements from the West with their own indigenous cultural attributes. They boasted a smart, city identity in direct imitation of the (perceived) style of the American Bronx and proclaimed their interest in sport and in the West when they chose to build *lantans* depicting famous boxing matches.<sup>53</sup> On both these occasions Bronx members wore a particular 'fashion dress' as their *aswebi*, comprising different coloured sneakers, trousers with one leg long and the other short, both slashed into strips, white T-shirts with the club's name, the US flag and a pair of boxing gloves printed on them, and a special 'Tyson' hair-cut.

Bronx club also illustrated the regular merging and splitting that was characteristic of Freetown associations. Despite its self-conscious 'city style' in which

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<sup>53</sup> Tyson versus Bruno in 1989 and the Tyson versus Douglas fight in 1990.

provincial values were openly derided, ethnic loyalties surfaced in the early 1990s when certain members of Bronx broke away to join Kossoh Town Lantern Club. They were apparently unhappy with Bronx's leaders who were largely Muslim Krios from Fourah Bay. Kossoh Town Lantern Club on the other hand had a mainly non-Krio leadership and membership. There was considerable rivalry between the two clubs in the run-up to the 1993 lantern parade because Kossoh Town was, apparently, jealous of the sponsorship Bronx was receiving from Kasor Macrae; as a result Bronx was particularly protective of its *lantana* since it feared the Kossoh Town boys might spoil it. But by 1997 Bronx's straitened financial circumstances following the death of its sponsor and its declining membership forced it to abandon *lantana* activities and to focus on its core interest in physical fitness.

### 4.3.3 Mandela Youth Organisation and Pan-Africanism

Mandela Youth Organisation (known simply as Mandela) was another organisation with substantial non-*lantana* interests. It took advantage of lantern parades in the 1990s to publicise its own particular ideological commitment to Pan-Africanism. Mandela was based at the East End Municipal Field in Fourah Bay (see Figs. 4 & 5) and had grown out of an interest on the part of a number of articulate, educated members of Babylon Lantern Club in the teaching of the Pan African Union of Sierra Leone. They set up Mandela Football Club (FC Mandela 102) in 1987 and attracted a following of supporters who adopted a Rastafarian image in speech and lifestyle. These supporters formed a ghetto at the East End Municipal Field (which by the 1990s was known as Mandela Field) and Mandela was reputed to earn an income from the many football games that were played there. It also engaged in a variety of activities including market gardening, self-help projects, art production and sport and it had organised celebrations, conferences and rallies in its attempt to promote Pan Africanism.

Mandela was well known for its structured leadership and had a written constitution and a core of card-carrying members. The area Mandela occupied was owned by Freetown City Council (FCC) and had a well and some toilets as well as members' kiosks (for selling goods) and workshops. A prominent lawyer for FCC was a member of Mandela and the former Chairman of FCC (Alfred Akibo Betts) married

into the Fourah Bay community and was reputed to support Mandela.<sup>54</sup> In 1995, however, the leaders complained that they lacked funds and support for their activities; it was also hinted to me by outsiders that they lacked direction since their founder and former leader had gone overseas. However, they still claimed to be concerned with spreading the causes of African unity and freedom and, more immediately, of 'youth advancement'. They denied that their organisation was associated with drugs: it was a mere 'reputation'. The overall impression was one of demoralisation and bitterness, however, and Mandela's leaders were particularly critical of the government which, they claimed, wanted the youth of the city to help clean the streets and gutters, but at the same time failed to provide them with schools. It was the politicians, they claimed, who went round spreading drugs and alcohol at election time in order to get votes but once elected 'They forget the youths. They brand them as drug addicts and they speak out against drugs on the radio but they never come near the ghettos between elections and meet the youth face to face.'<sup>55</sup>

Mandela's boundaries of collective identity were distinguished by an allegiance to a cause and ideology on the part of its leaders, and by a Rastafarian style of dress, musical preference and slang on the part of its ghetto supporters. It was an interesting fusion of a ghetto subculture and an educated leadership (one of the leaders I met had studied at Fourah Bay College) who espoused an intellectual philosophy.<sup>56</sup> Its choice of *lantana* theme and vocal music in the lantern parades of 1990, and 1993 clearly expressed a commitment to Pan Africanism and an attempt to proclaim this ideology to the masses.<sup>57</sup> But Mandela's 1997 *lantana* procession reflected a change in mood. Perhaps by then Mandela leaders had lost faith in the Pan-Africanist cause but still kept faith with their community and with one of its major landmarks.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See page 34, note 30 for more information about Alfred Akibo Betts.

<sup>55</sup> Interview 95/73.

<sup>56</sup> For recent insights into Freetown ghetto ('lumpen') youth culture, see Abdullah 2004:44-51. Rashid (2004) has explored the connections between Freetown's 'lumpen' culture and Fourah Bay College students.

<sup>57</sup> The *lantanas* depicted Mandela's release from prison and Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line.

<sup>58</sup> Mandela's 1997 *lantana* depicted a local mosque with a puppet figure calling prayers.

#### 4.3.4 The influence of ghetto sub-culture: Firestone and Babylonians

Mandela's utilisation of *lantans* celebrations for its own particular purposes based on its specific brand of ghetto sub-culture raises the issue as to whether and to what extent lantern clubs have been moulded by ghetto influences. Mandela Youth Organisation was one of the youngest ghettos in the city and partly grew out of Babylonians which was an older ghetto in a neighbouring part of the East End. Babylonians – or the Babylon Cultural Youth Organisation (Babylon) as it variously called itself – had participated in lantern parades since 1982 and was well known throughout the city, as was the other major ghetto organisation that had participated in lantern parades since the late 1960s – namely Firestone Friendly Society. Like Mandela both Babylonians and Firestone had a sense of place: Babylonians was located at the Fourah Bay football field on land leased from the authorities by Awodie Ojeh (one of the oldest *egugu* branches in Freetown). Firestone was situated just off Mountain Cut in Fula Town, close to Bambara Spring (Figs. 4 & 5). Both organisations attracted members and supporters on a city-wide basis, and both settlements included shelters where the youth congregated after school and after work, and where unemployed drop-outs who had never been able to complete their schooling, whiled away their days, drinking and smoking marijuana. Both ghettos became notorious within Freetown for alcohol and drug abuse, rough behaviour and ill-discipline. Firestone was extensively studied by Nunley in the late 1970s and his description of the ghetto remained largely applicable when I first visited it in the early 1990s and became a member (number 089) in January 1991.<sup>59</sup>

During the early 1990s Firestone built a number of *lantans*. In 1991 it completed one (depicting a local radio station called FM 94) for the parade that was cancelled at the onset of the civil war, and subsequently performed the *lantan* for a purely local audience. In 1993 it built 'Funfair' and in 1997 repeated this topic but added a number of puppet figures depicting various Mende *debuls* – to depict city modernity combined with indigenous tradition, so I was told by its builder. This mix of local (specifically provincial) and imported cultural elements seemed to encapsulate the choices and predicament facing Freetown youth in general. Freetown has historically

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<sup>59</sup> Nunley 1987:77-81. See also Deliss 1990.

always been a city characterized by the extensive mixing and interaction of diverse groups and cultural traditions; however, the twentieth century brought increasingly direct exposure to new ideas and products through the impact of the two world wars and through the influence of media innovations such as radio, cinema, TV and the Western press. Young people in particular could now each construct a personal lifestyle and value system by borrowing and mixing from many different sources, old and new, urban and provincial, West Coast, African, Western and global. The *lantana* business was predominantly the pursuit of urban youth who all faced the same confusion of choices and expectations, whatever their lantern club affiliation.

Freetown's ghetto sub-culture encapsulated the dilemma confronting young people, particularly those living in the poorer parts of the city in areas characterised by overpopulation, unemployment, poor health conditions and general lawlessness. Ghetto life countenanced extreme responses to this dilemma on the part of those who failed to live up to their personal expectations and resorted to drugs, alcoholism and petty crime without being cast out of the group. Mandela Youth Organisation demonstrated how ghetto sub-culture could be harnessed to a cause (Pan Africanism). On the other hand, by 1994 Firestone had demonstrated how, given appropriate incentives, a ghetto could reinvent itself as a peace-loving, law abiding organisation.<sup>60</sup>

In Fourah Bay the second major ghetto (in addition to Mandela Youth Organisation) that regularly participated in lantern parades was the Babylon Cultural Youth Organisation known also as Babylonians (Figs. 4 & 5). Like Firestone it claimed to have members throughout the city and even in the provinces. The members told me that they felt marginalized by society and they complained that they had often been subject to police harassment because, they said, the government disliked them meeting together and exchanging ideas. Over a period of ten years Babylon's energetic president,

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<sup>60</sup> I was amazed in 1994 to discover that Firestone had undergone a transformation. Its residents had quite literally hacked their way through the rocky outcrops of their settlement to create flatter areas where they had constructed new shelters, workshops, a level performance area and an office. The whole settlement was brightly painted and a big sign announced that drugs were forbidden and alcohol was not to be drunk during the daytime. Firestone had ostensibly reinvented itself as a respectable organisation advocating responsible citizenship. It had managed to do this by tapping government resources which the NPRC had made available to the city's youth through special youth enterprise schemes. Firestone maintained its interest in *lantans* and *debuls* side by side with its new priority of educating its members and helping them acquire income-generating skills for the future.

Mohammed Lascaff, managed to organise the ghetto members, encourage income-generation (mainly petty trading) and gradually help them gain some self respect. A dynamic leader, Lascaff had a charismatic personality and plenty of ambition. When the NPRC set up its youth enterprise scheme (NASMOS) in 1992 Babylon registered and managed to obtain a loan to set up a bakery on the site. For the first time, Babylon members maintained, the government actually entrusted the youth with money and urged them to 'build themselves up'. They considered that their participation in the lantern parade over the previous decade had helped them gain recognition from NASMOS: when a meeting was held, the YMMA's Organising Secretary was present and put up Babylon's name. Members claimed, however, that prior to the NPRC take-over the government ignored the youth of the country and this explained the choice of the name Babylon for their organisation. Babylon, I was told, portrayed chaos in biblical times and the previous APC regime was a 'Babylonian' regime with no interest in the youth: 'It was the government's behaviour that caused youth to sit down idly.'<sup>61</sup>

Babylonians prided themselves on the quality and organisation of every aspect of their annual *lantan* procession and rightly claimed that it was always one of the most popular of any parade. One of their members built their *lantan* every year to a good standard and Babylonians were particularly famous for their song and dance skills. Their procession was a truly composite performance which engaged the various artistic elements in an enterprising way. Despite its ghetto identity members claimed that Babylon was an Islamic organisation and wanted to sensitise and educate the public through its *lantans*. Lascaff explained to me that as a Muslim he was anxious for people to learn more about Islam and its heritage; his own forefathers were Muslims who took an active part in the long-established Mandingo *lantan* group in Fourah Bay Road.<sup>62</sup> Most importantly, Fourah Bay, where Babylon was situated, is the home of a large portion of Freetown's Muslim Krio population. The high moral tone and Muslim rhetoric expressed by Babylon's more articulate executive members may well have constituted an attempt on their part to divert my attention away from the lifestyle of a large proportion of its members. Nevertheless, YMMA records indicated that Babylon

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<sup>61</sup> Interview 95/123.

<sup>62</sup> See page 118.

had, from 1983, consistently built *lantans* using Islamic themes.<sup>63</sup> Babylon's concept of Muslim culture, however, was rooted in the tradition of the Muslim Krios of Fourah Bay. It is important to remember that when they claimed to want to preserve Muslim culture, Babylonians were talking about the culture and traditions of Freetown's East End and of Fourah Bay in particular. Thus when, in 1992, internal rivalry resulted in Lascaff losing his position as president he was criticised as being unsuitable for the post on the grounds of his ethnicity: he was an outsider (a Mandingo from another part of the East End) and was not a 'Fourah Bay boy' (a Muslim Krio).

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a survey of the various *lantan* groups that existed in Freetown at points in history almost fifty years apart. In the immediate post-war period neighbourhood ties and ethnic affiliation largely coincided, and they constituted key elements in distinguishing one *lantan* group from another. However, during the ensuing half century many neighbourhoods became ethnically more diverse so that while neighbourhood ties remained a major source of cohesion, ethnicity ceased to be a building block of lantern club identity, except at times in Fourah Bay.

Another contrast between the 1940s and the 1990s lay in the role of Islam in unifying and demarcating lantern clubs. In the 1940s all *lantans* were built by Muslim groups and, as a result, religion served to mark boundaries not between different *lantan* groups but between lantern parade participants (all of whom were Muslims) and non-participants.<sup>64</sup> In the 1990s, however, devotion to Islam was utilised by some but by no means all lantern clubs as a group marker. Paradoxically the leaders and members of some clubs, (like Babylon and Bronx Lantern Clubs) which espoused a lifestyle seemingly divorced from (and even contradictory to) any religious principles, used Islamic rhetoric to convey a particular impression about themselves or to help justify

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<sup>63</sup> Babylon's first *lantan* built in 1982 depicted Bob Marley. This imagery aroused considerable consternation on the part of the YMMA whose officials felt that Bob Marley stood for a decadent, drug-taking, ghetto-like lifestyle inimical to Islam (Interview 95/140). However, since then Babylon (under Lascaff and his successors) has concentrated on building *lantans* devoted to religious themes (discussed in Chapter 5).

<sup>64</sup> There were probably individual exceptions, but generally this statement held true. See Dele Charley's comments (page 72).

certain of their actions. Many other clubs, however, had a less complicated relationship with Islam. Their leaders testified to a deep faith and clearly considered the lantern parade as an opportunity to make a public demonstration of it. One such club was Aberdeen Ferry Road Lantern Club whose leaders took pains to explain to me that the members were bound together not just by a sense of neighbourhood solidarity but also by their shared devotion to Islam. They took part in a variety of religious activities during the year to express and reinforce their faith and had, since the late 1980s, always built a mosque *lantana* for the annual lantern parade, composed and sang Arabic 'Islamic' songs to accompany it<sup>65</sup> and had chosen an *aswebi* that reflected Muslim dress codes. They were widely acknowledged as one of the most serious minded lantern clubs in the 1990s. Few other clubs managed to create such a consistent Islamic profile and identity for themselves, although the leaders of many clubs emphasised the underlying religious motivation of their individual members.

A particularly significant contrast between the 1940s and 1990s was the extent to which urban youth culture had come to define the *lantana* tradition. However tempting though, it would be incorrect to identify the *lantana* tradition too closely with Freetown ghetto sub-culture (which represented an extreme of urban youth disengagement with mainstream culture in the 1990s) except in so far as ghetto sub-culture encapsulated many of the problems and challenges that exercised lantern club members in general. In any case, as the experiences of Firestone, Babylon and Mandela indicated, different ghettos invented and reinvented themselves in different ways. They used lantern parades as just one, albeit important, stage on which to act out their different collective persona.

Nevertheless the involvement in lantern parades of notorious ghettos like Firestone and Babylon highlighted the fact that the city's growing underclass of largely semi-educated youth shared similar concerns and similar frustrations regardless of the particular lantern club to which they might belong. In the 1990s lantern parade participants were as intent as ever they were in the 1940s on marking out the actual and conceptual boundaries that separated one group from another. At the same time, however, lantern parades offered an opportunity for them to present a general statement,

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<sup>65</sup> See Appendix 7 for a description of Islamic songs.

not about their affiliation with a particular religion (as in the 1940s) but about their collective sense of unrecognised worth. Ultimately participation in a lantern parade had come to constitute a single claim, on the part of every individual and lantern club involved, to be noticed and taken into account. It was a claim that the government proceeded to ignore at enormous cost.

## PART 2

### THE LANTAN TRADITION AS A FOCUS OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

#### *Chapter 5*

#### **LANTANS: THE HEART OF THE LANTAN TRADITION**

##### **5.1 Introduction**

The objective of every registered lantern club was, by definition, to produce a *lantan* procession on the night of the lantern parade. The organising of each procession was a group enterprise on the part of the lantern club concerned and involved a variety of tasks and skills. A series of decisions had to be made collectively by those who deemed themselves to be the club's executive members, starting with the initial decision as to whether or not to participate in the parade at all. Thereafter it was the duty of the club's leaders to manage the organisational details involved in preparing for a successful *lantan* procession.

An early and fundamental decision was to agree on the subject matter of the club's *lantan*, and practical matters such as technical complexity, potential cost and the time available would all be taken into account. The responsibility for obtaining the necessary supply of materials was usually that of the club's Organising Secretary and his assistants. Quantities of timber and fence sticks, sticks of *poka* (the pith of raphia palm branches), cane and large supplies of ordinary plain paper as well as coloured tissue and crepe paper were required. A low, wheeled chassis had to be borrowed or made and a *lantan* platform constructed on top of it. All this work required welders, carpenters and, to wire up the lights around or inside the finished *lantan*, an electrician. In order to get its actual *lantan* built, each club had to negotiate with a *lantan* builder. Builders who had a close association with a particular club usually provided their services for free, but where a club hired a builder from outside then a fee had to be agreed. In either case the club had to match its *lantan* subject to whatever skills its chosen builder could provide. Furthermore the club had to provide the builder and his assistants with food, milk, sugar, coffee and cigarettes throughout the building period which lasted for two to four weeks, depending on the size and complexity of the *lantan*

involved.

*Lantan* building took place inside a '*lantan* house' so an open space had to be found in the neighbourhood and temporarily fenced to hide the activity within. Only club officials and those assisting with the work could enter freely; others were prevented altogether or charged a fee. Club officials were always anxious for the work to be undertaken in private in order to protect their *lantan* from prying eyes so that rival clubs could not steal their ideas and techniques.<sup>1</sup> However, ship *lantans*, for example, were so big that they were partly visible from outside the *lantan* house and much of their construction was very public.

People living in the area often offered to help in collecting and preparing materials. In the past when every builder used intricately cut paper to cover his *lantan* a dozen or more club supporters would start congregating of an evening well before the beginning of Ramadan to cut the paper patterns. Once the building of the *lantan* was underway club supporters gathered at their *lantan* houses directly after breaking their fast or later after attending prayers and would stay long into the night assisting the builder where they could and generally enjoying one another's company. Older *lantan* enthusiasts in particular used the opportunity to reminisce about the past, talk about local and family history and relate parables and proverbs to encourage builders and 'give them zeal'. Club members with a talent for singing also gathered at the *lantan* house to practise new *lantan* songs and teach them to the rest of the company in preparation for the lantern parade. The sense of camaraderie during the fast month could be so intense that, as one person commented to me 'It is always sad when a *lantan* is taken from its house to go on parade'.<sup>2</sup>

While the planning and preparation of the *lantan* was by far the most expensive and time consuming task that lantern clubs had to undertake in the weeks preceding a lantern parade, members had other matters to organise in order to ensure the success of their eventual *lantan* procession. The two most important were the songs and music to be used during the procession and the *aswebi* to be worn by club members. The

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<sup>1</sup> A few builders worked secretly (Interviews 92/55, 95/88). Amara 'Roller', an elderly provincial builder, prepared certain *lantan* parts in total secrecy (Interview 94/6a & 94/53). Tipo, a young and highly competitive builder, sometimes shared the topic of the *lantan* he was building with just a few club officials, leaving ordinary club members ignorant of what the final result would be.

<sup>2</sup> Interview 92/46.

*aswebi* marked out the core of club supporters in the procession and drew attention to their comportment and singing. The songs and the beat of the instrumentalists who accompanied the procession were what drew onlookers to ‘dance’ behind the *lantan*.

*Lantan* processions can only be fully appreciated if they are each understood as a continuous, composite performance comprising the separate performance threads provided by the procession’s core elements. Each of these elements, (the *lantan*, the *aswebi*, the songs, the instrumentalists and the throng of supporters who danced behind the *lantan*) provided a performance in its own right. It was the interaction among these different performances, their combination and integration into a single, dynamic performance event that gave each procession its own specific character.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine each performance element that comprised a *lantan* procession. In the 1990s it was clear that music, in particular, played as fundamental a role as the actual *lantans* in creating memorable processions. In the course of my research it was inevitable that I learnt a certain amount about the history, nature and content of *lantan* songs and music, as well as the use of *aswebi* and its decline in the 1990s. Appendix 7 contains much of this data since it is integral to any understanding of the complexity of the *lantan* tradition.

The remainder of this thesis focuses on the actual *lantans* that lay at the heart of the *lantan* tradition, on the people (and the inter-relationships among the people) who created *lantans*, and on the notions of art and performance that *lantans* embodied. It became quickly obvious when I started my research that, while the Freetown Muslims who took up *lantan* building around the end of the nineteenth century inherited a basic repertoire of *lantan* imagery that came with the tradition from the Senegambia region, this repertoire had been greatly enriched in Freetown during the course of the twentieth century. By the 1990s there existed a diverse body of themes and subjects that had at some time or another during the previous hundred years been represented in *lantan* form in Freetown. The rest of this chapter discusses the variety, history and source of *lantan* imagery and subject matter, and describes the construction techniques which builders used to translate this imagery into *lantan* form. The chapter also explores the use of human actors and puppets within the *lantan* tradition and the influence they have had on the way *lantans* have been perceived and categorised in Freetown.

## 5.2 Lantans and the representation of man-made constructions

### 5.2.1 Ship imagery

#### 5.2.1.1 *A history of ship lantan building*

It has already been noted that the first ever reference to *lantans* appeared in the Freetown press in 1895 and specifically mentioned ‘... large paper boats, curiously devised and splendidly lit up ...’.<sup>3</sup> Paper vessels decorated with masts and flags were reportedly the ‘usual’ *lantan* form in the 1890s<sup>4</sup> and were still highly regarded a hundred years later, partly because they constituted the oldest *lantan* form and partly because their construction required considerable expertise and resources. Freetown boasts a huge natural harbour through which, over the years, a constant stream of shipping traffic has passed. Elder Dempster, the major British shipping line serving the West Coast of Africa in colonial times, had depots in Freetown, and the British Admiralty also maintained a presence there for many years. The importance of Freetown’s shipping facilities and the commercial and strategic interests they served provided a steady source of employment and it is still possible today to find older men who have spent all their working lives at sea or in the dockyards of Freetown.

Ship imagery is thus very familiar to the city’s inhabitants as it is generally up and down the West Coast of Africa. Its embodiment in the float tradition that spread from coastal Senegal and The Gambia down to Sierra Leone is, therefore, unsurprising.

In Freetown, ship *lantans* seem generally to have been inspired by specific vessels. As Pa Maggay Williams commented in his letter to the colonial government in 1941, *lantans* were regularly built ‘...in the form of some of our large Ships in the Harbour (sic)’.<sup>5</sup> Seventeen years previously the British naval vessel HMS Hood and the steamship Abinsi had both been represented in *lantan* form<sup>6</sup> and in the late 1930s, when the new flagship of the African Naval Station – HMS Neptune – used to visit Freetown regularly, it provided inspiration for a *lantan*.<sup>7</sup> With the onset of war,

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<sup>3</sup> *SLT*: March 30 1895, see page 44.

<sup>4</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896, see page 44.

<sup>5</sup> *SLNA* 1941, see page 64, note 82.

<sup>6</sup> *SLWN*: May 3 1924.

<sup>7</sup> *SLWN*: December 1 1937.

Freetown's strategic potential was fully utilised and its citizens became familiar not only with warships and troopships, but also with submarines and flying boats.<sup>8</sup>

The first reported lantern parade after World War II took place in 1948.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that alternative *lantans* forms (to be discussed later in this chapter) had by then become equally as popular as ships: of the twelve main *lantans* exactly half represented ships and of these, five bore specific names – 'MV Apapa', 'MV Worcestershire', 'SS City of London', 'HMS Ajax' and 'HMS Queen Elizabeth'. The descriptions of the 'SS City of London' and of 'HMS Ajax' highlight a number of characteristics that were to become common to many of the ship *lantans* built in the post-World War II era. Both *lantans* were large: 'HMS Ajax' measured twenty six feet long, four feet wide and eight feet deep and was mounted on four wheels (each eight inches in diameter) and was directed by a steering wheel. Each *lantan* carried human beings on board: the respective captains stood on the bridge and up to ten crew members manned the decks, some acting as signallers and others (in the case of the 'SS City of London') sounding fanfares on bugles. Each *lantan* had a single funnel and carried model mail carriers and airships on board. The 'SS City of London' was conspicuous for its garlands and decorations, for the column of smoke which actually poured from its funnel and, most significantly, for '...the contrivance by which an airship moved up and down the mast'.<sup>10</sup> In the case of 'HMS Ajax' the lighting system gave rise to much comment and admiration, consisting as it did of fourteen bulbs, each twelve volts, plus two mast lights. In addition, this *lantan* had four guns by the captain's bridge, two at the stern and two anti-aircraft guns in midship. 'By ingenuity and skill the ship fired shots almost as loud as those fired at Parades'. Six shots were fired as the *lantan* left the 'dock' at King Tom, five each at the Central and Eastern Police Stations, up to sixty were fired along the parade route and a twenty one gun salute was given when the *lantan* was eventually boarded and officially inspected by a British colonial officer (whose task was presumably to examine the rival *lantans* although it is unclear by whom or how this was organised).

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<sup>8</sup> *DM*: November 25 1938; *SLWN*: November 26 1938. Submarines and flying boats featured in the 1938 *lantan* celebrations although it is not clear whether they were built as hand *lantans* or as *lantan* floats.

<sup>9</sup> *DM*: August 11 & 12 1948. See page 71. See also pages 107-109, 111-116 & 117-120.

<sup>10</sup> I am not sure whether people in Freetown would have themselves seen airships but they would almost have certainly seen photographs in newspapers and magazines.

Clearly these two ship *lantans* set high standards for future *lantan* builders, relying as they did, not only on their size and decoration to impress onlookers, but also on visual effects (lighting and smoke columns), sound effects (simulated gunfire and real bugle fanfares), human interest (provided by the human actors who played the roles of captain and crew members) and mechanical systems (whereby independent parts of the *lantans* were made to move up and down). There seemed to be particular emphasis on realism in the broadest sense, as a description of a ship *lantan* in the early 1950s implies: ship *lantans* were ‘...fitted with the necessary equipments (sic) to give a factual appearance and movements. Horns hooted, bells tingled whilst smoke poured forth in a stream from funnels fitted at the top of the deck. Men moved about inside.’<sup>11</sup> None of these techniques had been mentioned in pre-World War II reports of lantern parades and oral evidence seems to confirm that they were developments which only appeared after 1945.<sup>12</sup>

A sense of drama, moreover, pervades the post-war press descriptions of ship *lantans*. Very often they included detailed information about the dimensions, tonnage and crew/passenger capacities of the actual ships on which the *lantans* were modelled.<sup>13</sup> One *lantan*, ‘HMS Warspite’, was described as leaving the ‘dockyard’ on the night of the parade ‘on a maiden voyage’.<sup>14</sup> The names of the captains and crew members were often reported in advance, right from the captain, chief mate, senior sailor, chief engineer and operator to the person responsible for the signalling.<sup>15</sup> In the case, of the ‘MV Aureol’ the captain was described as having ‘thirty years’ experience of seamanship’.<sup>16</sup> Overall an impression is given that people – *lantan* enthusiasts, reporters and their readership – all valued the ‘demonstration’ of every appropriate detail pertaining to these ship *lantans*.

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<sup>11</sup> DM: June 15 1953.

<sup>12</sup> Thousands of British troops passed through Freetown during World War II and we know that some of them took an interest in the *lantan* tradition (Interview 92/29). It is tempting to speculate that they may have helped devise the techniques described above.

<sup>13</sup> See descriptions of the ship *lantans* ‘Queen Elizabeth’ (DM: July 21 1949) and ‘HMS Luciania’ (DM: July 26 1949).

<sup>14</sup> DM: July 26 1949.

<sup>15</sup> As in the case of ‘MV Pasteur’ (DM: July 14 1950).

<sup>16</sup> DM: June 21 1952.

During the immediate post-colonial period the names of ship *lantans* were still being reported in the press. The SS France, a tourist boat which visited Freetown in December 1965, inspired a *lantan* by the same name in 1966<sup>17</sup> and other named *lantans* in the 1960s included 'SS Christopher Colombo', 'SS United States', 'HMS Lion' and 'MV Aureol', 'HMS Sir Albert', 'HMP 16' and the 'SS Canberra'.<sup>18</sup> YMMA records in the 1980s, however, more often described the type of ship *lantan* a club had registered (such as a cargo boat, tourist boat, man-of-war or oil tanker) rather than giving its name. Nevertheless, some exceptions exist. 'SS Maya Products' (1985), 'Napetco Oil Tanker' (1990), 'RSL Zyto' (1997) and 'Maersk Line Container Boat' (1997) were all named after commercial concerns in Freetown; 'SS Sandy' (1993) commemorated a hero of the 1992 NPRC military coup and 'HMS Revolution' (1993) actually celebrated the NPRC regime itself. In 1997 (by which time the civilian regime of President Kabbah had been installed) King Tom Lantern Club named its prize-winning ship *lantan* 'HMS Clarkson' after the first governor of the colony of Sierra Leone.

It is clear from the records, however, that ship imagery was playing a much smaller role in lantern parades in the latter part of the twentieth century. Whereas in 1948 six out of the twelve *lantans* represented ships, in 1960 this number had fallen to five out of a total of nineteen *lantans*. By the 1980s the utilisation of ship imagery had declined even further. In 1983 two *lantans* (out of sixteen) depicted ships while in 1988 there was only one ship *lantan* (App 13:35) out of the thirty nine that participated in that year's parade. In 1989 the number had risen to four – out of a total of fifty-seven *lantans*.<sup>19</sup> One reason for this decline in popularity lay in the country's worsening economic situation that made ship *lantans* extremely expensive to build both in terms of materials and labour.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore the task of building them needed to be co-ordinated by a *lantan* builder with an expert understanding of ship construction and it became clear during the course of my research that many younger builders' skills and expertise lay elsewhere.

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<sup>17</sup> DM: January 24 1966.

<sup>18</sup> DM: March 21 1961; DM: March 8 1962; DM: February 27 1963; DM: January 14 1967; DM: January 16 1967; DM: December 9 1969.

<sup>19</sup> See Appendix 5 for a chronological list of *lantans*.

<sup>20</sup> Interview 95/83.

### 5.2.1.2 Construction techniques

Ship *lantans* were notable for their size and strength: the fact that since (at least) the 1940s they had carried human crews on board indicates how sturdy they needed to be. In 1993 I was able to examine the construction of 'HMS Revolution' (App.13:36) which was built by Tengbeh Town Lantern Club under the supervision of its master-builder, Mr Kamara. It had a basic wooden frame (known as the skeleton) made from timber planks (2" x 2" and 2" x 4") with wooden strips (1½" x 1½") and rough fence sticks (cut from mangrove swamps or from monkey apple trees) to mould the shape (for example, of the stern). The superstructure, comprising bridge and engine room, was made of lengths of *poka* (palm pith).<sup>21</sup> The whole of the skeleton was covered with intricately designed and cut paperwork which in Freetown is usually referred to as *takada* (or *kadi*).<sup>22</sup> It is claimed to be the earliest form of *lantan* decoration in Freetown.<sup>23</sup> The earliest photographic evidence of its use dates to the 1950s and 1960s in the press<sup>24</sup> and to the 1960s in the collections of the Sierra Leone National Museum (App 13:37).

The decorative paperwork covering 'HMS Revolution' was made from large sheets of light-green paper of a type now difficult to obtain but derived from the builder's own personal stock of paper which he had saved over a period of twenty years. In order to produce the cut-out designs the sheets of paper were folded and placed on top of one another in a neat pile. On the uppermost surface was pencilled an intricate design which was then punched out through all the thicknesses of paper using a sharpened nail. In order to penetrate the pile of paper the nail was tapped hard by a small block of wood. When the cutting was complete the paper sheets were separated and unfolded, each sheet bearing an identical cut-out design (App 13: 38-40). Because

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<sup>21</sup> The dictionary definition of this material is given as "*poka* (English, dialect *poka* 'bullrush' cf Jamaican Creole *pok-pok* 'unidentified tree, with soft wood used for ceiling, walls') kind of mat made from the pith of bamboo" (Fyle and Jones 1980:295). Although Sierra Leoneans always refer to the pith as bamboo, it is actually derived from the thick midrib/stem of the huge branches of raphia palm trees.

<sup>22</sup> Neither of these terms appears in Fyle & Jones 1980.

<sup>23</sup> According to Mr Kamara (Interview 93/96) the techniques he used to build and decorate 'HMS Revolution' were identical to those used by the *lantan* builders who had taught him their skills back in the 1930s and 1940s, and he maintained that they were directly inherited from early Freetown *lantan* builders. *Takada* style of papering appears to have been the technique used in Senegal in the 1870s (App 13:34) and is still used by *fanaal* builders in The Gambia (see Appendix 3).

<sup>24</sup> For example, *DM*: May 14 1956; *DM*: April 28 1961; *DM*: January 24 1966; *DM*: January 14 1967; *DM*: January 1 1968.

of their size the sheets were cut into sections and then pasted to the frame of the *lantan* using cassava starch. The overall effect was like that of lace or filigree. According to Mr. Kamara paperwork decorations used to be more elaborate in the past when different patterns of lace-like designs were used for different parts of the ship *lantan* which might also be given an inner layer of these decorations so that when it was lit up from inside the light shone through two sets of cut-out designs thus enhancing the *lantan's* overall beauty. The internal lighting was originally produced by candles placed in metal holders that were fixed at intervals to the inside skeleton to provide illumination. Candles had long since been replaced by small electric bulbs, wired up round the inside of the skeleton and attached to a small petrol generator placed at the bottom of the *lantan*. Clearly the striking effect produced by the internal illumination of Freetown's early floats accounts for why in Krio floats are called *lantans*.

'HMS Revolution' had portholes located at regular intervals along the sides of the hull and these were made by cutting rings of cardboard and sticking them on the inner surface of the paper decorations. After drying, each porthole was cut out of the paperwork, equal in size to the internal measurement of the cardboard ring which enclosed and strengthened it. The final touches were added to the *lantan* when strips of coloured tissue paper were cut and stuck to the palm pith 'ribs' of the skeleton to provide additional decoration and to hide the joins in the paperwork. According to Mr. Kamara this technique of using tissue paper was called *fanaal* decoration.<sup>25</sup> The one part of the *lantan* that was left undecorated and that was covered with just plain, uncut paper was the lower part of the hull.

A builder of ship *lantans* must have the skills not only to build and organise the decoration of the *lantan* frame but also to design the frame in the first place. Mr. Kamara used magazines with pictures of actual ships as a guide and then drew up a scaled plan of the proposed *lantan* to ensure that its shape and proportions were accurate (App 13:41). In 1993 he designed 'HMS Revolution' and supervised the carpentry work entailed in building its frame, assisted by members of Tengbeh Town Lantern Club. The laborious work of actually cutting paper designs was done indoors by other club members under Mr. Kamara's direction. Whilst the *lantan* was under

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<sup>25</sup> A term that does not appear in Fyle & Jones 1980. See page 43, note 1 for the use of the term *fanaal* in the float tradition in The Gambia and Senegal.

construction Mr. Kamara and his team of assistants worked nightly from about 8 p.m. to 2 a.m. until the days immediately prior to the parade when the final preparations entailed virtually day and night attention.

Tengbeh Town Lantern Club did not participate in the 1997 lantern parade but several other clubs renowned for their ship *lantans* did. These included Ascension Town Lantern Club (App 13:42-43) and King Tom Rovers Lantern Club which produced the winning *lantan* 'HMS Clarkson' (App 13:44). Much larger than Tengbeh Town's 1993 *lantan* and carrying more crew members 'HMS Clarkson' (like Ascension Town's ship *lantan*) was painstakingly covered with *takada* paper decorations (App 13:45-49).

The building of *lantans* in the form of ships is clearly a complex exercise requiring considerable time, effort and experience as well a ready and abundant supply of materials and the financial resources to procure them. In the 1990s I noticed that a number of the lantern clubs which built ship *lantans* resorted to alternative papering techniques rather than cut out intricate paperwork decorations and this may have been the result of a shortage of time, funds and expertise on their part. Alternatively it may have indicated a conscious decision on the part of the clubs concerned to modernise their techniques or to render their *lantans* more realistic.<sup>26</sup> In particular, Magazine Lantern Club adopted materials and techniques widely used in building other types of *lantans* (to be discussed later in this chapter) to build their ship *lantan* 'SS Sandy' in 1993. They used timber, fence sticks, palm pith and cane in the construction of the skeleton but instead of decorating the boat with *takada* they covered it first with mosquito netting (stretched taut and stuck to the skeleton) and then glued large sheets of brown paper to the netting (App 13:50). The paper was then painted (App 13:51). The effect was totally different from that achieved using *takada*. In 1997 the same club again built a ship *lantan* (this time depicting a 'Maersk Line Container Boat') and combined painted paper coverings with *takada* (App 13:52). While it was much quicker and cheaper to cover a ship *lantan* with huge sheets of painted paper rather than with *takada*, it is clear that the latter technique was still valued, probably because of its long history and its particular aesthetic effects.

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<sup>26</sup> Chapter 7 discusses the importance of realism to Freetown *lantan* enthusiasts.

## 5.2.2 Imagery derived from buildings and monuments

As described in Chapter 2 the other early *lantana* type mentioned by the local press in Freetown in the late nineteenth century depicted a mosque<sup>27</sup> and this *lantana* subject was repeated throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Newspaper reports referring to the end-of-Ramadan *lantana* celebrations were somewhat sparse during the first half of this century but a reference to a mosque *lantana* did appear in the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* in 1933. From the 1950s onwards more detailed descriptions of the annual lantern parades appeared in the press and it was reported in 1953 that a *lantana* modelled on the mosque at Congo Town participated in that year's celebrations.<sup>28</sup> A year later a *lantana* was built in imitation of the new Hausa mosque in central Freetown.<sup>29</sup> In 1960 a total of nineteen *lantanas* took part in the lantern parade and four of them represented mosques.<sup>30</sup> Thereafter mosque imagery had to compete with an ever-increasing variety of alternative imagery that *lantana* enthusiasts introduced into the annual lantern parades, but despite this, mosque *lantanas* continued to be made on a regular basis. At least one such *lantana* has featured in every lantern parade since 1987 and four were built for the most recent parade in 1997.

There is no written or photographic evidence to indicate exactly how the early mosque *lantanas* were built but older informants maintain that their skeletons were constructed from the same materials used for ship *lantanas* and that *takada* was the only method used for covering mosque *lantanas* - at least until the second half of the twentieth century and possibly right up to the 1980s.

In 1993 Aberdeen Ferry Road Lantern Club allowed me to document the building of its *lantana*, which depicted the local mosque. The completed frame was covered with mosquito netting and scissors were used to cut the decorative paperwork (*takada*) that was then pasted to the netting. Older *lantana* builders disdained the use of netting and scissors but by using these methods the builders at Aberdeen Ferry Road were able to cover their *lantana* with paper designs very quickly and yet maintain the principle of the customary *takada* technique. Like 'HMS Revolution' the *lantana* was

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<sup>27</sup> See page 44.

<sup>28</sup> *DM*: June 15 1953.

<sup>29</sup> *DM*: June 1 1954.

<sup>30</sup> *DM*: March 29 1960.

lit from inside by bulbs that were fixed to the interior framework and wired up to a generator.

In 1997 Aberdeen Ferry Road Lantern Club repeated its 1993 *lantana* (App 13:53) and both Mandela Youth (App 13:54) and Moa Wharf Lantern Clubs built mosques. A new lantern club based in Calaba Town (on the very outskirts of Greater Freetown) participated in the lantern parade for the first time and modelled its *lantana* on its neighbourhood mosque. The *lantana* frame was covered not with *takada* but with sheets of painted paper and coloured plastic (App 13:55).<sup>31</sup> This method of decoration had become very popular in recent years and was used for all the *lantanas* (other than most mosques) that derived their inspiration from monuments, landmarks and buildings.

The first indication that local monuments and landmarks were being incorporated into the general repertoire of *lantana* imagery dates to 1977. That year the *Daily Mail* published a photograph of a *lantana* built in the form of the Clock Tower which was a well known landmark in the East End of Freetown.<sup>32</sup> The Clock Tower began to feature regularly in parades in the late 1980s and 1990s when Bombay Star Lantern Club identified itself with this particular *lantana* form. In 1993 the club's *lantana* won first prize in its category. Early in 1993 the actual Clock Tower had been cleaned up and provided with seating around its base by a local businessman.<sup>33</sup> Bombay Star Lantern Club's *lantana* duly depicted the Clock Tower in its refurbished condition, complete with copies of the Guinness and Star Beer advertisements that adorned the real tower, as well as replicas of its four-faced clock and its new seating arrangements (App 13:56-57).

Other local landmarks that inspired *lantana* builders over the years included the airport control tower, the original Fourah Bay College building, the Turntable (roundabout) at Uppun which marks the site of the colonial defences of the eastern end of the city (App 13:58-59) and the forefront of the Cottage Hospital. *Lantana* enthusiasts have also looked further afield for inspiration – for example to the heart of

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<sup>31</sup> As with the 'SS Sandy' (page 144) the reasons behind this choice of covering were not entirely clear.

<sup>32</sup> *DM*: September 16 1977.

<sup>33</sup> The businessman in question was Kasor Macrae who, until his death, sponsored Bronx Lantern Club.

Islam's holiest city (Mecca) and to the self-proclaimed protector of world freedom and democracy (the USA). The Holy Kaaba, which stands in the middle of the Great Mosque at Mecca and which forms a focal point of the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) ritual, was frequently depicted in *lantan* form during the 1980s and was built again for the 1997 parade (App 13:60-61). The Statue of Liberty, on the other hand, featured specifically in the 1988, 1990 and 1993 parades after being taken up by one particular *lantan* builder and club, Madrassat Abdullah (App 13:6). The skeleton of the club's 1993 *lantan* was made of cane which is flexible and easily curved into the rounded shapes which are suited to the depiction of human and animal figures. The skeleton of the 'Statue of Liberty' contrasted sharply with the monumental framework, built largely of timber and fence sticks, required by the larger *lantans* depicting ships, mosques and landmarks.

### 5.2.3 Imagery derived from land and air transport

Modern forms of transport appear to have provided *lantan* builders with inspiration for many years. Sierra Leone once boasted a well-used railway system (opened in 1898 and closed down in the 1970s) which gave rise to a succession of *lantans*. First mention of a train is found in the report of the 1948 *lantan* celebrations when one *lantan* group built 'The Flying Scotsman No. 152'.<sup>34</sup> It was much admired for its electric torch lights. The next year the same *lantan* was built again; it measured 35' x 7' x 4'6" and carried six passengers in addition to the driver, fireman and guard.<sup>35</sup> Train *lantans* continued to be built in the 1950s and 1960s<sup>36</sup> and although there is no mention of them during the 1970s one such *lantan* featured in the 1989 parade and another in the 1997 parade. Both built by Beatles Lantern Club they comprised an engine and several carriages all with strongly built skeletons decorated partly with *takada* paperwork and partly with plastic sheeting (App 13:62-67).

*Lantans* have also been built in the form of cars, particularly those that are distinctive in themselves or associated with important people in Freetown. In 1948 one group built a *lantan* representing an armoured car and in 1966 two *lantans* each

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<sup>34</sup> DM: August 11 1948. See page 113.

<sup>35</sup> DM: July 28 1949.

<sup>36</sup> DM: 9 June 9 1953; YMMA records for 1966 (Appendix 4).

depicted the then Prime Minister's Mercedes-Benz.<sup>37</sup> In 1993 one *lantana* represented a Rolls Royce (App 13:68).<sup>38</sup> Another form of transport no longer seen in Freetown today but introduced after World War II was the double-decker bus. Several bus *lantans* are reported to have been built in 1953 and in 1966 three bus *lantans* (including a Leyland Bus and a Fiat Bus) featured in the parade.<sup>39</sup> Bus imagery was revived in the 1990s by one particular builder in the East End who built the frame of a double-decker bus for Beatles Lantern Club in 1991 (when the parade was cancelled) and who completed full size bus *lantans* for Clinetonians Lantern Club in 1993 (App 13:69) and 1997 (App 13:70-74). The builder, Alie Fornah, was a seafarer who had travelled extensively and had seen double-decker buses abroad; he used a miniature toy version of a red London Transport bus as a model.

Aeroplanes are among other forms of modern transport and machinery that have featured in *lantana* celebrations. Newspaper reports indicate that even in the 1930s aeroplanes and flying boats were depicted in lantern parades (although the records do not indicate whether as hand *lantans* or as full-size floats).<sup>40</sup> In 1955, however, mention is made of 'giant aeroplanes' and in 1971 Fourah Bay College students built an aircraft for that year's lantern parade.<sup>41</sup> One *lantana* builder (Eddie Roberts) was generally recognised among *lantana* enthusiasts as the most expert creator of aeroplane *lantans* in Freetown. He told me that he first exercised his skills at the instigation of Fourah Bay College students but over the past eleven years had built regularly (1986-1990, 1993 and 1997) for Ishrine Lantern Club, modelling his *lantans* variously on British Airways, KLM and Sierra Leone National Airways aircraft. Other clubs took up the same or similar (space travel) themes including an ECOMOG jet (Congo Town Lantern Club), a Middle East Airline (built by Eddie Thomas for Malamatonians Lantern Club) and the American space shuttle (New Site Amalgamators Lantern Club) all in 1993 (App 13:75-76).

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<sup>37</sup> DM: August 11 1948; YMMA records for 1966 (Appendix 4).

<sup>38</sup> It carried puppet figures representing HM Queen Elizabeth II accompanied by the then Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai, during the Queen's visit to Sierra Leone in 1961, being driven by a chauffeur. See Appendix 13:14 & 15.

<sup>39</sup> DM: June 9 1953; YMMA records for 1966 (Appendix 4).

<sup>40</sup> SLWN: January 28 1933; SLWN: November 26 1938.

<sup>41</sup> DM: May 25 1955; DM: November 22 1971.

Examples of heavy, mechanised machinery have inspired completely new *lantans* forms in recent years. Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club built *lantans* depicting a Caterpillar D8 (1989), a Front-end Loader (1990) and a Conveyor Vehicle (1997) while the wars in Liberia and in Sierra Leone inspired Bod Water Lantern Club to build a *lantan* in the form of a war tank in 1993.

Most of the *lantans* mentioned in this section were constructed using a combination of timber, fence sticks and palm pith (App 13:77-78); where the frame needed to be particularly strong the proportion of fence stick or timber was increased (App 13:79-80). The frames of aeroplane *lantans*, however, were routinely made of wire with only a minimal amount of fence stick to support the skeleton in strategic places (App 13:81). Although wire was used extensively in all *lantan* skeletons to tie or bind strips of palm pith or cane together, aeroplanes seemed to be the only *lantan* type where wire was employed to construct the whole skeleton. Eddie Roberts, who was particularly dextrous at making aeroplanes, claimed to have excelled at making wire 'gigs' (toys) as a child.

Apart from the train built in 1997 by Beatles Lantern Club in the 1990s all the *lantans* inspired by forms of land and air transport were covered with netting and finished off with layers of painted paper. I was assured by several older informants, however, that prior to the 1970s train, bus, aeroplane and car *lantans* were all decorated with *takada* paperwork designs.

#### 5.2.4 The role of human actors

All the *lantan* types discussed so far represented specific man-made constructions, be they forms of transport, internationally known monuments, or aspects of the locally built heritage. As we have seen sea transport was an early inspiration to nineteenth century *lantan* builders. Ship imagery connotes the ability of man-made vessels to navigate rivers and oceans, moving from port to port, continent to continent. Such movement introduces people, goods and new ideas to new destinations – which recalls the spread of the float tradition itself along the upper coast of West Africa. Ship imagery thus constitutes a distillation of the very movement that brought the float tradition to Freetown. In the 1990s the ship *lantan* form, which is so distinctive of the float tradition throughout its history in Sierra Leone (and in West Africa generally), still constituted the most imposing *lantan* form in Freetown. But by this time *lantan*

imagery had become more diverse and included more recent forms of transport. However, the twentieth century *lantans* builders who gained inspiration from buses and trains, aeroplanes and space ships were continuing the use of visual imagery that embodied and reinforced the notion of movement which is the very essence of any form of street parade.

Nevertheless, some forms of man-made construction that have inspired *lantans* builders are in themselves static. Mosques, the Holy Kaaba, local buildings and physically constructed landmarks are immovable, although once reinvented in *lantans* form they assume mobility as they are hauled and pushed along the parade route. During the course of the twentieth century, however, *lantans* builders and lantern clubs made significant advances in reworking the notion of movement into all the *lantans* forms discussed so far in this chapter. On the one hand builders introduced movable parts into the *lantans* they built and, on the other hand, club members assumed the role of human actors on board those *lantans* that were sufficiently large and strong to bear their weight. Movable *lantans* parts were operated by simple string mechanisms in a vertical or horizontal direction. The operators of the mechanisms might walk alongside the *lantans* as in the case of several of the aeroplane *lantans* I saw in 1993 and 1997: some of these had miniature aircraft moving backwards and forwards horizontally along a cord that was strung above the main *lantans* (App 13:82). An operator might, however, travel on the *lantans* itself because while aeroplane *lantans* with wire skeletons were not particularly large or strongly built the majority of *lantans* representing man-made constructions were fairly sturdy. One technique I witnessed in 1993 involved the *lantans* operator lying on his back squeezed between the *lantans* construction and the platform on which it stood.<sup>42</sup> Some *lantans* built predominantly of timber and strong sticks were monumental in size and were able to bear the weight of several people. As contemporary press reports indicate, by the late 1940s ship *lantans* were carrying human crews who manipulated movable *lantans* parts.<sup>43</sup> More than this, they actually acted out appropriate sequences of action as the *lantans* moved

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix 13:189-190.

<sup>43</sup> *DM*: August 11 & 12 1948.

through the streets. I witnessed a fine example of this in the case of 'HMS Clarkson' (Appendix 14:3.1).<sup>44</sup>

Human actors<sup>45</sup> performing the roles of the crew of a ship, train or bus (or acting the part of worshippers at the Holy Kaaba or leisure seekers sitting round the Clock Tower) were not indulging in parody but in straightforward impersonation of the behaviour appropriate to their roles.<sup>46</sup> A major objective on the part of *lantan* builders was clearly to create as realistic a representation as possible of the form depicted by the *lantan*.<sup>47</sup> The dramatic impact of movable *lantan* parts integrated where possible with performances by human actors simply served to achieve a greater degree of realism than formerly possible. In the 1990s this applied to all *lantans* representing man-made structures except when such a *lantan* was built on too small a scale, and/or its skeleton was too fragile to carry human actors on board. In these cases, however, the *lantans* might still include simple moving parts that could be operated from alongside or might include visual effects (as in the case of aeroplane and spaceship *lantans* that usually had electrically operated flashing landing and tail lights). Of the *lantans* built in the 1990s specifically to represent man-made structures the only ones not incorporating any movable parts, visual effects or human actors were the 'Upgun Turntable', 'Statue of Liberty' and 'Ecomog jet' in 1993.

*Lantans* representing man-made constructions, however, comprised under a third of those that participated in the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades. None of the rest made use of human actors nor did they rely simply on movable *lantan* elements. Rather they incorporated articulated models of people and animals, locally referred to as effigies but more accurately described in English as puppets, given that there was an expectation that these effigies (*lantan* figures) should be articulated in some way.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See also page 38.

<sup>45</sup> I refer to the people who performed sequences of action on these *lantans* as human actors (as opposed to puppets/puppet actors). As already indicated they were not trained actors but ordinary lantern club supporters.

<sup>46</sup> The actions of the conductress and child passengers carried by Clinetonians' Bedford bus in 1993 are described on pages 27-28.

<sup>47</sup> See pages 230-233.

<sup>48</sup> I use the term *lantan* figure, puppet figure, puppet and puppet-actor interchangeably.

Puppetry was an essential element of most popular *lantan* forms in Freetown in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and these constitute the focus of the rest of this chapter.

### 5.3 *Lantans and the representation of the human and animal world*

#### 5.3.1 Animals and birds

The earliest newspaper reports mentioning the representation of animals in *lantan* celebrations appeared in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately I could find no one in Freetown in the 1990s who could confirm from personal memory that such imagery existed any earlier than this; however, a number of older people maintained that a Mandingo named Sampha Conteh was the first person to build an animal *lantan* a few years before the outbreak of World War II. He was widely remembered for constructing a *lantan* in the form of a lion, at a time when, according to his cousin, other builders were still concentrating on ship and mosque forms.<sup>50</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century the repertoire of animal imagery expanded and records mention the horse, elephant, baboon, camel, lion, 'alligator', tortoise, giraffe, reindeer, fish and eagle as *lantan* forms.<sup>51</sup> At times a number of animal figures were combined in a single *lantan*, sometimes called simply 'A group of animals' or more imaginatively entitled 'Animal Farm'. A *lantan* by the latter name was built by Mighty Spear Lantern Club in 1993 and featured a lion, a horse and a camel (App 13:10-11). Interestingly a photograph of the lion indicates that it was built in virtually identical form to an animal *lantan* illustrated in the local press in 1964 (App 13:83-84).<sup>52</sup>

#### 5.3.2 Islamic themes

Human imagery seems to have become associated with the *lantan* tradition in Freetown early on in its history. Among the 'magic lanterns and paper objects' seen by

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<sup>49</sup> In 1933 reference is made to a mule (*SLWN*: January 28 1933) and in 1938 various 'different animals' were represented (*SLWN*: November 26 1938). Again these lanterns may have been small and hand-held. In 1938, however, an ensemble representing 'warriors on horseback' was mentioned and this may well have been a full size *lantan*.

<sup>50</sup> Interview 95/130.

<sup>51</sup> See Appendix 5. Fyle and Jones (1980:10) define *aligeta* as 'alligator, crocodile'. Perhaps the term was introduced into Krio by freed slaves from America.

<sup>52</sup> *DM*: February 17 1964. The changing techniques used to construct and decorate animal *lantans* are discussed on pages 168-174.

Dr. Wellesley Cole as a child when he witnessed Temne *lantán* celebrations during World War I were 'giant dolls' which presumably represented human beings.<sup>53</sup>

During the course of my research I discovered that Temne and Mandingo *lantán* builders were widely acclaimed as the most skilled in the use of animal and human imagery. On the basis of what little evidence exists it is tempting to hypothesise that once the *lantán* tradition had been taken up independently by Mandingo and Temne Muslims in the early twentieth century they began to experiment with a new type of imagery that would mark them out from their Muslim Aku/Krio counterparts.<sup>54</sup> It is possible that the *lantán* constructions they first built were small (as described by Wellesley Cole) and that Sampha Conteh was the first builder to translate the new type of animal and human imagery into float form in the 1930s.

To those who mistakenly associate Islam with strict iconoclasm the use of animal and human imagery in celebrations marking one of the most important points in the Muslim year must seem surprising. The introduction of this imagery represents one of the most important but least understood innovations in the whole history of Freetown's *lantán* tradition. It opened the tradition up to the development of a whole range of new *lantán* styles and techniques which offered lantern club members, builders and audiences alike extraordinary scope for expressing, interpreting and negotiating their individual and collective understandings of the world around them (and their place within it) through the medium of *lantán* art.

The first press reports of human *lantán* imagery appeared in 1938 when reference was made to a *lantán* depicting 'warriors on horseback'.<sup>55</sup> In 1948 a Mandingo group built a *lantán* depicting two men shaking hands and a Temne group built 'The Endeavour' (which comprised three male figures). No interpretation of these *lantáns* is available but it is likely that they represented contemporary events, or incidents from Islamic stories. The theme of battle (first mentioned in 1938) came to be variously interpreted over the years as 'two men on horseback contesting a battle' (1952), 'man on horseback' (1954) and 'warrior on horseback with shield and sword'

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<sup>53</sup> Cole 1960:126. See page 59.

<sup>54</sup> See pages 58-59 and 248-250.

<sup>55</sup> *SLWN*: November 26 1938.

(1955).<sup>56</sup> In the 1960s the theme of mounted warriors became crystalised in such *lantana* titles as 'Prophet Ali and his enemies'(1963), 'two warriors on horseback' (1964 & 1967), 'Nfa Ali and Pagan' (1966), 'Knights on horseback' (1968), 'Battle between Imamu Alie and Humarr Amriyu'(1989) and 'Nfa Ali and the Kafiri'(1985, 1988, 1989, 1990).<sup>57</sup> The latter title has been the one most regularly used during the last two decades of the twentieth century and refers to a pagan fighting a mounted Muslim warrior (representing Ali), watched by a woman (Ali's wife) seated on a camel. In 1997 Vimto Lantern Club produced a *lantana* depicting this exact scene (App 13:85-86).

This is just one example of the imagery which has been incorporated into the *lantana* tradition over the past half century and which has drawn directly on Islamic tradition (and at times indirectly therefore on the Bible). Other religious subjects that are mentioned in the very sparse records of the 1950s and 1960s include Adam and Eve (1954, 1960), Noah's Ark (1960, 1966) and Al-Buraq (1965, 1966, 1968 & 1969).<sup>58</sup> The YMMA's more recent and more extensive records reveal that Al-Buraq was frequently built in *lantana* form in the 1980s as were a number of other religious subjects. The latter included Nebuchadnezzar, Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, Jonah and the Big Fish (App 13:87), Wise King Solomon (App 13:88), the Ten Commandments, St Michael against Satan, and even Christ's Nativity.<sup>59</sup> In the same decade the theme of religious faith taming man-eating animals has been depicted as Daniel (and sometimes Jacob) in the Lion's Den (App 13:89) and also as Prophet Abdul Kadri and the Lion.<sup>60</sup> 1980s *lantanas* have also been used to portray religious life in Sierra Leone, such as 'The Mimbarr with the late Imam of Fula Town reading the Kutuba', 'One Alhaji Praying' and 'Reading of the Holy Koran in a village'.

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<sup>56</sup> DM: June 25 1952; DM: June 7 1954; DM: May 25 1955.

<sup>57</sup> DM: February 27 1963; DM: February 17 1964; DM: January 14 1967; DM: January 3 1968; YMMA records for 1966, 1985, 1988, 1989 & 1990 (Appendix 5). Ali was a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed and became his son-in-law when he married the Prophet's daughter, Fatima (Fatmata). Ali was the fourth caliph of Islam and was the founder of Shi'itism. He had twin sons, Hassan and Hussein.

<sup>58</sup> DM: June 7 1954; DM: March 29 1960; DM: January 24 1966; DM: January 1 1968; DM: December 12 1969 and YMMA records for 1965 & 1966 (Appendix 4). For Al-Buraq see page 39, note 35.

<sup>59</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>60</sup> Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani is one of the most celebrated saints in Islam. Founder of the Qadiriyyah order of Sufis he was born in the region of Jilan in Persia but lived in Baghdad where his tomb is. According to legend his life was a chain of miracles. (Glassé 2001:18-19 & Brill 1960:69-70.)

Apart from these last few themes based on local events the source of inspiration for these religious *lantans* derived from Islamic prints (chromolithographs) mechanically printed in large quantities in centres like Cairo (App 13:90). Bouttiaux-Ndiaye (writing about Senegalese reverse-glass painting) refers to the prints as 'Moslem votive pictures' and explains that, imported into Senegal by Lebano-Syrian merchants around the turn of the twentieth century they were suppressed by the French colonial administration.<sup>61</sup> Lebano-Syrian traders also reached Freetown in the late nineteenth century and were the likely source of the very same type of prints which achieved huge popularity among the city's Muslims on account of their Islamic themes.<sup>62</sup> There is no evidence that they were ever suppressed by the colonial government and they continued to be imported (often via Nigeria) through much of the twentieth century. However, by the 1990s such prints were very difficult to obtain in Freetown as their import seemed to have ceased, but old copies were still used by Muslims to decorate their homes, and commercial artists often copied favourite prints to sell within the Muslim community.

While in Freetown I was fortunate in obtaining access to one such painting as well as to several individual prints and to two wall posters, each comprising eleven different miniature-sized Islamic prints (App 13:91-92). The painting (App 13:93) depicted Al-Buraq and, despite differences in its background, was obviously copied from the standard chromolithograph of the same subject which circulated so widely in West Africa and which appeared in miniature form on one of the posters I was shown.<sup>63</sup> In 1997 several *lantans* faithfully depicted Al-Buraq, complete with a mosque structure in the background. The platform of one *lantan* was decorated with pots of flowers in exact imitation of those visible in the usual chromolithograph. Photographs surviving from 1988 show less elaborate attempts to depict the same theme (App 13:94-95).

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<sup>61</sup> Bouttiaux-Ndiaye 1994:13-14. This act of suppression actually encouraged the development of reverse-glass painting. Lebano-Syrian merchants came from areas which are today part of Lebanon. The early Lebano-Syrian immigrants to West Africa were Shi'ite Muslims and this is the probable reason why prints depicting Ali (the founder of the Shi'ite doctrine) were so ubiquitous. Shi'itism recognises Ali as the sole successor of the Prophet Mohammed and rejects his other descendants (who are recognised by Sunni Muslims).

<sup>62</sup> Early newspaper references to 'Syrians' in Freetown include *SLWN*: July 22 & July 29 1905. See also Anthony 1980:13-20 and Cole (1997).

<sup>63</sup> Mazrui 1994:55.

Another popular *lantana* form directly inspired by a religious chromolithograph was that depicting Abraham in the act of sacrificing his son Isaac. Both the posters (App 13:96-97) and one of the prints (App 13:98) that I was shown in Freetown portrayed this story in identical form (apart from slight variations in the background). This has been a popular *lantana* subject and every effort has been made by *lantana* builders to replicate the print accurately (App 13:99). The same has been true of *lantans* I have seen (in person or on film) inspired by other prints. Adam and Eve, for example, have always been depicted standing either side of a tree up which a snake is coiled (App 13:100) and *lantans* (like that built by Vimto Lantern Club in 1997) depicting Nfa'Ali and the Kafiri or Ali's fight with the infidel, Amr (App 13:101) have always studiously followed the prints on which they were based (App 13:102).<sup>64</sup>

It is clear that the expansion of *lantana* imagery (from ships and mosques to simple human and animal forms and to groups of figures portraying aspects of the Islamic tradition) was a product of a number of influences within Freetown's diverse population. It appears to have been based originally on the skills and ingenuity of Temne and Mandingo *lantana* builders and on the imported Islamic prints which became so highly prized within the local Muslim community. However, the practice of depicting scenes and events, once introduced into the *lantana* tradition, did not long remain confined to incidents based on illustrations of Islamic themes and narratives. The latter provided a foundation for a dramatic proliferation of *lantana* imagery from the middle of the twentieth century onwards.

### 5.3.3 *Lantans* representing mythological, historical, topical and cultural themes

For the fifty years previous to the last lantern parade in 1997 *lantana* builders used the end-of-Ramadan celebrations as a vehicle for representing in *lantana* form an increasingly diverse range of current, mythical, historical and indigenous subject matter. They have featured people of local, national and international prominence past and present, issues of colonial and national identity, commercial themes, health and agricultural topics, national and international conflicts, entertainment and sporting

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<sup>64</sup> According to Bouttiaux-Ndiaye's sources the confrontation between Ali and Amr probably took place during the Battle of the Ditch in 626 AD in which the Koreishites (who inhabited Mecca) fought against the followers of Mohammed. Bouttiaux-Ndiaye 1994:54.

pursuits as well as scenes drawn from mythology and from the cultural traditions of indigenous Sierra Leoneans.

### 5.3.3.1 *Mythological and fictional themes*

A mythological theme that has provided regular inspiration has been the story of St George and the Dragon. I discovered that illustrations depicting St. George killing the dragon were in fairly wide circulation in Freetown (App 13:103). They have provided the basis for an extremely popular *lantan* form, first recorded in 1965 and still being produced regularly in the 1980s and 1990s (App 13:104-107). I also discovered that some classical myths (for example, Orpheus in the Underworld and the Head of Medusa) had been featured and illustrated in a 1950s Primary School text book used for a number of years throughout Sierra Leone and therefore widely familiar to *lantan* builders, lantern club members and spectators alike. A *lantan* entitled 'Zoo' has been described by John Nunley as including a central male figure playing a stringed instrument exactly like a Greek lyre and Nunley justifiably concluded that it depicted the story of Orpheus.<sup>65</sup> In 1991 Montego Bay Lantern Club began building this same theme and although the *lantan* was never finished I managed to identify a variety of animals in various stages of construction. In 1997 Baimbrace-Block Lane Lantern Club repeated a *lantan* it had built in 1989 representing 'Afisatu and her pet the giant Tortoise'. It was based on a fictional tale published in a collection of children's stories that was once available in Sierra Leone.<sup>66</sup>

### 5.3.3.2 *Historical and heraldic themes*

The practice of representing historical figures and people of prominence in *lantan* form dates back at least to the 1950s. Newspaper reports mention that a well known Sierra Leonean, Dr R D Jones, was featured by one *lantan* group in 1955, while in 1958 various 'historical characters' were depicted in *lantan* form.<sup>67</sup> Over the years a number of major international figures have inspired *lantan* builders. In 1990 one lantern club depicted Ayatollah Homeini (App 13:108) and in 1997 another club

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<sup>65</sup> Nunley 1985:47.

<sup>66</sup> Similarly in Nigeria school set books (e.g., Shakespeare) and children's popular literature (e.g., Aesop's Fables) have inspired artists (John Picton personal communication).

<sup>67</sup> DM: May 25 1955; DG: April 23 1958.

depicted the Emperor Hailie Selassi (App 13:109). In 1991 the 1<sup>st</sup> Gulf War inspired a number of *lantans* which were left unfinished when the lantern parade was cancelled (App 13:110-111). One of them depicted George Bush and Saddam Hussein facing each other across an array of miniature warships and missiles (App 13:112-113). For a number of years one particular lantern club, Mandela Youth Organisation, deliberately chose to represent internationally known figures associated with the Pan-African ideology which the Organisation's leadership espoused. In 1990 it built a *lantana* entitled 'The Release of Mandela from Prison' (App 13: 114) and in 1991 it was proposing to build 'Mandela's World Tour' (App 13:115). In 1993 the same club built 'Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line' (App 13:116-117).<sup>68</sup>

Sierra Leone's status as a British colony and the interest shown on the part of Freetown's press in imperial events account for the incorporation of royal imagery into *lantana* celebrations in the 1950s. In 1953 a *lantana* depicted Queen Elizabeth II in her coronation coach drawn by two horses and another *lantana* depicted her and the Duke of Edinburgh in their wedding attire.<sup>69</sup> In 1958 a horse and carriage were built in *lantana* form and again in 1960 (when the *lantana* was referred to as the Royal Coach).<sup>70</sup> This *lantana* type has retained a degree of popularity and was last built in 1997. In 1961 the Queen visited India and her tour received extensive press coverage in Freetown. A photograph of her riding on an elephant appeared in the *Daily Mail* and inspired an identical *lantana* in the 1961 lantern parade.<sup>71</sup> The occasion of Sierra Leone's Independence and the visit of the Queen in October the same year have both been regularly depicted in *lantana* form.

*Lantana* builders have also derived inspiration from familiar heraldic images - originally relating to Empire and the British coat of arms - but more recently associated with the notion of national identity expressed in the coat of arms of Sierra

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<sup>68</sup> This *lantana* depicted a modest-sized ship carrying a huge half-figure of Marcus Garvey, with busts representing well-known Pan Africanists in front and behind him.

<sup>69</sup> *DM*: June 15 1953.

<sup>70</sup> *DM*: April 22 1958; *DM*: March 29 1960.

<sup>71</sup> *DM*: March 21 1961.

Leone (App 13:118).<sup>72</sup> Just once a lantern club has built the coat of arms of the United Nations with its motto 'Nations shall speak peace unto nations' (1989).

The celebration in *lantans* form of the head of empire has been superseded on a sporadic basis by the representation of Sierra Leone's head of state and visiting dignitaries. The absence of readily available records providing complete lists of *lantans* themes for the 1960s and 1970s makes it impossible to generalise about the frequency with which *lantans* depicted Sierra Leone's various leaders in those years. However, the comprehensive records of the 1980s and 1990s make it clear that until 1997 (when the apparent end of the country's civil war turned the lantern parade into a double celebration) end-of-Ramadan lantern parades during the last two decades of the twentieth century did not focus much on national political leaders.<sup>73</sup> In 1997 though, when an end-of-Ramadan lantern parade was held after a break of seven years, a number of *lantans* expressed the optimism and confidence Sierra Leoneans felt in their new democratically elected civilian government (which superseded four years of military rule and which promised peace after six years' of civil war). One *lantan* depicted the hand-over of government from the outgoing NPRC military regime to President Tejan-Kabba in March 1996; another depicted the new President with his Guard of Honour (App 13:119) and four other *lantans* represented the Peace Conference and the signing of a Peace Accord with rebel leader Foday Sankoh in November 1996 (App 13:120-121). These *lantans* celebrated the country's new political leadership in a positive, uncritical way and help reinforce the impression that

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<sup>72</sup> The first known instance of the Sierra Leonean coat of arms being built in *lantan* form was in 1966 (YMMA records). In 1981 it was built by a Lebanese group as part of a *lantan* which included the Cedar of Lebanon (Lebanon's national emblem); the *lantan* presumably denoted notions of friendship and solidarity between the two countries (*DM*: August 5 1981). The British coat of arms was still being built in the 1960s (*DM*: March 29 1960 and YMMA records 1966). In 1967 David Gamble photographed two small *lantans* in Rokupr in north-west Sierra Leone. One was identified by Nunley (1985:48) as depicting Noah's Ark but it clearly comprised a platform surmounted by a lion and a unicorn either side of a structure that includes a crown. The unphotographed side of the *lantan* apparently comprised two lions (Sierra Leone's heraldic emblem).

<sup>73</sup> In 1986 the first end-of-Ramadan lantern parade to be held after President Momoh became President featured two *lantans* depicting him, one with his wife and the other with his two vice-presidents. He was represented only one other time, in 1989, when a *lantan* depicted him and visiting President Babangida of Nigeria seated in an official Mercedes car flanked by two outriders on motorcycles. (See Appendix 5.)

*lantan* imagery has never been used to express direct political opposition in end-of-Ramadan lantern parades.<sup>74</sup>

*Lantan* builders and enthusiasts have also used the *lantan* tradition as a means of celebrating the achievements and legacy of local heroes from the past – particularly from the nineteenth century. One national hero, for a long time better known in the United States than in Sierra Leone, is Sengbe Pieh who led a slave revolt aboard a boat called the ‘Amistad’ just off Cuba in 1839. A Mende from the hinterland of Sierra Leone, he and his fellow mutineers were charged in the US with conspiracy and murder but were finally freed when their case was argued by leading American abolitionists before the Supreme Court.<sup>75</sup> In April 1992 the anniversary of their return to Sierra Leone was celebrated in Freetown and the organisers specially commissioned a *lantan* depicting the slave mutiny.<sup>76</sup> The theme of the Amistad Revolt was repeated for the 1997 lantern parade (App 13:122). The subject of the slave trade itself inspired *lantans* several years before the Amistad anniversary, in 1985 and in 1990. Some *lantan* builders have found particular inspiration in the person of Bai Bureh – the ruler and military strategist who led the 1898 Temne uprising (known as the Hut Tax Rebellion) against the British in the northern part of the Protectorate. He was captured and exiled (though later reinstated) and has in recent years become the potent focus of national pride. *Lantans* depicting him in prison (sometimes in a cage) were built in 1985, 1986 and 1987, and his installation as a chief was commemorated in the lantern parade of 1993 (App 13:123-124). Similarly one of the last independent warrior-kings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kissi chief, Kailondo, inspired a leading *lantan* builder in 1988 to create ‘The Arrival of Chief Kailondo’.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> While this is true of *lantan* imagery it is not true of the songs that clubs have sung (see Appendix 7). Nor is this true of the *lantan* imagery employed in at least one of the occasional lantern parades held to mark important national events (see Appendix 11).

<sup>75</sup> See *Sierra Leone Heroes* 1988:30.

<sup>76</sup> Coincidentally the 1992 military coup which ousted the APC regime of President Momoh and installed the NPRC in power interrupted the anniversary events. The *lantan* was removed from its site at the City Hall and carried through the streets of central Freetown by jubilant crowds celebrating the downfall of the old regime.

<sup>77</sup> See page 196, note 32.

### 5.3.3.3 Topical themes - entertainment, commercial and educational

Popular music and sport arouse huge interest in Freetown and both have influenced *lantana* imagery. Sierra Leone can boast a number of unique popular styles of music and one musician, Ebenezer Calendar, became famous in the 1940s and 1950s for his distinctive *maringa* rhythms. After his death in 1985 he and his band inspired several *lantans* (in 1985 and 1990). The international cult figure and king of reggae, Bob Marley, was, more controversially, the subject of *lantans* in 1981 and 1982.<sup>78</sup> Other foreign entertainment forms have also proved inspirational. Most popular has been the 'Funfair' imagery introduced by Magnus Webber, a railway mechanic who trained in Germany in the 1970s and who witnessed several Bavarian funfairs. On his return to Sierra Leone he created a *lantana* depicting a merry-go-round, big wheel and trick cyclists, which became an immediate favourite.<sup>79</sup> It has been repeated many times, particularly by Firestone Lantern Club (App 13:125-126). With the recent revival of television in Freetown people have become familiar with a wide range of imported programmes and one new *lantana* theme in 1997 depicted the Muppet Show (App 13:127-130). Radio has played a more consistent role in people's lives, however, and in 1991 (partly in the expectation of receiving sponsorship) Firestone Lantern Club built a *lantana* depicting a local, private radio station known as FM 94. Although the parade was cancelled the *lantana* was completed and performed locally in its neighbourhood (App 13:131-132).<sup>80</sup>

Football and boxing are two popular sports in Freetown where local football clubs, in particular, attract huge followings. In 1972 Freetown United Games Club commissioned a *lantana* depicting a match between Freetown United and Ports Authority (a major Freetown football team).<sup>81</sup> In 1980 a match at Siaka Stevens Stadium between Freetown's two most popular teams (Roaring East End Lions and Mighty Blackpool) inspired one of the largest *lantans* in that year's parade.<sup>82</sup> Boxing,

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<sup>78</sup> See page 132, note 63.

<sup>79</sup> See page 173.

<sup>80</sup> The *lantana* comprised a dance floor (the stage of the *lantana*) with a booth at the back where a nearly full-size DJ sat behind a bank of microphones. Above the booth was a large globe and in front, on the stage, were five dancers representing popular Freetown socialites. Above the *lantana* at the front was fixed a large satellite dish and below it 'FM 94' was spelt out in huge lettering (App 13:131 & 171).

<sup>81</sup> DM: November 9 1972.

<sup>82</sup> DM: August 11 1980.

too, is followed and practised with keen interest in Freetown and the founder of Vimto Lantern Club claimed to have built a *lantana* sometime after the end of World War II depicting a world championship fight featuring Joe Louis.<sup>83</sup> In 1989 and again in 1990 Bronx Lantern Club achieved instant acclaim with its *lantanas* representing two Tyson fights, against Bruno and against Douglas respectively (App 13:133).

*Lantana* imagery has over the years been influenced to a degree by considerations of financial sponsorship, and commercial advertising has played a role from time to time in determining the subject matter of *lantanas*. In 1993 and 1997 every major donor that contributed towards the YMMA's appeal for funds to help organise the end-of-Ramadan lantern parade was allotted a participating club which was expected to advertise the donor or its products during the course of the parade. Most clubs did this by carrying a banner or decorating part of their *lantana* with the name of their allotted sponsor. Several clubs that built ship or aeroplane *lantanas* named them accordingly – as in the case of 'Maersk Line Container Boat' (1997), 'KLM Airbus' (1993), 'MEA Airliner' (1993) and 'SLNA Airliner' (1997).<sup>84</sup> In most cases, however, there was no direct relationship between the choice of *lantana* theme and the allotted sponsor. Some clubs, though, deliberately chose themes that specific companies were likely to favour (such as Freetown's Clocktower which was plastered with slogans advertising Sierra Leone Brewery products) in the expectation that this would induce the company concerned to assist both the YMMA and the individual club.

Occasionally a lantern club might enter into direct sponsorship arrangements with individuals or companies early on in their preparations and in this case they invariably (though not always) chose a *lantana* theme that clearly identified the person or company concerned. Thus in 1971 one club built a *lantana* that depicted clothes being washed in a laundry tub and carried the slogan 'Whitex on show' – Whitex being a local brand of soap powder.<sup>85</sup> In 1983 a *lantana* sponsored directly by the owner of the local spring water bottling company called Tutik, featured the processing and source of this water; in 1987 a *lantana* depicted a motor panel and spraying workshop in deference to its sponsor who was a local garage owner, and in 1988 Ashoebi Corner

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<sup>83</sup> Interview 95/89. This may well have been the 1953 *lantana* that represented a boxing match. *DM*: June 15 1953.

<sup>84</sup> MEA stands for Middle East Airlines and SLNA for Sierra Leone National Airlines.

<sup>85</sup> *DM*: November 22 1971.

Lantern Club's *lantan* depicted a front-end loader of a type imported by Blackwood Hodge, the club's sponsor. In 1990 a company that manufactured meat flavoured cooking cubes sponsored a club which called itself Supercube Lantern Club and which built a *lantan* called 'Cube Factory'.<sup>86</sup> In 1993 Bronx Lantern Club (which earlier had been responsible for the *lantans* depicting Mike Tyson) honoured its sponsor, a local businessman name Kasor Macrae, by depicting the forefront of the Cottage Hospital in *lantan* form. (Kasor Macrae had recently renovated the Hospital's grounds as part of a highly publicised campaign by the new military government to clean up Freetown.) In 1997 Malamatonians Lantern Club's *lantan* depicted a cowboy on horseback and was based on the well-known advert for Marlboro cigarettes. Club members hoped thereby to attract sponsorship from local cigarette retailers.

While many *lantan* enthusiasts and builders vaguely expressed the opinion that *lantans* had an educational role a few clubs clearly chose *lantan* themes that conveyed very specific messages, as in the case of Mandela Youth Organisation whose commitment to Pan Africanism governed its choice of *lantan* theme on several occasions.<sup>87</sup> Other clubs also took up specific causes from time to time. In the late 1980s the Ministry of Health ran an immunisation campaign and in 1989 Bod Water Lantern Club based its *lantan* on the campaign. The next year the National Council of Muslim Women's Organisations obtained UNICEF funding to commission a *lantan* on the same theme. In Kossoh Town the patron of the local lantern club was particularly interested in agricultural issues and devised *lantans* on the theme of 'The Green Revolution' in both 1990 and 1997 (App 13:134).

#### 5.3.3.4 Cultural themes

It is not only historical and topical imagery that has played an increasingly major role in lantern parades over the past fifty years. Relatively recently Freetown's repertoire of *lantan* imagery has been augmented by a form that is referred to by *lantan* enthusiasts as 'cultural'. This term is generally used to denote themes and images that are specifically related to provincial, rural –essentially indigenous –Sierra Leone and which are perceived to be traditional as opposed to urban and modern. The

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<sup>86</sup> See Appendix 5.

<sup>87</sup> See page 128, note 58.

incorporation of such themes into *lantan* building (and the perceptions in which they are grounded) constitutes one of the most fascinating innovations in the whole history of the *lantan* tradition. Many of the *lantans* depicting cultural themes have drawn their inspiration from everyday village life and have borne such titles as 'Village Scene' (1985), 'Village Crisis' (1986 and 1990), 'Village Farming' (1988), 'Village Festival' (1989), 'Hunting Expedition' (1989), 'Fishing Trip' (1993), 'Fula Cultural Display' (1989), 'Dance to the Bubu' (1993) and 'Marriage Ceremony' (1997)<sup>88</sup>. Given the paucity of records in the 1970s it is impossible to say exactly when such topics were originally introduced but the first published reference to a cultural *lantan* (depicting stilt dancers called *mamagbara*) was in the late 1970s.<sup>89</sup>

The introduction of rural, provincial imagery into what is, historically, an urban tradition, raises a number of interesting issues that are explored in Chapters 6 and 7. Furthermore, *lantan* enthusiasts did not confine this imagery simply to the human round of daily life and community activities but enriched it by including references to the supernatural component inherent, as they believed, in all cultural phenomena. By the 1990s the *lantan* tradition incorporated cultural *lantans* that included or wholly comprised imagery based on well-known masquerade figures (*debuls*) and spirit beings familiar to people from a variety of cultural traditions within Sierra Leone. This imagery is discussed in the following section.

#### 5.4 *Lantans representing the occult world*

##### 5.4.1 *Lantans representing debuls*

The incorporation of occult beings and *debuls* into the general corpus of *lantan* imagery appears to have occurred relatively recently. Eustace Yaskey, a leading *lantan* builder maintains he was the first to build a *lantan* depicting the National Dance Troupe in 1977.<sup>90</sup> Sierra Leone's National Dance Troupe was established in the 1960s and comprised expert dancers and musicians drawn from all over the country and from all ethnic groups who entertained audiences with dances, acrobatic routines and *debul*

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<sup>88</sup> The dates are taken from YMMA records incorporated into Appendix 4. *Bubu* is a popular Temne style of music (see Appendix 7). The Fula are famous in Sierra Leone for their particular form of acrobatic dancing. The builder of both these *lantans* was Tipo (see pages 193-196).

<sup>89</sup> *DM*: September 5 1978.

<sup>90</sup> See pages 79, 190-192 for more information about Eustace Yaskey.

performances. Yaskey's *lantan* depicted a selection of these in the form of puppets and it won first prize. As a result he was chosen to be one of the artists to represent Sierra Leone at FESTAC in Nigeria but unfortunately did not participate.<sup>91</sup> It would appear, however, that the possibility of attending FESTAC generated considerable rivalry among artists and encouraged Yaskey to experiment if not with new themes (it is not clear whether *debuls* had appeared in *lantan* form prior to 1977) at least with new techniques. Yaskey claimed that it was the challenge of competing for a place in Sierra Leone's delegation of FESTAC artists that spurred him to introduce spring mechanisms into his *lantans*.<sup>92</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s there has not been a single lantern parade when *lantans* depicting *debuls* of one type or another have not been built. The titles varied but usually referred to the general composition of the *lantan*.<sup>93</sup> The most frequently built *debul* figures represented *goboi*, *yavi*, *jobai*, *nafali* and *gongoli* (all of Mende origin)<sup>94</sup> as well as *yamama*<sup>95</sup> and *landa*<sup>96</sup> (App 13:135-138). One builder, Tipo, was well known for his depiction of a range of Jolly *debuls* in 1988 and 1997 (App 13:139-142).<sup>97</sup> During the course of my research it became clear that the choice of *debuls* for

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<sup>91</sup> See page 267, note 60. According to Nunley (1985:47) Yaskey actually built the National Dance Troupe *lantan* form for FESTAC and repeated it the next year in Freetown where it won an award. When I spoke with Yaskey (Interview 1991/8) he was adamant that he did not attend FESTAC because he would not 'dash' (bribe) the selectors.

<sup>92</sup> See page 191.

<sup>93</sup> For example, Cultural Devils (1984), Cultural Group (1985, 87, 88, 89), Cultural Festival (1989, 90), Cultural Show (1990), Dance Troupe (1983, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 97) and Masked Devil Dancers (1986, 93). See Appendix 5.

<sup>94</sup> For Mende *debuls* see Phillips 1995:52, 57-62, 64-69.

<sup>95</sup> According to Turay (1971:175) *yamama* is a *debul* who dances on a tightrope or on top of a pole. According to some of my consultees he is a Temne version of *nafali* from Port Loko.

<sup>96</sup> *Landa* was not common in Mendeland at the time of Phillips' research. (Phillips 1995:52.) I was told (Interview 94/2a) that *landa* is a Mende *debul* from Kailahun. Its carved headpiece depicts an alligator with a large mouth.

<sup>97</sup> In the 1990s I understood Jolly to be a children's society to which only youngsters unassociated with the more powerful secret societies used to belong in Freetown. It appeared to be on the decline. Both Nunley (1987:141-144, 147, 149 & 156) and Cannizzo (1979:64-67) describe Jolly *debuls* (the former in Freetown and the latter in Bo), although Cannizzo subsumes them under the term Alikali. According to Turay (1971:308-309) *adikali* (Alikali) was a junior version of the Ojeh Society among the Temne and its main *debuls* were *aguda*, *talabi* and *olpapa*. Cannizzo mentions Jolly (which looks like *aguda*), *talabi*, Rainbow (probably derived from a famous *ode lay* group's *debul* in Freetown) and *kaka* (a filthy *debul* which Nunley calls the Shit *debul* and identifies as *olpapa*). Nunley mixes up *aguda* with a form of Ojeh Society *debul* called *gbegi* but he does mention the Jolly *debul* known as *feri* (Fairy). The apparent overlaps and inconsistencies between different *debuls* probably reflects the fact that secret (and pseudo-secret) societies experience varying fortunes and interpretations in different localities at different points in time.

representation in *lantans* was highly significant. Apart from the children's Jolly *debuls*, all *debul* figures in Freetown *lantans* depicted *debuls* from the provinces. None of the powerful Freetown *debuls* from the Hunting, Ojeh or Otta Societies were ever depicted – nor have they ever appeared in the National Dance Troupe.<sup>98</sup> While *goboi* was considered a more powerful Mende *debul* up-country than were the regular Mende entertainment *debuls*, it seemed to be treated more lightly in Freetown where it was included in the National Dance Troupe (as well as in private cultural troupes) and where it often appeared in the form of a *lantan* puppet figure.

The case of the female secret society known as Bundu (among the Temne and in Freetown) and Sande (among the Mende) is problematic.<sup>99</sup> In the 1990s the Bundu Society was strong in Freetown where female circumcision was still a common practice and I was aware that *sowei* (the principal Bundu *debul*) regularly participated in local Bundu rites. The National Dance Troupe did not include *sowei* within its repertoire of *debuls*, the implication being that the Bundu Society (whose lodges controlled the various *sowei*) would not tolerate their *debul* being performed in a secular entertainment context. However, since the mid-1980s (or possibly earlier) *lantans* entitled 'Madam Yoko and the Sande Society' (or variations like 'Madam Yoko and the Sande Dancers') have been built on a number of occasions.<sup>100</sup> Madam Yoko was a Mende paramount chief from 1885 to 1905 and held considerable power within the Sande Society and her memory is widely revered. When translated into *lantan* form she was usually depicted seated on a throne at one end of the *lantan*, flanked by an adviser and a messenger. The *lantan* usually included several female musicians, several Sande Society dancers and the black Sande *debul* (*sowei*) itself (App 13:143-146). All these figures took the form of (near) life-sized puppets. Some *lantan* builders went even further in their representation of the Sande/Bundu Society by including a second, white *debul*, identical to the black *sowei* except for its colour (App

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<sup>98</sup> Nunley asserts that Yaskey's 1977 National Dance Troupe *lantan* comprised a domed shelter and puppet figures representing two drummers, two *debul* escorts and several *debuls* including an *egungun* figure. I very much doubt if this was so (see pages 269-272).

<sup>99</sup> See pages 270-271.

<sup>100</sup> 'Madam Yoko and the Bundu Society' (1985) by Magazine Stars Lantern Club; 'Madam Yoko and the Sande Dancers' (1987) by Super Combo Lantern Club (1993), by Kissy Central Lantern Club (1993), by Montego Bay Lantern Club (1997), by Kissy Central Lantern Club (1997) and by Super Combo Lantern Club (1997); 'Madam Yoko and the Bundu Dancers' (1993) by Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club. See Appendix 5.

13:147). This white *debul* puppet represented an actual *debul* (that wears a natural coloured raphia costume) which, I was told, only ever performed at night in certain rituals that mark the death of the most senior leader of a Bundu lodge (or group of lodges).<sup>101</sup> In 1997 another innovation occurred when a *lantan* builder depicted the *kundei* (Bundu/Sande medicine, App 13:148) in his *lantan*.<sup>102</sup>

#### 5.4.2 *Lantans* representing Mammy Wata

The representation of the Bundu Society in *lantan* form engendered varied and conflicting responses especially on the part of women in Freetown. Clearly lantern clubs and builders were testing the boundaries of what was and was not acceptable *lantan* imagery. Another *lantan* theme – that of the water spirit known as Mammy Wata – may well also have stretched the limits of what was then considered appropriate *lantan* imagery when it was first depicted in the early 1980s.<sup>103</sup> The form she assumed had been copied directly from a popular chromolithograph that has inspired Mammy Wata imagery throughout much of West and Central Africa.<sup>104</sup> In 1991 Vimto Lantern Club began building a *lantan* depicting Mammy Wata and worked from an old, torn copy of the snake-charmer print (App 13:149) and from a home-made sketch of a mermaid holding a comb and mirror (App 13:150). In the *lantan* representation I saw in 1997 (built by Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club) Mammy Wata was enclosed in a structure that I was told represented a large rocky cave; the puppet figure of a centaur moved across the stage of the *lantan* and struck the rock with a

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<sup>101</sup> This information was supplied independently by different *lantan* builders (Interviews 93/95, 94/2a and 95/133).

<sup>102</sup> Madam Yoko and the Sande dancers' built by Tipo for Kissy Central Lantern Club. The *kundei* comprised a rectangular box draped in white cloth. According to Phillips (1995:83-84) the final release of girls from the Sande initiation session is one of the rare occasions when the *kundei* is seen in public. It is never brought out in the presence of the Sande *debul* since their combined powers would be too great to control.

<sup>103</sup> 1983 (by Seven Up Social Club), 1983 and 1985 (by Block Lane Star Lantern Club), 1986 (by Union de Magazine Lantern Club), 1987 (by Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club, Independent Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club and Great Ashanti Lantern Club), 1988 (by Lumley Strikers Lantern Club), 1989 (by Idara Lantern Club), 1990 (by Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club), 1991 (by Vimto Lantern Club) and 1997 (by Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club). See Appendix 5.

<sup>104</sup> The chromolithograph (which depicts a snake-charmer) is of European origin and was printed in Germany in 1885. It was later copied and reprinted in India and England and distributed throughout West and Central Africa. The long flowing hair of the snake charmer in particular marks her out as a non-African female, similar to another European image – the mermaid – which has also become associated with Mammy Wata. The mermaid in Africa is most often shown coming out of the water, combing her long hair and gazing at a hand mirror. (See Salmons: 1977:11 & 13, Drewal 1988:38-39, Gore & Nevadomsky 1997:60 and Salmons 2000.)

sword, whereupon the rock split open, revealing Mammy Wata. Her figure was fitted to a small wheeled platform that was rolled backwards and forwards across the floor of the *lantan* on a narrow track (App 13:151-153). Mighty Red Lions registered their *lantan* under the title 'The stone which the builder rejected' and club members explained this title with reference to the rock from which Mammy Wata emerged.<sup>105</sup> It later became clear that the image of the rock may have been derived from an Indian print depicting a Hindu goddess sitting within the upward curving petals of a lotus flower (App 13:154).<sup>106</sup> The partly opened lotus petals bore an uncanny resemblance to the curved segments of the rock once they had fully split open to reveal the figure of Mammy Wata inside. Encapsulated within the *lantan* theme was thus a hybrid mass of imagery and associations derived from European, mythological, Biblical, African and possibly Hindu sources. Mammy Wata herself is vested with considerable powers in local Sierra Leonean belief and the act of building and parading her in *lantan* form was often regarded as a dangerous undertaking, particularly for the *lantan* builder responsible.<sup>107</sup>

During the two lantern parades I observed in the 1990s it was abundantly clear that cultural *lantans* depicting spirit and, in particular, *debul* figures, were among the most enthusiastically received by parade participants and spectators. The response of the watching crowds and roars of approval emanating from them corresponded closely to the high degree of animation often achieved by this type of *lantan*. Levels of animation were related to the number and complexity of the puppetry techniques incorporated into the *lantan* figures. Several builders skilled in the use of such techniques specialised in building puppets representing *debuls* and cultural dancers and this combination of skill and imagery produced some spectacular *lantans*.

## 5.5 Construction techniques and the use puppetry

While *lantans* depicting ships and other man-made structures tended to be single, monumental constructions, *lantans* depicting animals, human beings, *debuls* or

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<sup>105</sup> Psalm 118 v 22 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'. Also Matthew 21 v 42, Mark 12 vv 10-11, Luke 20 v 17, Acts 4 v 11 and 1 Peter 2 v 7.

<sup>106</sup> In 1991 I discovered a lantern club building a *lantan* in the form of an Indian goddess and using an Indian print as a guide, which I photographed. Drewal (1988:39) mentions the growing African market in Indian prints of Hindu gods, goddesses and spirits.

<sup>107</sup> Chapter 8 considers notions of supernatural danger and power within the *lantan* tradition.

spirit beings, either singly or in groups, comprised one or more miniature or life-sized puppet figures made from palm pith or cane<sup>108</sup> combined with little (if any) timber or fence stick (App 13:155-158). The puppets were usually individually mounted directly onto the *lantan* platform, which had to be built as sturdily as possible in order to bear the combined weight of the puppets and their operators who generally crouched inside the platform out of view of spectators.

There were a number of ways of producing the skeletons of large animal figures, such as horses, but the technique which was favoured by several builders who were well-known for building animal *lantans* involved constructing two identical body halves and joining them together. According to older informants human and animal figures used to be covered with *takada* paper decorations of the type used for ship *lantans*, and this is clearly confirmed by newspaper photographs in the 1950s.<sup>109</sup> However, a new technique for covering animal skeletons was introduced in the 1960s; it involved covering the skeleton with netting or with plain paper and then applying delicate paper frills. The frills could be cut in a number of ways and stuck in rows on the animal skeleton to resemble the feathers or coat of the bird or animal concerned (App 13:159-162).

The use of a combination of cane or palm pith and paper frills made the animal puppets of more recent times quite distinctive from earlier animal forms covered with *takada*. However, the frill technique has sometimes been combined with the technique of covering some surfaces of the animal skeleton with large expanses of plain paper. This latter technique has very occasionally been used to cover whole animals without the use of any frill-type decoration at all (App 13:163). Plain papering is quick and cheap and has the advantage that once painted with oil paint the paper is a great deal more durable than either *takada* or frill-type decorations. On the whole *lantan* builders and lantern club members did not regard the technique with favour but as a poor substitute when they lacked the time or money to make paper frills in sufficient quantity to meet their requirements.

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<sup>108</sup> Heavier and stronger than palm pith, cane is much more pliable and can easily be bent into curved shapes.

<sup>109</sup> *DM*: June 7 1954; *DM*: May 14 1956; *DM*: April 22 1958.

The skeletons of all other types of *lantan* puppet were generally made out of strips of palm pith tied with thin wire and reinforced with cane, fence stick or wire (App 13:164). In the past the skeletons were usually covered with plain and coloured paper (often crepe or tissue paper) to resemble different types of costume (App 13:165). In the 1970s, however, *lantan* builders began to experiment with new techniques in order to reduce the damage wrought by inclement weather. During the late '70s and early 1980s the lantern parade fell during the worst of the rains (August-September) which were capable of ruining paper-covered *lantans* in a matter of minutes. One development consisted of covering skeletons with a layer of mosquito netting and/or a layer or more of paper, using cassava starch as glue (App 13:166-168). Thereafter parts of the puppet might be painted with oil paint to give a tough, bright appearance (App 13:169). Alternatively some *lantan* builders began to make costumes for their puppets using cloth and synthetic materials instead of coloured paper: taffeta was particularly popular as it is light, bright and shiny (App 13:170-172). These costumes were sewn by tailors and were often lavishly decorated. A much cheaper technique involved the use of synthetic rice bags which had the advantage of being nearly totally waterproof. Opened out and cut to the necessary shapes and sizes to fit the various puppets, this type of sacking could be sewn together and then painted to make the required costumes (App 13:173-174). Alternatively, it could be unravelled and made into artificial raphia-style clothes and accessories (App 13:175-176).

The faces of puppet figures were sometimes simply made by covering the heads of the skeletons with coloured or painted paper and then cutting out the eyes, mouth and other features from paper, foil or cloth and sticking them on with glue (App 13:177-178). Alternatively some more skilled builders used papier-maché techniques to build up facial features before painting them (App 13:179-180). Others made the heads out of wire and then applied a thin layer of foam which was sewn in place and then covered with cloth. The features were then cut out separately and either sewn or stuck on (App 13:181-182).

As already described, *lantans* depicting ships and other man-made constructions sometimes featured miniature objects drawn backwards and forwards along a string above the *lantan*.<sup>110</sup> The same technique was often put to use in *lantans*

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<sup>110</sup> See page 150.

that featured puppets. In these cases the puppets were pulled to and fro by means of an overhead wire or string (using a pulley mechanism) above the *lantan* or on a wheeled base on the *lantan*'s platform (App 13:152). These techniques allowed a simple sequence of movements to be enacted and repeated as the *lantan* moved along. The sequence itself helped convey the narrative of the *lantan* as in the case of Abraham and Isaac (App 13:99) where the angel holding the ram was always suspended from an overhead wire (running the length of the *lantan*) and was pulled backwards and forwards in front of Abraham. In the prints that inspired this particular *lantan* topic the figures of the angel and the ram do indeed appear to be suspended in mid-air and thus the *lantan* replicates the print in a surprisingly authentic way (App 13:98).

The techniques used to draw figures across a *lantan* were usually combined with the incorporation of movement into the individual figures themselves. The use of puppetry techniques to articulate and animate *lantan* figures was first described in 1948 when a Temne group built an eagle which was able to open its beak and flap its wings.<sup>111</sup> The specific movements depended on the number of articulated sections built into the puppet's skeleton. Common types of animation which I witnessed included arm, leg and head movements, the blinking of an animal's eye, the flicking of its tail or the opening of an animal's jaw. A simple method involved the use of pieces of elastic or strips of rubber which were tied round two articulated parts of a skeleton (for example, between the upper and lower leg) to allow independent movement. Elastic or rubber strips were usually used in combination with empty cotton reels to create a joint which permitted movement in a single plane (App 13:183-184). A similar effect could be achieved by pivoting a joint round a palm pith pin, a very fragile construction which was rarely used in the 1990s (App 13:185-186). All these techniques allowed limited movement which was controlled by the manipulation of strings which were attached to the movable parts of the puppets.

In the 1960s and 1970s younger builders intent on creating more lively *lantans* started introducing new techniques which, in combination with string mechanisms, extended the range of animation possible. One method they adopted allowed multidirectional movement on the part of whole figures and involved the use of rods made from thick lengths of palm pith or from fence sticks (App 13:187). By mounting

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<sup>111</sup> DM; August 11 & 12 1948.

a puppet onto a rod it could be moved vertically or horizontally or it could be rotated on the spot while at the same time any articulated joints could be operated by means of the strings attached to them. Most builders in the 1990s combined rod and string mechanisms to provide maximum flexibility.

In the case of *lantans* that utilised only simple string mechanisms the puppets could be mounted straight onto the floor of the *lantan* immediately on top of the wheeled chassis. There was no need to create a cavity between the chassis below and the *lantan* floor above as the people operating the strings attached to the puppets could either walk alongside the *lantan* as it moved through the streets (App 13:188) or squeeze themselves between the *lantan* floor and any *lantan* components resting on top of it (App 13:189-190). Older informants maintained that the earlier types of *lantans* incorporating human and animal imagery were constructed and operated in this manner. However, when puppets were mounted on rods there needed to be space (below the *lantan* floor and above the chassis) into which the bottom of the rods could extend in order to be held and manipulated by unseen puppeteers crouching underneath. In this case a strong, rectangular, hollow construction, made out of timber or fence sticks, was built on the chassis and the top of it formed the stage or floor of the *lantan*. Its sides were covered with paper, cloth, matting or rice sacking so that the puppeteers within it were hidden from view (App 13:191-194). The frame of this hollow stage construction had to be built in such a way as to give freedom of movement to the individual rod puppets in whatever space and direction each was to be moved. Because *lantans* stages were large (and measured perhaps fifteen to twenty feet long) a rod puppet was never able to move the whole length or width of the *lantan* since the framework of the stage divided the *lantan* floor into discrete sections. However, a skilled builder would ensure that the stage's frame was constructed in such a way as to give each rod puppet sufficient space for the movement demanded of it.

Another way of enlivening a puppet's performance was through the use of springs (usually removed from old car seats) which Eustace Yaskey claimed to have introduced into *lantan* building in the 1970s.<sup>112</sup> A builder would insert such springs into a puppet figure according to the effect that he wanted to achieve (App 13:195-196). Yaskey and his former apprentices used a combination of springs, elastic and

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<sup>112</sup> See page 191.

cotton reels at the waists and necks of their puppets in order to give maximum movement, but only elastic and cotton reels at the other joints (hips, knees, shoulders and elbows). This allowed the puppeteers more control over the movement of individual limbs (albeit in one plane) whilst the head and upper part of the body could be made to swirl in all directions and planes. Yaskey emphasised that the weight of a puppet figure's different body parts had to be kept in tension by careful use of the elastic and strings which were attached to them and by means of which they were operated. A multi-jointed figure could be kept upright, and would even automatically return to an upright position during performance provided the tension and balance were correct. This depended entirely on the technical skill of the builder. Relatively unskilled builders tended to rely on springs alone for the movement of the head, upper body and limbs of their puppets, and discard the use of cotton reels altogether. The effect in performance was to produce a jiggling movement which could be very energetic but was largely uncontrolled as the springs, once set in motion, were difficult to restrain in the absence of properly balanced string and elastic mechanisms.<sup>113</sup>

By the 1990s a few of the most skilled *lantán* builders had refined the means whereby they articulated their puppets and could manipulate their movements to such an extent that they were able to engineer quite complex sequences of action within a single *lantán*. Some builders even combined rod and string techniques with welded metal machinery to allow more ambitious and innovative *lantáns* to be created.

Known as 'heavy mechanism' in Freetown this technical innovation permitted the creation of some of the most popular *lantáns* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was developed by Magnus Webber who helped produce the first 'Funfair' *lantán* in Freetown. The movement of the various structures, especially the Big Wheel and the Merry-Go-Round depended on various combinations of iron shafts, ratchets, nuts, bolts and welded plates which only someone with appropriate technical knowledge and skill could create or emulate (App 13:197-198).

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<sup>113</sup> A different spring-like mechanism was sometimes used to provide a concertina-type effect which enabled a *lantán* figure to contract and expand in size at the tug of a string. The builder of St George and the Dragon used this device in 1993 for the body of the dragon which was constructed round a piece of coiled cane which acted as a giant spring. By pulling the strings which were attached to the coil the dragon could withdraw into itself or lunge out in combat with St George.

Eustace Yaskey was one *lantan* builder who was sufficiently talented to appropriate Webber's techniques. By the 1970s Yaskey had formed Super Combo Lantern Club and in 1977 he adapted Webber's innovation to the *lantan* he was building, the 'National Dance Troupe'. This was the first time he had used heavy mechanism but thereafter he improved his techniques and by the 1990s was, with Magnus Webber, considered the most skilled exponent of this type of *lantan* mechanism in Freetown. His use of it in his *debul* and Madam Yoko *lantans* enabled him to produce a strikingly realistic imitation of the acrobatic movements of certain *debuls* and dancers. Yaskey often fixed one foot of an appropriate puppet (usually representing *yamama*) onto the top of an iron pole which was then rotated by an unseen operator who turned a handle attached to the pole underneath the *lantan* floor. The puppet swivelled round as the pole rotated and, at the same time, its articulated limbs were manipulated from below the platform by means of strings. Yaskey normally placed this rotating puppet at the front of his *lantan* to ensure that, towering above the crowds, it was clearly visible from a distance and succeeded in attracting instant public attention. His brother Andrew imitated Eustace's technique in 1993 (App 13:199). Eustace himself varied it in 1997 when he mounted two *sampa* dancers<sup>114</sup> one on the other's shoulders on a rotating metal rod (App 13:200). In this way Eustace improved what he termed the 'approach' of his *lantans* and refined their composition by introducing puppet figures at different heights. Thus through the efforts of Webber and Yaskey, and their use of modern technology, exciting new *lantan* imagery was developed, the performance of certain *lantan* components was improved and the potential visual impact of *lantan* processions was enhanced.<sup>115</sup>

## 5.6 YMMA *lantan* categories and the shifting boundaries of *lantan* classification

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<sup>114</sup> *Sampa* dancers belong to the Sande Society.

<sup>115</sup> It must not be forgotten that the visual impact achieved by the builders of *lantans* depicting animals, people and supernatural beings might also be improved by the use of smoke effects (just as in the case of ship *lantans* which usually emitted smoke from their funnels). One *lantan* theme that offered great potential was 'St George and the Dragon' and in the hands of a talented builder the dragon was sometimes depicted with smoke and flames pouring from its jaws and nostrils as it performed in front of the judges during the lantern parade. The effect was achieved by creating a controlled fire beneath the *lantan* platform and carefully directing its flames and smoke through non-combustible tubing that reached inside the dragon's head.

In the course of this chapter it has emerged that *lantans* and *lantana* imagery can be differentiated according to a number of principles. For example, *lantans* can be divided into two categories according to the method by which they produced and reproduced the movement (action) that told the story of any particular subject. Thus there were those *lantans* representing ships and monuments (man-made structures) that relied on human beings to act out the movements that conveyed a heightened sense of realism. Then there were those *lantans* including or wholly comprising puppet figures representing animals, humans or occult beings that relied on puppetry techniques to create appropriate movement.<sup>116</sup> The distinction between these two different *lantana* types was recognised by Sierra Leoneans and I was frequently reminded by *lantana* enthusiasts that human actors and puppets were not supposed to be mixed in the same *lantana*.

At the same time *lantana* imagery and themes became increasingly rich and diverse. The *lantana* tradition is firmly grounded in the imagery of ships and buildings (especially mosques) which are themselves man-made constructions. They, and by extension other forms of transport and modern built structures, are evidence of the impact which technological development has long had upon coastal West Africa. Western forms of transport – particularly ocean-going vessels, motorized vehicles and aeroplanes – have wrought extensive, and at times devastating changes in people's lives, while imported building techniques have largely dictated the form and appearance of the urban environment of Freetown. While modern technology is admired in Freetown it also represents an intrusion from outside over which people have no real control. Similarly the incorporation into the *lantana* tradition of imagery relating to the natural environment and to the Islamic and mythical worlds represents a further appropriation (and domestication) of otherness. Like modern technology the natural and Islamic worlds are integral parts of the lives of *lantana* enthusiasts but at the same time they constitute outside forces that are not human (in the case of animals) or not distinctly Sierra Leonean.<sup>117</sup> By contrast, *lantana* imagery based on local historical,

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<sup>116</sup> I saw only a handful of *lantans* that did not carry human actors or puppets and had no moving components of any sort (see page 151). These were not regarded in Freetown as a separate *lantana* type but were simply considered substandard *lantans* because they did not incorporate any animation.

<sup>117</sup> Many animals depicted in *lantana* form represented foreign species - such as giraffes, reindeer and camels. *Lantana* builders would only have known them from illustrations in books, Islamic prints and Christmas cards and from films. Likewise, Islamic beliefs and practices were regarded as foreign. 175

topical and cultural personages, events and practices may be interpreted as an attempt to indigenise the *lantana* tradition's repertoire of imagery and to turn it into something recognisably Sierra Leonean. Increasingly the tradition seems to have been used to portray the events and experiences that people in Freetown found relevant and meaningful in terms of their everyday lives and circumstances.

However, the classification of *lantans* which was introduced by the YMMA (as part of its reorganisation of the annual *lantana* celebrations on a competitive basis) constituted a response to another principle of differentiation. It was based on the formal content of *lantans* rather than on their use of human or puppet actors or on the local or imported nature of their themes. In the early 1960s *lantans* were divided into two groups (those representing Ships and those representing Animals) which reflected the two dominant *lantana* forms at the time. However, very soon a third category – called Miscellaneous – was added. It is clear from YMMA records dating to 1966 that these three categories bore a direct relationship to the form of the *lantans* grouped within them: only ship *lantans* were classified under Ships and the Animal category comprised six *lantans* depicting Al-Buraq and three *lantans* depicting a giraffe, a horse and a reindeer respectively. All other *lantans* were classified under Miscellaneous and included a train, a bus, the Sierra Leonean coat of arms, the British coat of arms, a horse and carriage, various representations of Nfa Ali and one *lantana* combining Al-Buraq, a mosque and a number of animals.

Subsequently these *lantana* categories became subject to a process of continual redefinition in response both to the incorporation of new subject matter into the repertoire of *lantana* themes, and to the concomitant development of more complex construction techniques. It may also at times have been a result of practical (and possibly political) circumstances surrounding particular lantern parades. The multiple shifts in the boundaries of YMMA *lantana* categories are best evidenced in the YMMA's detailed records for the period 1983 to 1997. It is clear that by the 1980s a number of *lantana* forms had been permanently relocated within the classification system. The Ship category now included not only ship *lantans* but also *lantans* representing other types of transport as well as built structures. The term 'Ship' had

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People in Freetown drew a firm distinction between 'religion' which, whether Christian or Islamic, is imported, and 'culture' which is indigenous.

thus become a generic term for all *lantan* representations of man-made structures. The Animal category meanwhile had expanded to include *lantans* representing animals and/or humans. Thus *lantan* representations of Nfa Ali had shifted from Miscellaneous in 1966 to Animal in the 1980s and 1990s. Other themes combining animal or human puppets were either classed as Animal *lantans* at their first and subsequent appearances (e.g., 'Nebuchadnezzar' 1983 and 1986 and 'St John/George and the Dragon') or were shifted from Miscellaneous to Animal (e.g., 'Jonah and the Big Fish' 1985 and 1988). Some themes, however, were for no obvious reason shifted in the opposite direction (from Animal to Miscellaneous) such as 'Abraham and Isaac' (1988/1989 and 1990) and 'Adam and Eve' (1986/1987 and 1988).

As might be expected, the Miscellaneous category has shown the most flexibility through time. In the 1980s a number of themes drawn from daily life, were classed under Miscellaneous. They included 'Reading the Koran in a Village' (1988), 'An Arabic Class' (1990) and 'Fula Cultural Display' (1989). Some religious themes based on printed sources, such as 'Noah's Ark' (1989), were also classed as Miscellaneous as were *lantans* such as 'Indian God' (1989), 'Mammy Wata' (1985 – 1989, 1997) and all *lantans* with puppet representations of *debul*s. In practice this meant that most topical and historical *lantans*, all cultural *lantans* and some religious *lantans* were classed as Miscellaneous either at their first appearance or at least in subsequent years.

In the course of my research in the early 1990s the criteria used by the YMMA to classify *lantans* were summarised for me by several members of its Executive Committee, but, as far as I am aware, the criteria were never published. Thus, Ship *lantans* were *lantans* that represented ships, other forms of transport or built structures. They might carry human actors but were not supposed to include puppets. Animal *lantans*, on the other hand, were *lantans* depicting animals or humans but no transport or built structures. They were not allowed to carry human actors. Finally, Miscellaneous *lantans* combined elements from Ship and Animal *lantans*. In other words, they included representations of man-made structures as well as puppets representing human beings and animals. Like Animal *lantans* they were not allowed to carry human actors. Furthermore, a *lantan* that included the representation of a *debul* or an occult being was always classed as Miscellaneous (and even if it contained no

depictions of man-made structures it would not be classed as Animal).

In reality the application of these criteria was not completely straightforward. In 1988 'Jonah and the Big Fish' was reclassified as an Animal *lantan*, even though it included a ship. In 1993 'Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line' as well as Aberdeen Ferry Road's mosque *lantans* were classed under Ships even though they both carried puppets. In 1997 several *lantans* combining Al-Buraq and a mosque were classed under Animals. Historically the single most 'mobile' *lantan* topic (which has never varied in form) has been the depiction of Sierra Leone's coat of arms: it has travelled from Miscellaneous in 1966 to Animals in 1984, to Miscellaneous in 1988 and back to Animals in 1993.

The extent to which the YMMA's criteria were applied in any given lantern parade depended on various factors. One was simply ignorance. YMMA registration forms required each lantern club to enter the category into which its *lantan* fell and some club members were genuinely confused as to which category their *lantan* belonged. The YMMA, on the other hand, did not systematically inspect *lantans* in the course of their construction so was often unaware of the exact composition of a club's *lantan* before the parade night and therefore had no time to re-classify an incorrect entry. On the other hand in 1993 the Organising Secretary of the YMMA clearly wished to create some semblance of numerical equality between the various *lantan* categories in order to provide a more balanced competitive environment. He was prepared to justify the anomalies in the Ship category by explaining that the puppets in the Marcus Garvey and mosque *lantans* were subsidiary to the ship and mosque structures and should therefore not be taken into consideration.

However, there has always been room for clubs and the YMMA to insert their own agendas into the classification exercise. On several occasions it was hinted to me that a club might knowingly categorise its *lantan* under Animals so as not to enter it into the Miscellaneous category where it knew the competition to be stiff. At the same time I gained the impression that in the past YMMA officials had used their knowledge of local and political rivalries to ensure whenever feasible that certain clubs did not compete against each other or that a particular club was entered in a category where it was likely to do well (or otherwise). Such juggling was only possible where a *lantan*

mixed different representational forms.<sup>118</sup> I was told it had been done occasionally to separate volatile clubs with rival political sponsors in order to avert violence during or after the parade, or to increase the chance that a *lantan* built by a club with a particularly influential sponsor would win first prize in its class. Ultimately, although broad principles were generally upheld, pragmatism took precedence over the strict application of the YMMA's classification criteria.

The main reason this became necessary in the 1980s and 1990s was the huge increase in *lantans* that fell into the Miscellaneous category. As *lantan* imagery diversified clubs increasingly favoured topical, historical and cultural themes and the *lantans* they built generally included the depiction of built structures (such as mosques, huts, forms of transport) as well as animals, humans and occult beings. Thus the Miscellaneous category began to grow out of all proportion with the other *lantan* categories. Furthermore, an increasing number of *lantans* in the Miscellaneous category included puppets representing *debuls* or cultural dancers. These puppets were generally the most highly animated and incorporated some of the more ambitious construction techniques that were being developed by Freetown's most skilled *lantan* builders. As a result the clubs, builders and spectators began to place an ever increasing emphasis on the importance of a *lantan's* action – in other words the degree of puppetry it incorporated. *Lantans* that included highly articulated puppet *debuls* were thus the most likely winners in their category leaving a large number of *lantans* without any hope of success.

In 1997 the YMMA attempted a stricter application of its criteria governing *lantan* classification which reflected the varying extent to which *lantans* made use of puppetry. Ten *lantans* qualified as Ship *lantans*<sup>119</sup>, nine as Animal *lantans*<sup>120</sup> and the rest (twenty four in all) as Miscellaneous. This last category included *lantans* as different as a 'Mosque with Worshippers' (in puppet form) and 'Madam Yoko and the

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<sup>118</sup> For example, a ship *lantan* carrying human passengers could only belong to the Ship category; however, a mosque *lantan* carrying puppets might be slipped into the Ship category (on the grounds that the mosque was the predominant feature and represented a man-made structure) or be classed (correctly) in the Miscellaneous category (on the grounds that that it contained a mixture of forms).

<sup>119</sup> Four ships, three aircraft, a bus, a train and a 'Clock Tower'. Apart from the aircraft they all included human actors.

<sup>120</sup> 'Al-Buraq' (3), 'St George/John and the Dragon' (2), 'Antar (Nfa'ali) and the Kafiri', 'Wise King Solomon', 'Horse and Rider' and 'Afisatu and her Tortoise'. None included human actors.

Sande Dancers'. None included human actors but all incorporated puppetry. In an attempt to redress the imbalance in numbers the YMMA divided the Miscellaneous category into two sub-divisions. One contained fifteen *lantans* each with a mixture of representations (of structures combined with puppets representing animals and/or human beings). The other contained nine *lantans* all but one of which included representations of *debuls* or spirits.<sup>121</sup> In effect this process separated those *lantans* with a modest degree of action (in the first sub-division) from those which made more extensive use of puppetry and mechanical techniques. It also resulted in more prizes being awarded and met with general approval on the part of the lantern clubs and builders.

Interestingly, there was one principle of differentiation that was never mentioned by *lantan* enthusiasts or by the YMMA but which struck me very forcibly when watching lantern parades. This was the difference between *lantan* forms that were covered with *takada* (intricately cut paperwork) and those covered with other materials (such as painted sheets of paper, synthetic sacking and textiles). Those ship and mosque *lantans* covered with *takada* decorations were always lit internally, whilst *lantans* that did not make use of *takada* were always lit by means of light bulbs or strip lighting strung round and across the *lantan's* frame but not fitted inside the *lantan's* component forms. The effect of having a light source inside a *lantan* and of the light shining through layers of decoratively cut paper is very distinctive and is presumably the reason why Freetown floats (which were originally all lit this way) were called *lantans*. The name remains despite the fact that the vast majority of *lantans* use a different method of illumination.

## 5.7 Concluding remarks

As this chapter has demonstrated the classification of *lantans* has shifted both formally and informally over the years. Formal changes have been officially introduced to reflect the diversification of *lantan* imagery and the growing significance of puppetry techniques combined with *lantan* themes representing the occult (or in the

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<sup>121</sup> 'Dance Troupe' (2), 'Madam Yoko and the Sande Dancers' (2), 'Jolly Festival', 'Funfair and Cultural Group', 'Marriage Ceremony' (including a small *debul* figure) and 'Mammy Wata'. The only exception was the *lantan* depicting the 'Muppet Show'. It should be remembered, however, that muppets are puppet representations of fantasy animals that behave as humans and they may, therefore, be perceived as in some way supernatural.

case of the muppets, the pseudo-occult) world. Informal changes have been possible on an unofficial basis when personal or political agendas have inserted themselves into the classification process.

Regardless, however, of how the finished product might be classified, *lantan* building has always been a highly skilled and creative enterprise and the production of such older style *lantans* as 'HMS Clarkson' in 1997 still attracted a great deal of admiration. Nevertheless from the 1970s onwards the *lantan* tradition became strongly influenced by certain talented *lantan* builders who specialised in refining the construction and articulation of puppet figures and who referred to themselves as artists and to their workmanship as a form of art.

The next chapter focuses on Freetown's *lantan* builders who are the people upon whose practical expertise the *lantan* tradition always relied at grass roots level. In the 1990s there existed various networks of builders in Freetown who were inter-related through time and space and who passed on their skills and knowledge within informal groups each comprising at least one master builder-artist and several apprentices. The regular *lantan* builders knew one another and regularly competed against one another. It is to them and their inter-relationships that Chapter 6 is devoted while Chapter 7 addresses their perceptions of themselves and the evaluative criteria by which *lantan* enthusiasts in Freetown judged the art they practised.

## Chapter 6

### LANTAN BUILDERS: 'WI NO WISEF'<sup>1</sup>

#### 6.1 Introduction

Freetown's *lantana* builders are the people in whom the expression and future of the *lantana* tradition ultimately reside. Without them there can be no *lantans*, but as long as they survive and preserve their knowledge and skills then, given the opportunity and will, the tradition can live on. This chapter is based on information I gathered from the many *lantana* builders with whom I periodically discussed *lantana* building in Freetown during the years 1991 to 1995. Many were actively involved in the 1993 lantern parade but others were in self-styled retirement from *lantana* building or were associated with neighbourhoods and lantern clubs that did not participate in 1993; one leading builder was out of the country when the 1993 *lantana* celebrations were held. Additional builders came to my notice after the lantern parade in 1997 but I was unable to meet them and discuss their work.

The first section of this chapter comments on the ethnic, educational and occupational backgrounds of those builders whom I met and who participated in the 1993 and/or 1997 lantern parades.<sup>2</sup> In all, these builders totalled thirty six in number. There was only one club, Idara Lantern Club, whose 1993 *lantana* builder could not be located and whom I therefore did not interview.<sup>3</sup> Of the thirty builders I interviewed who took part in the 1993 parade, seventeen went on to participate in the 1997 lantern parade. Of these all but one maintained the same club allegiance they had demonstrated in 1993.<sup>4</sup> A further six builders (who did not participate in 1993 but whom I interviewed in 1994-95) took part in 1997. A number of builders worked for more than one club and were responsible for two *lantans* each but nevertheless sixteen

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<sup>1</sup> Krio phrase meaning 'We all know each other'.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 8 summarises this data in tabular form.

<sup>3</sup> The builder had come down from the provinces and returned home after the 1993 parade. Unfortunately it was not safe to travel up-country when I went back to Freetown for a second research phase in 1994-95.

<sup>4</sup> Only one builder changed clubs and joined with his former *lantana* boss to build for the latter's club. See page 193.

named builders (and several whose names I never discovered) emerged in 1997 who were hitherto unknown to me. Unfortunately the events that took place in Freetown in May 1997 prevented me from pursuing any further research among *lantan* builders. As a result the thirty six builders on whom the comments in the next section of this chapter (6.2) are based represent only about two thirds of those who were active in 1993 and/or 1997. Despite this inadequacy, the body of data points to some consistent trends and shared attributes among them.

In a further section of this chapter (6.3) I explore some of the networks of relationships that existed among *lantan* builders, and the way in which these relationships influenced their work.<sup>5</sup> As my research progressed it became clear that *lantan* builders, (active, retired and temporarily redundant) shared many common characteristics and were interconnected by multiple webs of ties that penetrated many different aspects of their lives. Leading builders were often fierce rivals but at the same time close friends or even relatives. As one builder told me in Krio '*Wi no wiseɛ*' ('We know each other') and, if anything, this served to intensify their competitive spirit.

All the *lantans* I saw in 1993 and 1997 were constructed by men and when asked to explain this they simply stated that *lantan* building was not a task suitable for women. In particular, they pointed out that it was arduous and often involved heavy carpentry work, considerable athleticism and technical skills of a type which women seldom possessed. Young women, I found, often participated in supplementary activities (such as preparing paper decorations) but not in core building tasks. This division of labour seemed to be accepted without question or complaint and did not imply that women were peripheral to a *lantan*'s success. Had my research focused more closely on other aspects of the *lantan* tradition – such as musical performance and, in particular, singing – then the role of women would have featured much more prominently.<sup>6</sup> As it was, I concentrated on the tangible products of the *lantan* tradition and these products, the *lantans* themselves, were the work of men.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix 6 contains biographical notes on many of these builders.

<sup>6</sup> During the course of my research in Freetown I never once came across a female *lantan* builder. I later discovered from a video of the 1989 lantern parade that one of the participating *lantans* was made by a woman. I never had the chance to return to Freetown to locate and meet her.

## 6.2 Survey of thirty six practising *lantan* builders

The *lantan* tradition is generally recognised as being grounded in the Muslim Yoruba, Mandingo and Temne 'sections' of Sierra Leonean society<sup>7</sup> and from the outset of my research I was interested to discover whether *lantan* builders of the 1990s reflected this particular ethnic mix. Of the thirty six builders active in 1993 and/or 1997 whom I managed to interview only three claimed Mende (or part-Mende) origin. These were Joseph Mambu, Magnus Webber and John Goba.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, twelve builders claimed to be Temne and four Mandingo. Of the rest, two builders claimed Lokko parentage and five claimed either full or (in the case of two builders) part Limba parentage. Of the latter, one had a Temne parent and the other a Susu parent. Five of the thirty six builders interviewed were Muslim Krios and four more claimed full or part Christian Krio parentage.

While it would be inappropriate to generalise too freely from these findings they seem to indicate that in the 1990s *lantan* building was firmly in the hands of people of northern origin, (especially Mandingos and Temnes from Port Loko and Kambia Districts) who accounted for two thirds of the thirty six builders interviewed.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, of the thirty two builders whose ages were known to me, seventeen were born prior to 1960 and fifteen after 1960. Of the latter, fourteen were northerners. In contrast the Muslim Krio builders were all older men born before 1960 and had long established track records in *lantan* building. The absence of younger Muslim Krio builders was noticeable.

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<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 2 and Nunley 1985:45. People in Freetown tend to refer to the different ethnic/linguistic/ 'tribal' groups as 'sections'.

<sup>8</sup> John Goba's father was Mende and his mother Sherbro. Goba – a man renowned for his creative carving abilities – was not considered an outstanding *lantan* builder by any of my informants. Magnus Webber, a contemporary of John Goba, did not claim to be a *lantan* builder but as a master of 'heavy mechanism' I have included him here.

<sup>9</sup> If one takes into consideration the additional builders who took part in the 1997 parade but who were not interviewed, it appears that the proportion of northerners was higher. Fifteen bore names that indicated they were of northern, Muslim origin. If this were to prove correct then at least thirty eight (about 70%) of the fifty three builders known to have been associated with the 1993 and 1997 *lantans* were of northern parentage.

Eight of the thirty six *lantán* builders who were interviewed in connection with the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades had Christian rather than Muslim backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> The contribution that some of these Christians have made, especially to the development of *lantán* building techniques, will be explored later in this chapter.

Freetown is a cosmopolitan city whose population includes large numbers of migrants from the provinces (as well as immigrants from many other parts of West Africa and beyond). Given the fact that three-quarters of the active *lantán* builders whom I interviewed in 1994 and 1995 claimed non-Freetown family origins, I was interested to discover where they were brought up and where they had schooled. Although my information is incomplete<sup>11</sup> I found that out of thirty one builders, twenty seven had been born in Freetown and two had been brought to Freetown as babies. Three of the builders who were born in Freetown went on to attend provincial secondary schools and another spent part of his childhood in Dakar. Of all the thirty one builders only two had been born and maintained strong links with the provinces<sup>12</sup> and even they schooled wholly or partly in Freetown. The indications are that all the builders interviewed had lived most of their lives in an urban environment, mainly that of the capital, even though most of them traced their family origins to the provinces.<sup>13</sup>

As regards educational achievement I collected information from thirty of the builders interviewed. All of them had attended primary school but four had not continued on to secondary school. Thirteen dropped out of secondary school (mostly at Form 4 stage) without achieving any qualifications but a further nine had received a technical education. Only four *lantán* builders claimed to have achieved any academic qualifications ('O' levels or the equivalent). Of these one builder, 'Papa' Mansaray, had acquired several 'A' levels and was studying at Milton Margai Teachers College to become an art teacher when I interviewed him in 1994. Another much older builder

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<sup>10</sup> I suspect that, had I been able to interview the additional builders associated with the 1997 parade I would have found the proportion of Christian to Muslim builders to be lower than these figures suggest.

<sup>11</sup> I failed to obtain the necessary information from five of the thirty six builders I interviewed.

<sup>12</sup> One of these was John Goba much of whose artwork has been influenced by Mende beliefs and practices. See Nunley 1987:149.

<sup>13</sup> This makes the popularity of cultural *lantán* themes of particular interest. Were builders and club members hankering after a rural idyll? Were they attempting to give Sierra Leoneans a sense of identity separate from Freetown (a symbol of British philanthropy and British-Krio colonialism)? Or were cultural *lantáns* simply valued for their action?

called Lansana Daramy had long completed his educational studies and was teaching physical education at a secondary school in Freetown (and was also a well-known football referee). Although limited in scope, the foregoing information does support the impression that *lantana* builders were drawn from the less well-educated strata of society although those with a technical education were better represented and, as section 6.3 will demonstrate, some of these have made an outstanding contribution to the development of *lantana* building techniques.

Employment opportunities in Freetown have been declining for many years and most people (even those with educational qualifications) find it difficult to access the formal work sector. I discovered that of those with some qualifications, Lansana Daramay (a school teacher) and all but one of those *lantana* builders with technical training had formal employment records.<sup>14</sup> Only the youngest builder with technical qualifications, Andrew Yaskey, (Super Combo, 1993), had never managed to gain any sort of formal employment. Of the majority who lacked secondary or technical qualifications I found that a few, mainly older *lantana* builders, were fortunate enough to have enjoyed long-term formal employment. These were Alpha Sesay (Bantus Lantern Club, 1993), Abdul Kamara (King Tom, 1997) and M S Kamara, (Tengbeh Town, 1993) who had the most varied occupational record of any of the *lantana* builders I met. Otherwise, a few *lantana* builders had managed to find jobs over the years but only at a very lowly or precarious level.<sup>15</sup>

In Freetown, students who are forced out of the school system (usually because they are unable to pay the necessary fees) and who, therefore, curtail their education before gaining any recognised qualifications are referred to as 'drop-outs'. By this definition the majority of the *lantana* builders whom I interviewed in connection with the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades would be classed as school 'drop outs'. Their hopes of formal employment were necessarily limited and a few managed to survive by

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<sup>14</sup> Sammah Sesay (Mighty Spear LC, 1993 and 1997); Ade Sawyerr (Congo Town, 1993); Ali Fofanah (Clinetonians - 1993 and 1997, Mandela - 1993 and 1997, Beatles - 1997); Eustace Yaskey (Super Combo, 1997); Joseph Mambu (Vimto, 1997); Abdul Lasisi Mukhtarr (CroJimmy, 1997); Magnus Webber (Firestone 1993) and John Goba (Firestone 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Gibrilla Bangura (Aberdeen Ferry Road, 1993 and 1997); Abiodun Robinson (Babylon, 1993 and 1997 and Bronx, 1993) and Imran Rasheed (Big Wharf, 1997).

running their own small business operations.<sup>16</sup> During lean periods, they fell back on their wits and on the generosity of those friends and relatives whose circumstances were marginally better than their own.

One builder, Alieu Mansaray (New Site Amalgamators Lantern Club, 1993 & 1997), seemed to have a brighter future than most, having obtained 'O' levels before leaving school. He was working as an apprentice architectural draughtsman when I first met him in 1993, but in 1994 the firm employing him downsized and he went to help a friend run a small bakery for a self-help organisation in the Kissy area. By 1995 he was talking of setting up on his own as a commercial artist. I have many memories of visiting *lantan* builders like Alieu all of whom were trying their best to make their way in the most inhospitable of economic circumstances. Often working in the corner of a back street room or yard each was doing his best to survive against the odds. A lasting impression remains of poverty mixed, on the one hand, with resignation, and on the other, with a surprising degree of optimism. I vividly remember one *lantan* builder, Eddie Roberts (Ishrine Lantern Club, 1993 & 1997, Malamatonians, 1993), who was reluctant to tell me much about himself because, I was told, he was ashamed of his lack of education. He had only completed primary school and, living in the Goderich Street area (where there are a lot of outdoor, road-side mechanics and other types of artisan plying their trade) he had picked up what skills he could. In 1994 he was running his own radio repair operation from a scruffy backyard cannibalising unworkable equipment to eke a little more life out of the old, unreliable radios his customers brought him to mend. He was just one of the multitude of urban youths in Freetown who had to struggle for his livelihood by drawing on what few resources he could muster. These resources comprised a patchwork of uneven educational and technical skills on the one hand, combined with personal initiative and the good-will of friends and acquaintances on the other.

The data presented above makes it clear that older *lantan* builders generally had a history of formal employment but younger builders did not. Fourteen of the

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<sup>16</sup> Nazir Joaque (Ungun, 1993 and 1997); Abayomi Tejan Jawara (Lumley Strikers/Rainbow, 1993 and 1997); Sanusi Mansaray (who helped build Moya Wharf's lantern in 1993); Abdulai Sesay (Kissy PWD and Kossuh Town, 1997); Haruna Sesay (Bod Water, 1993); Alusine Conteh (Mighty Red Lions, 1993 and 1997); Alimamy Bangura, (Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club, 1993); Santigie Hindow Sesay (who helped Haruna Sesay build Bod Water's *lantan* in 1993).

seventeen builders who were born prior to 1960 were (or had been) employed and a further two were self employed. Of the fifteen younger builders only three could claim to have had some sort of formal employment, five were self-employed and seven had no regular work at all. These younger *lantán* builders were very much part of the youth culture of the 1990s that comprised the urban, largely semi-educated, lumpen proletariat<sup>17</sup> whose members were being pressed to the very margins of Sierra Leone's ailing socio-economic system. Feared by many for their perceived anti-social tendencies, and rasta sympathies and for their rising (if at times ill-informed or naive) political consciousness urban youth had become progressively more alienated during the last quarter of the twentieth century; at the same time they remained subject to manipulation on the part of unscrupulous politicians (who were prepared to supply money and drugs to whoever was prepared to engage in thuggery on their behalf).<sup>18</sup> I found that most *lantán* builders I interviewed, like the majority of lantern club members, identified closely with the expectations and resentments that characterised the lumpen world view espoused by Freetown's youth culture.

The important role played by *lantán* builders as agents of the artistic creativity generated by this marginalised sector of the urban population had been reinforced during the 1980s when the government suppressed *ode lay* practices. These had developed around the time of Sierra Leone's Independence and were used by urban youth as a means of publicly shaping and expressing their emerging sense of identity. The government, however, refused permission for *ode lay* processions to be staged publicly once the levels of violence associated with them reached unacceptable levels in the early 1980s. This action left *lantán* building and lantern parades as the main means of public artistic expression still available to Freetown's youth and to the builders commissioned to create *lantáns*.<sup>19</sup>

The close association between urban youth and the *lantán* tradition in the 1990s was all the more significant given the catastrophic civil war that broke out in Sierra

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<sup>17</sup> See Abdullah and Muana 1998:172.

<sup>18</sup> See pages 127-128.

<sup>19</sup> During the period of my research restrictions were lifted on three *ode lay* groups (Firestone, Bloody Mary and Paddle) which were allowed to parade their *ode lay debuls*. However, *ode lay* processions, like *lantán* parades, were occasional events. The only other public vehicle of artistic expression (which urban youth used to great effect in 1993) was street art such as wall painting (see page 231).

Leone in 1991. The role of the country's youth in this war has been widely recognised and commented upon. As Ibrahim Abdullah and Patrick Muana have pointed out

Central to an understanding of the war in Sierra Leone is the role of alienated youth, especially alienated lumpen youth in the urban and rural areas, for whom combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a country with high levels of unemployment, where the economy is ... in long-term decline.<sup>20</sup>

While Sierra Leone's civil war fed upon the grievances of the lumpen culture of alienated youth it must not be forgotten that the frustrated energy which in desperation helped fuel the unmitigated horrors of war, also had positive and creative potential. The *lantana* tradition which, over the years, relied heavily on the talent of Freetown's youth was but one expression of this potential.

### 6.3 Lantana builders' networks and the dissemination of skills in Freetown

Over a period of six years my intermittent research in Freetown enabled me to meet (and often revisit) many active and retired *lantana* builders. In time I came to appreciate that their talents were nurtured by dense webs of personal relationships through which *lantana* building knowledge and skills were channelled. In the process of unravelling at least some of these ties I quickly recognised the importance of the informal apprenticeship system on which the learning of *lantana* building techniques largely depended. This system was based on a patron-client relationship. The master builder shared his knowledge with his assistants or apprentices and provided them with the opportunity to practise their skills by helping him build *lantans*. In return they owed him practical support and loyalty. Builders who learnt under the same master often developed long-term friendships and helped one another out when they started to build *lantans* independently; for although *lantana* building was highly competitive I discovered a fair degree of co-operation within different networks of builders. On the other hand a master-apprentice relationship might flounder if the master builder was perceived to act unfairly (for example in failing to share monetary rewards) and disaffected apprentices might break away and build separately from their master in the future.

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<sup>20</sup> Abdullah and Muana 1998:172.

In addition to these ties there were numerous other types of inter-connections among *lantan* builders. Attendance at the same school, shared work relationships, neighbourhood allegiances, family ties, club affiliations and secret society loyalties criss-crossed Freetown's urban population, particularly in the older, densely populated areas in the heart of the city where the *lantan* tradition was strongest.<sup>21</sup> This section attempts to follow the ramifications of various interconnections, and in so doing tries to demonstrate how certain *lantan* building styles and preferences can be traced from builder to builder within and between different neighbourhoods. However, I by no means claim to have met everyone in the 1990s who had at some time or another built or helped build *lantans* in Freetown, nor do I pretend to be aware of all the linkages that relate builders, or groups of builders, to one another. What follows is a descriptive analysis based on my present level of knowledge which is inevitably incomplete. It is summarised in diagrammatic form in Appendix 8.

### 6.3.1 The Yaskey network of *lantan* builders

#### 6.3.1.1 *Eustace Yaskey – a 'lion' among lantan builders – Appendix 14: 4.1-4*

Although the phrase 'master builder' was not used in Freetown I soon discovered that certain builders were respected for their mastery of particular types of *lantan* building techniques. No one was more frequently mentioned than Eustace Yaskey whose impact on *lantan* building in Sierra Leone in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been profound – a fact that was widely acknowledged by builders, club members and the YMMA alike. Yaskey was the person to whom I was directed when I first began to make enquiries about the *lantan* tradition in 1991. Born in 1951 Eustace Yaskey's association with *lantan* building stretched back to the 1960s when he was a young member of Guinness Lantern Club (which was based in the Mountain Cut area). The club's leading builder was Lasisi and its President was Magnus Webber. Eustace later set up his own lantern club called 'Sudan' but soon changed its name to 'Super Combo' (after a popular Sierra Leonean music band of the 1970s). Yaskey – who was an extremely articulate person with a confident manner – claimed to have introduced

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<sup>21</sup> See page 29, note 23 for an explanation of the notion of secret society.

new materials and fostered innovative *lantán* building techniques.<sup>22</sup> He specialised in building *lantáns* in the Miscellaneous category and introduced the practice of covering puppets with plastic rather than tissue paper. In 1991 I witnessed him using plastic sacking (from the bags in which rice was imported) to make costumes for his puppets. Cut to size and painted with gloss paint (or unravelled to make imitation raphia fronds) the sacking was water resistant and cheap. Yaskey also adapted techniques that Magnus Webber introduced into *lantán* building (when he created the first 'Funfair' *lantán* for Firestone Lantern Club in the mid 1970s). Webber made use of car seat springs (to operate a see-saw) and Yaskey took up the idea to create more flexible limb movements in his *lantán* puppets. Inserted at key points (such as the waist and neck) they created an all-round jiggling effect. Yaskey also perfected the technique of creating invisible mechanisms by cutting and fixing lengths of plastic or rubber piping inside the puppets; through this piping he ran strings which articulated the puppets without being seen by the audience.

Most dramatic, however, was Yaskey's adoption of the type of heavy mechanism that Webber introduced to operate his 'Funfair' *lantán* in 1976. Yaskey copied it in 1977 when he built the National Dance Troupe in *lantán* form. Comprising a selection of '*debuls*' (featured in the Dance Troupe) Yaskey positioned the puppet depicting *yamama* (a particularly acrobatic *debul*) on top of a steel rod which a hidden operator rotated from beneath the stage of the *lantán*.<sup>23</sup> The puppet, raised high above the other *lantán* figures and visible from a considerable distance, contributed towards what Yaskey calls the *lantán's* 'approach'. His brother (Andrew Yaskey) made use of this exact technique in 1993. Yaskey was very aware of the influence that composition had on the overall impact of a *lantán*. He understood that a *lantán* should not be crowded with too many puppets and he limited their number according to the size of the *lantán's* platform. He also understood the effect of varying the heights of different puppets and this led to his practice of elevating at least one puppet above the rest. In 1991 and in 1997 instead of using the figure of *yamama* he built two Sande Society

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<sup>22</sup> These claims were substantiated by a number of different *lantán* builders who readily agreed that Yaskey had been largely responsible for rescuing *lantán* building which declined during the 1970s.

<sup>23</sup> A diagram of this mechanism is featured in Nunley 1985: 48. However, the diagram is inaccurate as both of *yamama's* feet are shown fixed to the plate on top of the rod. The accompanying photograph of the *lantán* indicates that only one leg was fixed to the rod. The other moved freely as the figure rotated.

*sampa* dancers (one standing on the shoulders of the other) to provide a focal point at the front of his *lantans*.

Another feature of Yaskey's *lantan* puppets was the use of papier maché. Instead of covering the head and limbs of his puppets with netting (as many builders did) he built up layers of newspaper stuck on with cassava starch. He then added features in papier maché, coated the figure with white duplicating paper (coloured appropriately with gloss paint) and then dressed it in its costume (usually made from plastic sacking with cloth decorations). The finished result was surprisingly lifelike.

As a result of collecting around himself a band of enthusiastic, young assistants to help in the operations of his business (General Art Services – GAS), Eustace Yaskey had a ready pool of workers to assist him in creating and performing Super Combo's annual *lantans* throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s. He himself sometimes took on contracts to build *lantans* for other clubs as well – something he could do with the support of his assistants and still meet parade deadlines.<sup>24</sup> In this way Yaskey spread his talent widely. Furthermore, as his various apprentices improved their skills so (in the absence of formal employment) they were able to eke out a living by taking on small contracts of their own (for items of commercial art such as signboards). Some of them also tried to make a little income by producing craftwork that could be sold in the market to foreigners. Those of Yaskey's apprentices who managed to achieve a degree of independence from him were also at times hired by rival lantern clubs to build their *lantans*. This happened in 1987 when a group of Yaskey's assistants left him wholesale to build for Mighty Endeavour. They carried with them knowledge of Yaskey's style of *lantan* building and of the techniques he used for animating *lantan* puppets, and these they in turn put into practice with varying degrees of success.

### 6.3.1.2 *Papa Mansaray and the Yaskey influence*

According to one of his apprentices Yaskey's young assistants each tended to specialise in different aspects of *lantan* building. One of them, Papa Mansaray was skilled in making *lantan* 'structures' (as the various puppets and items comprising a *lantan* were called) whilst another, Brima 'Tippo' Kargbo, was talented in building the

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<sup>24</sup> When I met him in 1991 he was not only building Super Combo's *lantan* but was also contracted to build 'The Head of Medusa' for Sossoh National Lantern Club.

mechanisms required to articulate different *lantan* parts. Both Papa and Tipó were among those who broke away from Yaskey in 1987, following a dispute over money. However, in 1997 Papa was back assisting Yaskey to build Super Combo's winning *lantan*. In the years between, Papa had built for a number of other clubs and in 1991 I discovered him making 'Orpheus in the Underworld' for Montego Bay Lantern Club. In 1993 he built 'Madam Yoko and the Sande Dancers' for the same club.

The heads of Papa's puppets were extremely striking – particularly those for the 'Orpheus' *lantan* (which owing to the outbreak of the civil war and subsequent cancellation of the lantern parade, was never finished). The heads were superbly crafted using papier-maché and were skilfully painted. Their overall style clearly reflected the influence of Papa's former boss, Eustace Yaskey, and the standard of their finish was a credit to Papa's own artistic talent and to the knowledge and skills he had gained as a student art teacher.

### 6.3.1.3 *Brima 'Tipó' Kargbo and the development of Yaskey's lantan style* *Appendix 14:5.1-3*

Unlike Papa and Yaskey, Tipó concentrated less on the finish of his puppets and *lantan* parts, but (like Yaskey) was highly skilled in developing and creating the various mechanisms that articulated them. After splitting from Yaskey, Tipó took the lead in building for Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club in 1987 but was beaten in the Miscellaneous category by the *lantan* Yaskey built for Super Combo that year. However, Tipó succeeded in capturing first prize for Mighty Endeavour in 1988 and he regarded this triumph as the high point in his *lantan* building career. In 1989 and 1990 Yaskey left the building of Super Combo's *lantans* to his brothers and apprentices, and Tipó succeeded both years in capturing first prize for Mighty Endeavour. In 1993 Yaskey was not living in Freetown and so did not participate in the *lantan* celebrations. Tipó was able to capture first prize in the Miscellaneous category for the *lantan* he built for Kissy Central Lantern Club but to his great disappointment Eustace Yaskey recaptured first prize in 1997.

In 1995 Tipó still marvelled that he, a former apprentice, actually beat his *lantan* boss in 1988 and he explained that in order to defeat a 'lion' (Yaskey) he (Tipó) had had to expend a considerable amount of mental effort on improving the techniques Yaskey had taught him - especially those used for articulating *lantan* parts. As I came

to know Tipo better he gradually provided more detailed information about how he planned and built the different mechanisms that allowed his *lantan* puppets to perform. His winning 1988 *lantan* (depicting a Jolly Festival) comprised at least sixteen puppets plus the structure of a hut.<sup>25</sup> The various *lantan* parts incorporated numerous mechanisms which are indicated in a sketch that Tipo made of the *lantan* in skeletal form to indicate to me how it was articulated.<sup>26</sup> Included are six *aguda* puppets in different performance modes. A small *aguda* (known as *kekere aguda*<sup>27</sup>) is attached by two cords to a wooden frame that in actuality leaned out over the edge of the *lantan* and from whence the *kekere aguda* was swung onto the street below. According to Tipo his *lantan* of 1988 was the first ever to include this action and at first the *kekere aguda* was thought to be a human being. When the *lantan* arrived at the Law Courts the judges tried to touch the *kekere aguda* but Tipo kept moving it out of reach. Eventually a YMMA executive member was obliged to use a megaphone to ask Mighty Endeavour Lantern Club to instruct its builder to keep the puppet still. Tipo then swung the *kekere aguda* onto the road where it performed and then sat down. The judges inspected it and realised that it comprised a skeleton made of palm pith clothed in an authentic *aguda* costume.

Although Tipo's sketch omits a number of details it does serve to indicate the composition and complexity of his *lantan*. As regards composition, Tipo was happy to crowd as many puppets as possible onto his *lantan*. As regards complexity the puppets depicting humans had the least number of mechanisms (articulated joints) but the Fairy *debul* and the *agudas* incorporated up to six (at the elbows, knees, waist and neck). The *kekere aguda* had mechanisms at its neck, waist, knees, ankles, elbows and wrists to give it maximum flexibility. In addition Tipo used two sets of heavy mechanism incorporating steel rods. Several puppets (or sets of puppets) required two operators to perform them. In all the *lantan* must have required seventeen hidden puppeteers

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<sup>25</sup> For the Jolly Society see page 165, note 97. Jolly seems to embody several inspirational sources. In Lagos *aguda* is a Yoruba term meaning a Brazilian repatriate. (Such people used to be regarded as trend-setters and were often gaily dressed, hence the use of the term to describe a particular, brightly costumed Jolly *debul*.) According to some of my consultees Jolly was introduced into Sierra Leone from Ghana and Jolly performances are accompanied by musical instruments and songs of Ghanaian origin. (Interviews 92/57, 94/38 & 94/45.)

<sup>26</sup> A copy of Tipo's sketch and a detailed description appear in Appendix 10.

<sup>27</sup> In Yoruba *kekere* means 'little' or 'small'.

crouched below its floor, led by Tipó who always co-ordinated the operation of his own *lantán*.

Tipó provided sketches of four *lantáns* in all and certain similarities can instantly be recognised.<sup>28</sup> For each *lantán* he has drawn on the same repertoire of techniques. At the front is always a tall feature comprising the 'approach' and using heavy mechanism. This is a technique copied from Eustace Yaskey who introduced it in 1977. Each *lantán* also incorporates Tipó's own innovative feature comprising a puppet that is swung from *lantán* to ground level (to perform in the road) and then back again onto the *lantán*. This was Tipó's trademark which was widely recognised. Another effect he regularly uses is to hide a *debul* inside a hut structure from which it emerges and performs. Like Yaskey, Tipó uses springs, empty cotton reels and cords to articulate his puppets and is likewise concerned about weighting them correctly (by means of a piece of iron inserted, for example into a leg or foot) to ensure that a particular puppet or limb maintains or reverts to a particular position. Finally, Tipó has developed a technique that enables him to introduce more flexibility into those types of *debul* puppets that are fully clothed in raphia costumes. His method of building the Bundu *debul* puppets in 1993 and 1997 illustrates this. In each case the body of the puppet comprises three circular cane hoops of increasing diameters strung together with cords (the smallest hoop at the top and the largest at the bottom). To the top hoop are attached the arms and head while to the bottom hoop are fixed two legs (each comprising just the lower part from the knees down). The concertina-type mechanism which the hoops created was invisible to the audience since each puppet was clothed in a cloth costume covered with raphia fronds. However, the mechanism allowed the puppet (which was mounted on a rod) to crouch low to enable it to emerge from its hut and to move very flexibly.<sup>29</sup> This contrasted with Eustace Yaskey's Bundu *debul* puppet in 1997 which was built in his conventional style.

Tipó has proved himself the most innovative *lantán* builder after Eustace Yaskey in terms of modifying existing *lantán* mechanisms and creating new ones, and

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<sup>28</sup> Jolly Festival (1988), Fula Display (1989), Dance to the Bubu (1993) and Mammy Yoko and the Bundu Dancers (1993). See Appendix 10.

<sup>29</sup> I was informed that this mechanism is used for certain types of real *debuls* to enable them to reduce and increase in size.

he fiercely protected his techniques from becoming common knowledge.<sup>30</sup> He admitted that when he built 'Madam Yoko and the Bundu Dancers' for Kissy Central Lantern Club in 1993 he deliberately simplified the mechanisms used in the puppet that moved off the *lantan* and performed on the street. This was because he recognised that the Secretary of Kissy Central was very observant and might work out the techniques that Tipo used. Tipo had several assistants working with him in the 1990s but his innovations were not widely copied by other clubs.

#### 6.3.1.4 *Degool and the Yaskey connection in Portee*

The only *lantan* builder with whom Tipo freely shared his knowledge was his great friend Mohammed Tarawally (known as 'Degool') who built for Portee Muslim Lantern Club. The neighbourhood of Portee is situated on the outer edge of Greater Freetown and is reached via the main provincial highway out of the city which passes by Kissy where Tipo lived. Degool was born and lived as a youngster in the western part of the city of Freetown where he became involved in *lantan* building in the Kroo Town Road area in the 1980s. It was not until 1987 that he went to live in his late father's house in Portee where he encouraged the local youth to form a lantern club. For a number of years he built *lantans* depicting religious or mythical themes<sup>31</sup> but in 1991 he adapted a theme introduced by Eustace Yaskey in 1988 which depicted Chief Kailondo being carried in a hammock (from which he stepped down on to the floor of the *lantan* and danced).<sup>32</sup> Degool adapted the theme to Bai Bureh whom he depicted arriving at a village cultural festival immediately after being crowned.<sup>33</sup> Degool provided me with a sketch of the *lantan* which reveals the extent to which he borrowed from Tipo's repertoire of *lantan* building techniques.<sup>34</sup> The *lantan* included an *aguda* which swung from the front of the *lantan* to the ground, several examples of heavy mechanism, a so-called 'approach' figure (located, however, towards the back of the

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<sup>30</sup> He was reluctant at first to provide me with sketches and only agreed when I showed him the part-sketch which Yaskey provided John Nunley (Nunley 1985:48).

<sup>31</sup> These included Abraham sacrificing Isaac (1988), St John [sic] and the Dragon (1989) and Nfa'Ali and the Kafiri (1990).

<sup>32</sup> Kailondo was a Kissi chief who, in the 1880s, conquered large areas in the present Kailahun District of Sierra Leone as well as in neighbouring Guinea and Liberia and is reputed to have ruled with great wisdom. See page 160 and *Sierra Leonean Heroes* 1988:38.

<sup>33</sup> See page 160 and *Sierra Leonean Heroes* 1988:42.

<sup>34</sup> Included in Appendix 10.

*lantan*) and a *debul* (identified as *landa*) which was made of three concentric cane hoops strung together. It emerged from a hut in exactly the same way as Tipo's Fairy *debul* (in 1988) and his Bundu *debuls* (in 1993 and 1997). The sharp contrast between this *lantan* and Degool's earlier *lantans* is very noticeable as is the similarity in style between this and Tipo's constructions.

By 1991 Tipo and Degool had been collaborating for a number of years.<sup>35</sup> They continued to do so throughout the 1990s in their *lantan* building and in their commercial art activities. Like Tipo, Degool had a number of assistants who worked with him from time to time. One *lantan* builder who was hired to help build 'Al-Buraq' for Portee in 1990 was Keleha Bangura who had, in 1985, taken up *lantan* building with Bombay Stars Lantern Club.<sup>36</sup> Bangura also had connections with Lasisi whom he had helped build a slave ship in 1987 for the *lantan* parade marking the Bicentenary of Freetown. Several other of Degool's associates were among Eustace Yaskey's former apprentices who had moved out of General Art Services with Tipo or who had attached themselves to Degool after Yaskey's departure for the UK in 1991.

#### 6.3.1.5 Other Yaskey-trained assistants

In April 1992 Degool was commissioned to build a *lantan* depicting the Amistad Revolt as part of special celebrations to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the event.<sup>37</sup> He was joined by a number of friends including Kennedy Moore and Alusine Bangura. Kennedy Moore had trained in the 1970s as a commercial artist under Eustace Yaskey from whom he had also learnt to build *lantans*. He was connected with a number of different *lantan* builders including Lasisi who was a senior member of several of the secret society lodges to which Moore currently or formerly belonged.<sup>38</sup> Moore was also associated over the years with a number of lantern clubs, in particular Moea Wharf (where I had first met him building in 1991). Alusine Bangura was a contemporary of Tipo and Papa when they were members of

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<sup>35</sup> Degool had helped Tipo complete his *lantan* for Mighty Endeavour in 1989 when Tipo was arrested and imprisoned a few days before the lantern parade. See pages 80-81, note 45.

<sup>36</sup> Keleha Bangura was responsible for Bombay Stars' winning 'Clock Tower' *lantan* in 1993. He built the same theme for the same club in 1997.

<sup>37</sup> See page 160.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Kofi Jolly and Fourah Bay Otta (Interview 94/21).

Yaskey's General Arts Services and broke away with them in 1987 to build for Mighty Endeavour. Alusine later joined Degool as his permanent assistant and in the 1990s, when I met him, he was working with Degool on a variety of contracts.

In the course of my research I met a number of other *lantan* builders who traced their original interest in *lantans* and their acquisition of building skills to Eustace Yaskey. One such builder was Alimamy Bangura who in 1993 was building for Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club in the Blackhall Road area. He had lived as a youngster in the neighbourhood of Mountain Cut where he had trained under Yaskey. The *lantans* he helped build for Ashoebi Corner were not highly articulated and he clearly did not match his teacher in the building of *lantan* mechanisms.<sup>39</sup>

One of Alimamy Bangura's associates was Lamin Turay who helped Bantus Lantern Club build its 'Tamaborah Squad' *lantan* in 1993. Turay lived in Annie Walsh Street a few compounds down from the Yaskey family home and he claimed to have learnt most of his artistic skills (not just in *lantan* building but in many forms of commercial art) from Eustace Yaskey and from Joseph Yaskey (Eustace's elder brother).

### 6.3.2 Lasisi, Goba and the Firestone complex

Not far from Yaskey's home and a short walk up Mountain Cut were the headquarters of Firestone on the banks of Bambara Spring. In the early 1990s Firestone was serving variously as a ghetto, an *ode lay* group, a lantern club and as a self-help organisation.<sup>40</sup> The veteran artist and *lantan* builder Lasisi, and his colleague Magnus Webber, were both involved in Firestone's *lantans* in the 1970s (when Webber introduced 'Funfair') but by the 1990s both had retired from any serious participation (although Webber did provide some technical advice in 1993).

By the time I met Lasisi he was no longer associated with Firestone. He was living off Mountain Cut in Doherty Street, just a few compounds from where he was born. He informed me that he had originally learnt his *lantan* building skills from the

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<sup>39</sup> His *lantans* included Nfa'Ali and the Lion (1986), Adam and Eve (for the 1987 Bicentenary parade), Wise King Solomon (1988) and a Front loading Caterpillar (1989 and 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Firestone changed dramatically in character after the NPRC coup of 1992. See page 130, note 60.

late Gaffa Carew – a well-known builder in the Mountain Cut area who had been responsible for Fula Town’s main *lantans* in the 1940s and 50s and who was Lasisi’s mother’s brother.<sup>41</sup> Lasisi started building *lantans* for the newly established Guinness Lantern Club in 1957 where he collaborated with his schoolfriend Magnus Webber. By the 1970s Guinness LC had collapsed and Lasisi and Webber then moved to Firestone. Thereafter, in the 1980s, Lasisi built for Foulah Town Islamic Cultural Group. By the 1990s he had developed links with Crojimmy Lantern Club (based on the western edge of Fourah Bay) for which he built a highly successful *lantan* (‘Marriage Ceremony’) in 1997. Lasisi regarded himself as an all-round *lantan* builder and claimed to have competed in all three of the YMMA’s *lantan* categories and won in all of them at some time or another. He was multi-skilled and did not need to hire anyone to undertake the carpentry work (involved in making the *lantan* platform) or the electrical work (required to illuminate *lantans* by means of bulbs or fluorescent lights). However, he was not known for producing highly articulated *lantan* puppets, unlike his former assistant Eustace Yaskey (who as a youngster had helped Lasisi and Webber with Guinness’ *lantans*). However, he made good use of well-lit, bright colours and was prepared to invent figures from his imagination - such as the *debul* puppet which he included in his 1997 *lantan* (‘Marriage Ceremony’) but which did not correspond to any known *debul* character.

Lasisi was a mercurial character whose reputation was based on his skills as a *lantan* builder, carver and, above all, as a secret society man. His contacts and influence, particularly through the Hunting, Ojeh, Otta, and other secret societies with which he was involved, was considerable but his impact as a *lantan* builder, other than in collaboration with Magnus Webber, seems to have been limited. Their ‘Funfair’ *lantan* for Firestone in 1976 marked a watershed in *lantan* building history but it was Yaskey who took up and developed the innovative techniques it incorporated, not Lasisi.

Firestone proved over the years to be one of the most popular organisations in the Mountain Cut area and many thousands of people have had some sort of association

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<sup>41</sup> According to Nunley (1987:147) Lasisi learnt to build *lantans* with Black Arrow Lantern Club in Mountain Cut. However, Black Arrow was only established in the early 1960s by which time Lasisi was already involved in *lantan* building.

with it in their youth. One such person was John Goba, who by the 1990s had achieved an international reputation as a carver.<sup>42</sup> Goba had a long association with Firestone, having transferred there from Black Arrow (an older lantern club also based in the Mountain Cut area) in the late 1960s. John Goba was not best known for his *lantan* building skills but he lived close to Firestone's compound and in 1993 helped out its main *lantan* builder/artistic director, Sheka Sesay, who handled the group's *lantan* building and *debul* making activities. A former assistant of John Goba, Sheka still regarded Goba as his boss and regularly consulted him for advice and practical help. Indeed, in the event of Firestone organising a major *debul* performance John Goba would take over responsibility for creating the *debul* costume and for carving its headpiece.<sup>43</sup>

Sheka Sesay and his colleagues at Firestone do not seem to have been particularly influential among Freetown's *lantan* builders. One technique they favoured (but which few other builders seem to have adopted) involved the use of foam for covering puppet faces. Furthermore, although they stuck to their well-tried 'Funfair' theme in 1993 and 1997 they built a totally original *lantan* depicting a newly launched local radio station (FM 94) for the aborted lantern parade of 1991. The *lantan* comprised puppets depicting well-known Freetown socialites and disco dancers, complete with a disc jockey sitting behind a bank of microphones. The *lantan* was never paraded but its builders (Sheka Sesay and Idrissa Kargbo) completed it and performed it privately at Firestone's compound.

Both Sheka and Idrissa hired out their services to other lantern clubs when a suitable opportunity arose. In 1991 Sheka started building a *lantan* for a new lantern club in Georgebrook and in 1993 I found Idrissa working on a *lantan* over on the far western side of Freetown. At the time Idrissa worked at the Bintumani Hotel (which was situated near Aberdeen Village) and had joined forces with the builder (Gibrilla Bangura) responsible for the mosque *lantan* commissioned by Aberdeen Ferry Road

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<sup>42</sup> Probably as a result of Nunley's work (Nunley 1987:149-153) John Goba came to the attention of Vogel (1991:107) and Magnin (1996:84-87). He was one of several African artists who was interviewed in a BBC video production ('Out of Africa') that coincided with a Saatchi Gallery exhibition in London that included some of his work.

<sup>43</sup> John Goba made the *ode lay debul* which the Government allowed Firestone to parade on 1 January 1995.

Lantern Club. Gibrilla in turn told me that he had grown up in Bambara Town (which is adjacent to Mountain Cut) and had supported Vimto Lantern Club where he first started helping to build *lantans* as a boy. This sort of fluidity involving *lantan* builders living and working and moving between different neighbourhoods and lantern clubs at different points in their careers was characteristic of the *lantan* tradition at least in the 1990s. Another case that clearly demonstrated this was that of Joseph Mambu who built Vimto Lantern Club's winning *lantan* in 1997.

### 6.3.3 Joseph Mambu

Joseph Mambu was born in 1958 and was, therefore, seven years younger than Eustace Yaskey. Like Yaskey he attended the Trade Centre at Kissy Dockyard where he learnt carpentry and joinery in the mid-1970s. Around this time Mambu was a young member of Firestone and helped with making the first 'Funfair' *lantan* under Webber and Lasisi. At the same time he lodged with John Goba and at some point learnt wood carving under Mustapha Kargbo – the master carver who also taught both Lasisi and Goba to carve.<sup>44</sup> Mambu also became interested in Yaskey's *lantan* building exploits at Super Combo while continuing to help Lasisi when the latter took up building for Foulah Town Lantern Club. Mambu was clearly subject to a range of influences but claims an advantage over older builders because of his knowledge of technical drawing and biology. He also told me that, unlike them, he knew something about 'colouration and proportion'.

In the late 1980s Mambu left his government job with the Ministry of Works (painting street and road signs and zebra crossings) and set himself up as a freelance sign-writer and commercial artist. Around the same time he started to undertake *lantan* building contracts on his own. He has worked for a variety of lantern clubs including Magazine Stars, Mighty Endeavour (where he helped Tipo with the Jolly Festival in 1988), Bronx (Douglas v Tyson, 1990), Block Lane, and latterly Vimto (Nfali and the Kafiri, 1997). In 1985 Mambu was responsible for purportedly the largest ship *lantan* ever made (SS Maya). Measuring about forty five feet long and twenty two feet wide Mambu completed it with the help of two apprentices in just fourteen days. The

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<sup>44</sup> Nunley 1987:147 & 150.

finished ship *lantán* was transported by lorries and carried up to one hundred people on board.

Mambu was very much an all-round *lantán* builder with a broad network of contacts among artists with very varying skills and interests. He had had a number of apprentices himself over the years and claimed that amongst them was Tipó. This may well have been the case as it is clear that people who were interested in acquiring different artistic skills learnt them from whomever choice and opportunity allowed. It is, therefore, not unusual for young artists to apprentice themselves to different experts at different points (and sometimes at the same point) in time. Mambu clearly loved his work and enjoyed teaching others; he even expressed a wish to train his five children as artists. Though I heard some criticism of Mambu's *lantán* building skills the *lantán* ('Nfali and the Kafiri') which he built for Vimto Lantern Club in 1997 (and which I was able to photograph extensively) seemed to exhibit a very high standard of workmanship.<sup>45</sup>

#### 6.3.4 Black Arrow, Block Lane and Baimbrace *lantán* builders

The early 1960s saw the emergence of a famous lantern club called Black Arrow in the Mountain Cut area of Fula Town. It attracted a large following and in time some of its supporters split away to form other clubs in the same area. These included Firestone (in the late 1960s) and Block Lane Lantern Club (in the 1970s). One of Black Arrow's main builders was Imran Rasheed who, by the time I met him in 1995, had moved from the family home on Mountain Cut to East Brook Street near the shores of Susan's Bay. In 1997 he was responsible for building a *lantán* for Big Wharf Lantern Club whose base was located among the squalid shanty dwellings that are crammed together on the mudflats in Susan's Bay between the cliff face and the sea.

Rasheed first took an interest in *lantáns* as a member of Young Fula Town Lantern Club and was encouraged by his uncle who used to help with the papering of Fula Town's main *lantán*. In time Rasheed became Black Arrow's principal builder

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<sup>45</sup> The leaders of one club criticised Joseph Mambu for making the wings of an Al-Buraq *lantán* too heavy so that they would not work properly; the *lantán* had to be paraded without them (Interview 95/77). In turn, Mambu complained to me that he did not like the way the club conducted its affairs (Interview 94/48).

and concentrated on religious themes.<sup>46</sup> In the 1970s he worked for Fourah Bay College and built several *lantans* for the student body which at that time was interested in participating in the annual lantern parades. These *lantans*, unlike Black Arrow's, represented man-made structures including Apollo 11 (1973) and a VC10 (1974).<sup>47</sup> Rasheed also built in the Miscellaneous category, both in Freetown and up-country. One of his most recent Miscellaneous *lantans* was built in Kono in 1989 and depicted a Dance Troupe.<sup>48</sup> One of his earliest was built in Freetown when, in the early 1980s, he depicted a football match involving East End Lions Football Club. Rasheed claimed that this was the first *lantan* ever to use plastic and taffeta (for the players' shirts) and that thereafter *lantan* builders throughout Freetown took up this innovation.<sup>49</sup>

Rasheed trained a number of assistants over the years, one of whom, Ahmadu Kamara, left Black Arrow together with a number of other supporters to set up a new lantern club in Block Lane in the early 1970s. Ahmadu Kamara built a variety of *lantans* for Block Lane Lantern Club.<sup>50</sup> On several occasions he was assisted by Joseph Mambu although this proved an uneasy collaboration.

Block Lane lies to the west of Mountain Cut close to Macauley Street and to its north, around Ambrose, Horton and Devere Streets, is the neighbourhood of Baimbrace. Sometime in the 1980s a lantern club was established in this area whose builders were Abu Turay and his relative Abdullai Kamara (known as 'Biggi Joe'). Turay moved from Freetown to Guinea in 1990 leaving Biggi Joe to work alone. When I met him in 1995 he was living off the meagre proceeds of the commercial art business

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<sup>46</sup> Rasheed mentioned that the *lantans* he had built for Black Arrow included: Al-Buraq, Abraham and Isaac, Adam and Eve, Daniel and the Lion's Den, Nafali and the Kafiri and Moses, as well as St George and the Dragon and Animal Farm. He explained that Fula Town people generally valued the lantern parade's Muslim connections.

<sup>47</sup> The builder Eddie Roberts claimed to have helped FBC students make a *lantan* in the form of an aeroplane (see, page 148). It is possible he worked with Imran Rasheed.

<sup>48</sup> The *lantan* tradition had spread up-country (to the Port Loko and Kambia Districts) by the 1930s. It was then probably taken by Temne traders and migrant workers to the diamond areas of Kono and Kenema. I discovered that a number of Freetown-based *lantan* builders had been hired at different times to build *lantans* in the provinces (and vice versa).

<sup>49</sup> His claim illustrates how difficult it is to distinguish exactly who was responsible for what innovations. Yaskey claimed he introduced plastic into *lantan* building (page 191). This was in the 1970s when the rains threatened to wipe out the lantern parade. It is possible that each builder was responsible for a different aspect of the innovation. On the other hand I found that in their eagerness to impress me some *lantan* builders claimed responsibility for innovations I later found definitely to be the work of others.

<sup>50</sup> Including mosques, a ship, St John and the Dragon, Al-Buraq, and a Dance Troupe.

which he operated from his room in the family home on Horton Street. He was not a particularly experienced *lantana* builder and claimed involvement in only four *lantans*: - 'Queen Elizabeth and her Carriage', 'Afisatu and a Tortoise', 'St George and the Dragon' and, in 1990, 'Air Iran plane' (with Ayotolloh Khomeini descending its steps). This latter *lantana* was built jointly for Baimbrace and Block Lane Lantern Clubs which by then had amalgamated. In 1993 Biggi Joe painted a large backdrop (depicting the Chairman and Head of State (Valentine Strasser), the Deputy Chairman, an ADC and a tiger) which was paraded in the lantern parade in place of a proper *lantana* by Baimbrace-Block Lane Lantern Club. In 1997 he repeated 'Afisatu and her pet tortoise' for the same club to considerable acclaim. The *lantana* won first prize in the Animal category just a few marks ahead of Joseph Mambu's 'Nfali and the Kafiri'. The technique Biggi Joe used to operate the tortoise was novel to *lantana* building; it involved a young boy getting inside the animal's head and forelegs (which were made from sacking) and directly manipulating them with his own head and arms.

Biggi Joe and his relative Abu Turay were helped from time to time by younger assistants, one of whom was Usman Kamara. As a youngster Usman lived in Fula Town where he got to know the various lantern clubs in the area – Black Arrow, Firestone, Super Combo and Fula Town Lantern Club. Whilst at secondary school he became interested in *lantana* building and it was then that he helped Baimbrace Lantern Club build 'St George and the Dragon'. On leaving school in 1990 Usman was unable to find work and went to live with his mother in Kuntolloh – an area on the fringes of Greater Freetown – where he joined Kuntolloh Lantern Club. He was responsible for building 'Sierra Leone Warfront' and 'The Lion of Judah' for the club in 1993 and 1997 respectively.

### 6.3.5 Bambara Town and its *lantana* builders

North of Baimbrace and west of Mountain Cut is the neighbourhood known as Bambara Town which stretches up towards Kissy Street. Long the home of part of Freetown's Mandingo community Bambara Town has strong ties with the *lantana* tradition.<sup>51</sup> This was the location of Vimto Lantern Club which, by the 1990s, was one of the oldest surviving *lantana* groups in Freetown. It had been influential in nurturing

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<sup>51</sup> See pages 111-113.

*lantana* building for half a century and over the years it had generated a number of off-shoots including Lumley Strikers Lantern Club (also known as Rainbow) and Ishrine Lantern Club. Ishrine's builder in the 1990s was Eddie Roberts whose skill in building aeroplane *lantans* (with skeletons made almost totally of wire) was renowned in Freetown. While Ishrine was a relatively new club (established in the 1980s) Rainbow had a longer history. Its leader and builder was Abayomi Jawara (of Serahuli-Mandingo stock) who was first introduced to *lantana* building in the late 1950s by his relative Mohammed Boye Conteh (alias Alhaji Vimto) who founded Vimto Lantern Club. Around the time of Independence Jawara set up Young Rainbow Lantern Club from his home in Lumley Street; it comprised young supporters of Rainbow Ode Lay Society<sup>52</sup>. Jawara claimed that in the 1960s and 1970s he also built *lantans* with a number of other clubs, including Super Combo Lantern Club where he worked with Eustace Yaskey on several occasions before leaving to build for Vimto Lantern Club. With the revival of *lantana* building in the 1980s Jawara again set up his own club (Rainbow/Lumley Strikers). He described it as a descendant of the earlier Young Rainbow Lantern Club which by this time was defunct. Jawara was keen for young people in his area to acquire knowledge of arts and crafts and he saw his lantern club as contributing towards the achievement of this objective. In 1993 Jawara was also involved in helping run a training workshop for about fifteen youngsters located a few doors away from his family home and sponsored for a time by the German Ambassador in Freetown. Jawara himself claimed to be skilled in woodworking and carving, leatherwork, wire work, portrait painting, 'model making' (using sand, stone and cement) as well as textile design and *gara* dyeing (which he had learnt as a child from his grandmother).<sup>53</sup> However, when I knew him he was spending most his time on his tailoring business.

Although Jawara claimed an early association with Eustace Yaskey his style of *lantana* building and his choice of themes bore a greater resemblance to those of Vimto Lantern Club. He told me that he was fond of Islamic themes as well as topical and historical subjects: in 1993 he built Sierra Leone's 'Coat of Arms' and in 1997 Rainbow's *lantana* depicted the '1996 Peace Conference in Abidjan'. Unlike Eustace

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<sup>52</sup> See Nunley 1987:96-101.

<sup>53</sup> According to Fyle & Jones (1980:119) *gara* is Mandinka for 'indigo'. The term *gara* is used generally in Sierra Leone to refer to tie-dyed cloth. See Cannizzo 1983:60.

Yaskey Jawara did not seem to be interested in developing the skills required to build highly articulated *lantans* nor did he share Yaskey's enthusiasm for depicting 'debuls'.

### 6.3.6 Sherif Carew, Madu Carr and other Mountain Cut *lantan* builders

In 1977-78 John Nunley undertook much of his research (into Freetown's *ode-lay* groups) in Mountain Cut (which is part of Fula Town) where he located the city's most prolific carvers (John Goba, Lasisi and their teacher, Mustapha Kargbo). In the 1990s I discovered in turn that Mountain Cut was home to more *lantan* builders than any other part of Freetown.<sup>54</sup> Lasisi's *lantan* mentor and uncle, the late Gaffa Carew, trained a number of other *lantan* builders including his son, Sherif Carew, who told me he had been active in *lantan* building since at least the early 1980s. Sherif had close associations with lantern clubs in Magazine (the neighbourhood at the north end of Mountain Cut) and with clubs located further afield. In 1993 he built a *lantan* representing an ECOMOG Vessel ('SS Sandy') for Magazine Lantern Club<sup>55</sup>, and in 1997 built 'Dance Troupe' for Union de Magazine Lantern Club and 'Muppet Show' for Wellington Independent Lantern Club. He clearly commanded a wide range of skills including both those required to build monumental ship *lantans* as well as those needed to produce puppetry. Over the years he had collaborated with several fellow *lantan* builders and had helped train a number of youngsters, some of whom I met in the course of my research.<sup>56</sup>

One of Sherif Carew's colleagues was a freelance artist called Madu Carr who, like Sherif, was also a native of Fula Town and had close connections with Magazine and Moa Wharf Lantern Clubs. With his assistant, Minkaidu, Madu Carr earned his living from his artwork. In his youth Madu Carr supported Vimto Lantern Club and in the 1980s he and Minkaidu used to help Minkaidu's late brother Tunde build *lantans* for Moa Wharf. Tunde worked with a number of other younger *lantan* builders (including Idrissa Mansaray who helped build Moa Wharf Lantern Club's 1993 *lantan*) and was himself taught *lantan* building by Alpha Sesay who was responsible for Bantus Lantern Club's 1993 *lantan*. Alpha Sesay told me that Tunde was a 'powerful' builder

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<sup>54</sup> Nunley (1987:141) noted this concentration of creative talent in Mountain Cut.

<sup>55</sup> ECOMOG is the military arm of ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States) and is dominated by Nigeria.

<sup>56</sup> Such as Sanusi Mansaray and Dennis Cole. See Appendix 6.

of *debuls* as well as a good carver and that it was in return for teaching him the skills involved in making *debuls* that he (Alpha Sesay) taught Tunde how to build *lantans*. Tunde was never described to me as being an outstanding *lantan* builder and neither was Madu Carr. Carr, however, was a versatile artist who built *debuls*, carved *debul* headpieces (masks) and statues, worked with tortoise-shell, and did wood etching, painting (of village scenes), stencilling and signboard production. One of his students in wood etching was Alusine Conteh who lived in Kanikay (in the neighbourhood of Clinetown).

### 6.3.7 *Lantan* builders from Magazine and the western end of Fourah Bay Road

The area north of Kissy Road that stretches from Hagan Street eastwards to Bombay St and on to Patton Street encompasses Magazine and the western end of Fourah Bay Road. As the previous sub-section has indicated Magazine and Moa Wharf Lantern Clubs (which were located in this area) were closely associated with *lantan* builders from Mountain Cut, such as Madu Carr, Sherif Carew and Kennedy Moore, all of whom were of Krio (Muslim and Christian) origin. Magazine and the adjacent area of Fourah Bay Road, however, were heavily settled by Mandingos but apart from Sanusi Mansaray, a young builder who assisted with the *lantans* built for Elba Stars Lantern Club (in 1991) and Moa Wharf Lantern Club (in 1993) I was unable to contact other local builders. One, Idrissa Mansaray (Moa Wharf 1993), was a soldier who by the mid-1990s was engaged on active military service in the provinces. In 1997 an Alhaji Abu Mansaray built Moa Wharf's *lantan*, Inah Fofornah Dixon built for Independent Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club and Abdulai Swarray built for Russia State Lantern Club in Jenkins Street. Circumstances prevented me from returning to Freetown to locate and meet them. However, it is likely that Abdulai Swarray belonged to the well-known Mandingo family which had strong historical ties to Independent Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club and to its predecessor, Fourah Bay Road *lantan* group.<sup>57</sup>

One older, former builder in the area, however, was Alhaji Sankoh who ran a Koranic school (Madrassat Abdullah) in his home in Magazine Cut opposite the Islamiyya (Mandingo) mosque. Alhaji Sankoh informed me that he started building

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<sup>57</sup> See page 118.

*lantans* as a schoolboy member of the Young Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club and remembered many of the older Mandingo builders including Pa Sampha Conteh and Usman Lascaff Koroma (both of whom had died by the 1990s). Alhaji Sankoh began by helping build ship *lantans* but then turned to building animal *lantans* and eventually specialised in building various different ‘Coats of Arms’ for the main Fourah Bay Road Lantern Club.<sup>58</sup> Alhaji Sankoh’s son, Mohammed Sankoh, learnt to build *lantans* from his father and was responsible for the ‘Statue of Liberty’ which Madrassat Abdullah Lantern Club paraded in 1993. By the mid 1990s, however, Mohammed had left Freetown for the UK where he was hoping to continue his studies.

### 6.3.8 Mighty Endeavour connections

Mighty Endeavour was another well-established club (like Vimto Lantern Club) with an influential history.<sup>59</sup> In 1987 its style of *lantans* changed (from religious, topical and historical themes to highly articulated cultural *lantans*) when a group of Eustace Yaskey’s assistants left Super Combo and moved over to Mighty Endeavour. As described earlier, the group comprised Tipu, Papa Mansaray, Alusine Bangura and Andrew Yaskey. Tipu stayed with Mighty Endeavour in succeeding years and established a permanent reputation there by building a series of prize-winning *lantans* that embodied and developed Eustace Yaskey’s love of mechanisation. One of Tipu’s assistants at Mighty Endeavour in the 1990s was Alex Thomas who was Vice-President of the club. He could remember watching the club’s former *lantan* builders create its *lantans* in the 1960s. By the time of my research these builders had mostly retired from *lantan* building and some were dead but I met one, Chuku Paul, who explained that in his youth (in the 1950s/early 1960s) Mighty Endeavour used to bring down a *lantan* builder from the Northern Province during Ramadan each year. In the course of assisting him Chuku Paul learnt to build religious *lantans* such as ‘Noah’s Ark’, the ‘Holy Kaaba’, and ‘Nfali and the Kafiri’. In the 1960s Chuku Paul and various colleagues within the club took over full responsibility for its *lantans* and continued to build religious themes until the mid 1980s. In the process they nurtured the skills of various younger trainees within the club, including Alex Thomas, Alpha Sesay and

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<sup>58</sup> They included those of Britain, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Alhaji Sankoh also claimed to have been the first to build St George and the Dragon in *lantan* form and to have incorporated into it a fair degree of articulation. Like most people in Freetown, Alhaji Sankoh referred to St George as St John.

another apprentice named Haruna Sesay. When some of the younger elements within Mighty Endeavour decided to break away from their elders and form new lantern clubs of their own during the 1980s some of these trainee builders went with them. Thus Alpha Sesay became the main *lantana* builder for Bantus Lantern Club (and Chuku Paul himself gave Bantus assistance from time to time). Alpha Sesay tended to concentrate on religious and topical themes (much as the older builders did for Mighty Endeavour).<sup>60</sup> Not only did he teach the late Tunde to build *lantans* for Moa Wharf Lantern Club but he also nurtured the talent of Lamin Turay, who worked with him on Bantus' 1993 *lantana* and who had been a one-time assistant of Eustace Yaskey. Alpha Sesay had also helped to build *lantans* for Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club (again limiting himself to religious themes) as had one of his colleagues from Mighty Endeavour, Haruna Sesay. Like Alpha, Haruna trained under Mighty Endeavour's builders in the 1960s and 1970s and helped Ashoebi Corner Lantern Club build its 'Caterpillar' *lantans* in 1989-1990. In the 1990s, however, Haruna's closest associations were with Bod Water Lantern Club, which, like Bantus was located in the foothills of Mount Aureol across on the south side of Kissy Road from Mighty Endeavour's base in Patton Street. Again, like Alpha, Haruna enjoyed building religious and topical subjects and showed no interest in *debul* themes.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, Haruna Sesay complained that the *lantana* he least enjoyed building for Bod Water depicted 'Markalate' (the child immunization campaign that was being widely publicized in Freetown in the late 1980s and 1990s). In his view it incorporated too much 'mechanism' (which he perhaps found difficult to execute) and was very expensive to build.

### 6.3.9 Alusine Conteh and his colleagues

In the course of searching out all the *lantana* builders associated with the 1993 lantern parade I visited the headquarters of Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club which was located on the western edge of Fourah Bay at the lower end of Savage Square in a

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<sup>59</sup> See pages 119-120.

<sup>60</sup> Prior to 1993 (when he built the 'Tamaborah Squad') Alpha Sesay had built Noah's Ark and Wise King Solomon for Bantus.

<sup>61</sup> Prior to 1993 (when he built 'War Tank') Haruna Sesay had built Al-Buraq, Nfa'Ali and the Kafiri and a Coat of Arms for Bod Water.

notoriously rough area close to the docks. There I was directed to Alusine Conteh who lived near Kanikay Wharf on the shore of Cline Bay. Alusine told me that he had learnt art in school and now spent his spare time painting, modelling clay and building *debuls*. He learnt wood etching from Madu Carr but seemed to have acquired his *lantan* building skills from an independent source – a provincial builder, Pa Johnson, whom Mighty Red Lions used to hire from the town of Pepel (in the Northern Province). Pa Johnson was elderly in the 1990s and had long retired from *lantan* building. He lived in Wellington, on the outskirts of Freetown, where he still ran his own carpentry workshop. Born in Port Loko District he had learnt to build *lantans* in his home village. He knew of a number of other provincial *lantan* builders of his generation whom lantern clubs in Freetown used to bring down to the capital each year to build *lantans* for them.<sup>62</sup> Pa Johnson claimed to have built *lantans* representing a wide range of themes: ships, mosques, a goods train (such as used in the Pepel iron ore mine), ‘Al-Buraq’, ‘Abraham and Isaac’, as well as cultural *lantans* (including ‘Bundu Society’). The *lantans* Alusine built in 1993 (‘Bundu Society’) and in 1997 (‘Mammy Wata’) were both cultural in content.

Alusine Conteh was not the only member of Mighty Red Lions who had learnt *lantan* building under Pa Johnson. One such colleague was Dowu Kamara (a cousin of Sherif Carew) who explained to me that Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club was ‘not perfect’ in ship *lantans* and preferred to build in the Animal and Miscellaneous categories.<sup>63</sup> Another of the club’s *lantan* assistants was Mohammed Sesay (alias ‘Wanbone’ on account of his size and strength). Wanbone was a carpenter who was working for a furniture company in Freetown when I met him in 1994. Unlike Alusine and unlike Dowu (who could sketch and who was responsible for various street paintings in Freetown in 1993) Wanbone did not claim any artistic interests other than *lantan* building although I learnt independently that he made *debuls*. He was married

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<sup>62</sup> One of his friends and rivals (also from the Port Loko area) was Amara Conteh, who may possibly be the person referred to as Amara Kamara by Nunley (1985:48, 97). Also known as Amara ‘Roller’ he was living at the National Dance Troupe’s headquarters in the early 1990s where he was responsible for creating the *debul* costumes worn by members of the Troupe. Amara Conteh formerly built *lantans* for lantern clubs located around Susan’s Bay at Big Wharf where Temne traders from up-country used to moor their boats when they came to Freetown. Alieu Mansaray who built *lantans* in 1993 and 1997 for New Site Amalgamators/Shell Lantern Club lived as a boy in the area of Big Wharf and was familiar with Amara Conteh’s *lantans* (Interview 95/83).

<sup>63</sup> He mentioned as examples such themes as Dance Troupe, St John and the Dragon, Mammy Wata and Village Scene. In 1997 Mighty Red Lions built Mammy Wata.

into a family of *lantan* builders and I originally met his brother-in-law, Abdulai Sesay, through contacts with Fisher Lane Lantern Club in 1991. Abdulai learnt tailoring, *debul* making and *lantan* building from his older brothers and among the *lantans* he had built were 'Nfali and the Kafiri', 'Indian Goddess' (part-built for Fisher Lane Lantern Club in 1991), 'St John and the Dragon' (built for Kissy PWD in 1997) and 'Green Revolution', (comprising a farmer harvesting his crops) for Kossoh Town in 1997.

### **6.3.10 *Lantan* builders in Fourah Bay: Mohammed din Gabisi, Nazir Joaque, Abiodun Robinson and Alie Fofanah (Appendix 14:6.1-6)**

Abulai Sesay lived close to the western boundary of Fourah Bay where a number of well-known and experienced *lantan* builders were based. Best known was Mohammed din Gabisi (who was a commercial artist, *lantan* builder and well-known secret society adherent).<sup>64</sup> Born of Muslim Krio parentage Gabisi's first contact with *lantans* was as a small child growing up near to the compound where Fourah Bay Muslim Lantern Club was based. As a youngster he joined Beatles Lantern Club (which was established in the 1960s) and he later became its main builder. Gabisi was particularly skilled in building animal puppets and was reputed to be the best builder of animal *lantans* in Freetown. I first came across Gabisi's work in The Gambia where he had been summoned in 1989 by the Sierra Leonean Oku Marabout community in Banjul to build *lantans* for the end of Ramadan.<sup>65</sup> When I met him in 1991 in Freetown he took pains to describe his building methods and he claimed to have perfected the 'frill' technique of papering animal puppets.<sup>66</sup> He never used the more complex systems of heavy and hidden mechanisms so favoured by Yaskey and Tipo but instead relied on simple articulated joints often operated by visible strings. In Banjul in 1989 Gabisi built two *lantans* – one a horse carrying Bilal (the Prophet's servant) and the other depicting some dancers and drummers. On this occasion he made use of car seat springs as a means of anchoring the feet of the dancers to the *lantan* floor, at the same time allowing them to jig up and down.

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<sup>64</sup> He was one of Nunley's informants (Nunley 1985:102).

<sup>65</sup> The Oku Marabout community in Banjul comprises Muslim Krios from Freetown. See Appendix 3.

<sup>66</sup> Interview 91/1.

Gabisi was very well known in Freetown both for building *lantans* and for serving on the Executive Committee of the YMMA. However, he left Sierra Leone in early 1993 to settle in Banjul and consequently had no hand in making any of the *lantans* built in Fourah Bay for the lantern parades of 1993 and 1997. I discovered that they were the work of two of his relatives and of a former colleague. In 1993 UpGun Lantern Club, which was based close to Ross Road on the eastern boundary of Fourah Bay, built a *lantan* depicting the turntable (roundabout) which dominates the Ross Road junction with Kissy Road. In 1997 the same club built the 'Holy Kaaba'. Both *lantans* were the responsibility of Nazir Joaque, a Muslim Krio and a relative of Gabisi on Joaque's mother's side. Joaque's mother's brother was in fact a *lantan* builder for Beatles Lantern Club in the 1960s and Joaque, like Gabisi, learned to build *lantans* under his guidance. Joaque claimed to have no other artistic skills outside *lantan* building but he had a certain amount of technical expertise derived from the refrigeration business he ran and he also knew how to sew. He emphasised to me the importance of being an all-round *lantan* builder and assured me that although he had never built a *lantan* in the Miscellaneous category he could do so if asked. However, throughout its existence Beatles Lantern Club tended to build in the Ship and Animal categories and there are no records of UpGun ever building a Miscellaneous-type *lantan*.

Another very active *lantan* builder of Fourah Bay origin was Abiodun Robinson who was Gabisi's first cousin. Indeed, Robinson boasted to me that his only competitor was Gabisi himself (with whom he grew up). Robinson, who was also a well-known secret society adherent and herbalist, had over the years built *lantans* for a number of clubs but was most closely associated with Babylon Lantern Club which grew out of an earlier club established in the 1960s called Apollo Post (after the American space programme). Robinson developed his *lantan* building skills as a youngster helping with Apollo Post's *lantans*. He told me that he had never taken the lead in building a ship *lantan* (though he had once helped with one) and had never built 'Dance Troupe' or 'Devil Dancers' (although he claimed to know how). The *lantan* themes with which he was most familiar as a builder included 'St John and the Dragon', 'Abraham and Isaac', 'Daniel in the Lion's Den', 'Adam and Eve', 'Jonah and the Big Fish', 'Wise King Solomon', 'Horse and Carriage', 'Coat of Arms' and a mosque. In 1993 he built the 'Queen's Visit to Sierra Leone in 1961' for Babylon Lantern Club and followed it

in 1997 with 'Al-Buraq'. In 1993 he was also contracted to build the 'Forecourt of the Cottage Hospital' for Bronx Lantern Club. Robinson was a good friend of Madu Carr who belonged to the same Ojeh Society lodge and who helped with Babylon's *lantan* in 1993 when Robinson's involvement in building two *lantans* left him struggling to meet the parade deadline. Carr was also a friend of another Fourah Bay – based *lantan* builder called Ali Fofanah who was born of Temne parentage in Clinetown in 1951 and who, like Gabisi and Joaque, joined Beatles Lantern Club as a boy. With them he trained under Beatles' first *lantan* builder whom, in time, he and Gabisi succeeded. Ali Fofanah followed a technical training in engineering and welding and went to sea with Mobil in the 1970s and again (with BP) in the early 1990s. He was able to participate in the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades during periods of home leave. However, in the 1980s he stayed in Freetown and worked on contracts with Gabisi, supplying technical and welding expertise to supplement Gabisi's commercial art and craft skills. Like Joaque and Robinson Fofanah concentrated on building Ship and Animal *lantans*. He himself admitted that he was not good at depicting masked *debuls* and that his 'best' *lantan* was a warship. When I first met Ali Fofanah in 1993 he was building Clinetonian Lantern Club's 'School Bus' (which he repeated for them in 1997) and Mandela Lantern Club's 'Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line'. Fofanah's carpentry skills were impressive and he was capable of designing and constructing huge wooden *lantan* frames able to take the weight of dozens of people. He was also an excellent organiser and by working with several assistants he could build *lantans* for two or three different lantern clubs at any one time. In 1997 he built the frames and supervised the completion of *lantans* for Beatles Lantern Club (a train comprising an engine and two carriages), Mandela Lantern Club (a mosque) and Clinetonians Lantern Club ('School Bus'). Fofanah had extensive contacts among *lantan* builders and was a friend of both Eustace Yaskey (with whom he attended the Technical Trade Centre at Kissy Dockyard) and Degool (with whom he actively collaborated in the building of *debuls*<sup>67</sup>).

### 6.3.11 King Tom builders in the West End of Freetown

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<sup>67</sup> I was told that Fofanah was an expert builder of *debuls* (Interview 95/146).

Through his seafaring connections and his friendships within Clinetonians Lantern Club Fofanah was in contact with other seamen and employees of shipping companies based in Clinetown. The President of Clinetonians was Samuel Feka who worked for Sierra Leone National Shipping Company. Among his colleagues within the same company were Abdul Kamara and Karankay Mansaray – both of whom had long connections with the *lantana* tradition in the West End of Freetown. Mr Karankay was President of Congo Market Lantern Club which emerged as an offshoot of King Tom Lantern Club in the 1960s. Abdul Kamara was a *lantana* builder who started his career with King Tom in 1960 following in the footsteps of his father (who was a welder attached to the Elder Dempster Shipping Company) from whom he learnt the necessary skills.<sup>68</sup> Abdul Kamara later transferred to Congo Market Lantern Club and helped build its *lantans* until the late 1970s. By then he was working for the National Shipping Company and through his contacts in Freetown's East End he joined Gabisi for several years in building for Beatles Lantern Club. King Tom Lantern Club always specialised in ship *lantans* and in 1997 produced 'HMS Clarkson' which gained the highest marks of any *lantana* in the parade. Abdul Kamara was one of several *lantana* builders who collaborated in its construction and in cutting the *takada* (fancy paperwork) which covered it. In addition to ship *lantans* (which he claimed were his speciality) Kamara also maintained that he could build animal *lantans*. He was also skilled in sewing, tailoring and upholstery work which, he had learnt through his contacts in what he called the '*lantana* business'.

Over the years King Tom Lantern Club generated an extensive network of *lantana* builders who used their skills to build *lantans* for neighbouring clubs in the West End. Among them were M S Kamara who was responsible for Tengbeh Town's *lantana* in 1993<sup>69</sup> and Ade Sawyerr (who in 1993 built a tiny aeroplane *lantana* for Congo Town Lantern Club which had all but collapsed by the early 1990s). Ade Sawyerr had learnt his skills by watching *lantans* being built in Congo Town in the 1970s.<sup>70</sup> Another builder influenced by King Tom Lantern Club was Samuel Johnson who was a man of

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<sup>68</sup> Elder Dempster repaired its lighters (for discharging cargo) at Marine Yard which in those days was situated alongside King Tom harbour which was too small for big ships to enter (Interview 92/45).

<sup>69</sup> See pages 142-144.

<sup>70</sup> He particularly remembered one builder who also built for King Tom and who was working for National Shipping in the 1990s. This may well have been Abdul Kamara. By National Shipping Ade Sawyerr meant the Sierra Leone National Shipping Company.

about sixty when I met him in 1992. He had joined Elder Dempster as a deck boy in 1950 and later transferred to the National Shipping Company in 1973. In 1985 he joined the Sierra Leone Ports Authority. During his many years at sea he travelled widely to ports in America, the Far East and Europe and still had vivid memories of Catholic Lenten celebrations in Spain in the early fifties when he saw float parades which reminded him of Freetown's *lantans*. It was this experience that convinced him that he would like to build *lantans* back in Sierra Leone even though he was a Christian and Freetown's lantern parades were then dominated by Muslims. In the 1960s he supported King Tom Lantern Club but later transferred his allegiance to Congo Market where he built ship *lantans* for a number of lantern parades. Over the years he was also hired by other lantern clubs, including Brookfields (in the West End) and Green Lane (in the East End). The last *lantan* he built was a warship (called 'Habanna Water') for Congo Market Lantern Club in 1990. It was through builders like Abdul Kamara and Samuel Johnson that the *lantan* building network generated by King Tom Lantern Club in the West End of Freetown spread deep into the East End of the city.

#### 6.4 Concluding remarks

My research clearly indicates that Freetown's *lantan* builders did not operate in isolation from one another but rather were part of a fluctuating network of practitioners whose individual sub-networks of contacts constantly overlapped (Fig. 6). Considerable exchange of knowledge and ideas took place within sub-networks between experienced *lantan* builders and apprentices (assistants), between relatives and neighbours and between co-workers and friends. Even the few *lantan* builders I met in Freetown who had learnt their skills from people outside the network I have described were well acquainted with other builders' workmanship and ideas. One such builder was Sammah Sesay who had been associated with Mighty Spear Lantern Club since his boyhood.<sup>71</sup> In the 1960s when the club was first established it hired a *lantan* builder from Mange Bureh (in the Northern Province) who built religious themes and who was particularly expert at constructing animal figures. Sammah Sesay learnt under him and by the

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<sup>71</sup> The other two were Alusine Conteh (and his colleagues) at Mighty Red Lion who learnt under the provincial builder Pa Johnson, and Lansana Daramy (Kissy PWD) who learnt under provincial builders (some of whom came from Lunsar in the Northern Province). Unlike Alusine and Sammah only Lansana Daramy was actually living up-country (in Songo) when he learnt to build *lantans*. Alusine Conteh and Sammah Sesay both learnt in Freetown.

1970s had taken over responsibility for Mighty Spear's annual *lantan*. Like his teacher before him Sesay became known for building animal puppets and had most success with Animal *lantans* (App 14:7.1). However, he also built in the Ship and Miscellaneous categories and claimed to have been the first person to represent *mamaparah* (a dancer on stilts) in puppet form. Like many *lantan* builders Sammah Sesay had a wide range of interests and had an established network of friends and contacts that interpenetrated many different interest groups in Freetown at different levels. He used to be a keen Ojeh Society member and was chairman of a leading amateur football association in central Freetown. He was, moreover, a long-serving member of the executive committee of the YMMA and during the preparations for each lantern parade was in formal contact with every participating lantern club in Freetown.

The network of *lantan* builders in Freetown during the 1990s was far larger than I could research and document. From the data I was able to gather, however, I concluded that there existed a broad repertoire of *lantan* themes and a pool of technical knowledge to which all builders had varying degrees of access, depending on their contacts, circumstances and, of course, their motivation. The extent to which individuals appropriated and used the *lantan* building knowledge and skills available to them ultimately depended on such factors as personal choice and ability. Similarly, individual builders varied in the extent to which they adapted ideas and techniques, or actively tried to innovate. In this respect it is interesting to compare two very different *lantan* builders of similar ages. Eustace Yaskey and Ali Fofanah both attended the Technical Trade Centre at around the same time and remained friends ever since. The former, however, moved on from building established *lantan* themes (like ships, mosques, animals and religious subjects) to representing new cultural themes (like 'Dance Troupe' and 'Madam Yoko and the Bundu Dancers'). Moreover, he took up and exploited innovative techniques (like Webber's use of springs and heavy mechanism). Fofanah, on the other hand, concentrated on certain types of 'Ship' *lantans* (particularly buildings, ships and the double-decker bus) which depend on highly skilled carpentry work and not on their degree of articulation. Yet Fofanah clearly had the ability to mechanise a *lantan* and, as a welder and engineer might even have been able to rival Yaskey in his use of heavy mechanism should he have chosen to do so.

There are a number of factors that might be relevant to an understanding of the

different approaches of the two men. Yaskey was brought up in the Mountain Cut area where there was probably the densest concentration of creative energy and enterprises (lantern clubs, secret society lodges etc) anywhere in Freetown. Fofanah, on the other hand, was brought up in Fourah Bay where a strongly conservative Islamic element had at times put up fierce resistance to any secret societies and associations (and their attendant activities) deemed inappropriate on religious grounds.<sup>72</sup> Yaskey, moreover, was nominally a Christian and was, therefore, perceived by others (and probably by himself) to be marginal to the religious debate surrounding the connections and contradictions between *lantan* building and the end of Ramadan. Several people made the point to me that the most far-reaching developments within Freetown's *lantan* tradition (namely the popularisation of cultural themes and the use of increased mechanisation) had been fostered by a Christian (Yaskey) who, despite having a mother with strong provincial links, had no deep-rooted family ties to the *lantan* tradition.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, Yaskey, his assistants and many of the *lantan* builders who produced *lantans* in the Animal and Miscellaneous categories styled themselves, quite self-consciously, as artists. Most builders, however, who produced *lantans* only in the Ship category, did not. Yaskey did indeed earn his living as a commercial artist as to varying degrees did Degool, Tipo, Joseph Mambu, Biggi Joe and Gabisi. Many of these builders also undertook artistic work for secret societies, making *debul* costumes and/or carving *debul* headpieces (masks). So too did Alie Fofanah, whilst Lasisi and Goba were two of the leading secret society artists in Freetown. Meantime there were other *lantan* builders who professed to make occasional earnings from art and craft activities as and when the opportunity arose.<sup>74</sup> However, dedicated ship *lantan* builders in the tradition of King Tom Lantern Club (like M S Kamara) considered their skills to be those of expert technicians – carpenters and draughtsmen – and did not use the English term artist to describe themselves. This distinction seemed to stem from Western attitudes to art and craft – attitudes to which Freetown's population had long been exposed. The distinction proved to be of little help in understanding the principles

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<sup>72</sup> For example, the Ojeh Society (also known as *egugu*). See pages 58-59 and 67.

<sup>73</sup> Yaskey's mother was a Muslim of Susu origin from the Northern Province and held a leading position in a Bundu lodge in Freetown.

<sup>74</sup> Such as Santigi Sesay, Usman Kamara and Alusine Conteh.

incorporated in local evaluations of *lantans* as products of the skill and imagination of their builders. The next chapter examines the way in which *lantan* builders themselves (as well as supporters of the *lantan* tradition in general) evaluated *lantans*, and it addresses the issue of whether, and in what sense, *lantans* can be understood as art.

PRINCIPLES OF *LANTAN* EVALUATION: ARE *LANTANS* ART?

7.1 Introduction

Given the wide variation in *lantana* themes and the differences in building technology and appearance between *lantans* of different types, it was difficult to imagine that there could be any single set of criteria by which *lantans* were evaluated either formally, by parade judges, or informally by parade participants and audiences in Freetown. Nevertheless, in the course of my research (1994-95) I discussed the 1993 lantern parade with five of its six judges and with many of the *lantana* builders who had participated in it (as well as with various lantern club leaders). I discovered a considerable degree of consensus among them as to what constituted a potentially winning *lantana*. Virtually everyone I questioned maintained that in order to win a prize a *lantana* should bear the closest possible resemblance to its subject or theme and, by extension, it should incorporate as much relevant action (human or puppet) as possible. Some people were able to describe the specific properties that enabled a *lantana* to achieve a high degree of realism and these included size, strength, scale, shape colour, detail and the neatness of its finish. Others pointed out that the choice of *lantana* theme was of fundamental importance since even the most realistic of *lantans* would be undermined if its subject matter were uninteresting, inappropriate or unrecognisable. Given the use of the term '*lantana*' in Freetown I was surprised that during the course of my research very few people referred to lighting or luminosity as a significant feature of a successful *lantana* float.

The YMMA had formalised the competitive nature of the lantern parades in the 1960s and, as already explained, divided *lantans* into three categories for judging purposes – Ship, Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans*.<sup>1</sup> However, the YMMA had never, to my knowledge, produced guidelines to help clubs and *lantana* builders achieve specific standards within each category or to assist judges in evaluating *lantans*

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<sup>1</sup> I use capital letters when referring to a category of *lantana* but lower case when describing a specific *lantana*. For example, 'HMS Revolution' (1993) belonged to the Ship category and was a ship *lantana*; the 'Clock Tower' (1993 & 1997) also belonged to the Ship category but clearly was not a ship *lantana*.

according to any publicly recognised criteria. In the absence of any official policy document or set of written regulations I first turned to individuals - builders, club members, general enthusiasts and judges - for information about how in practice they identified the qualities of winning *lantans*. Then, during the 1997 lantern parade I followed the judging procedures very closely in order to ascertain whether people's expectations were realised. I discuss the 1997 results in the following section as a means of introducing the issues which form the main focus of the rest of the chapter.

## 7.2 Lantan evaluation in practice

In February 1997 the YMMA appointed nine judges for the end-of Ramadan lantern parade. One, Louise Metzger was a retired head of the Art Department at Milton Margai Teachers' College (MMTC) and was a respected UK-trained artist in her own right. Another, Kitty Fadlu-Deen, was then head of the Music Department at MMTC. Ahmadu Jah was a musician and Eke Halloway was a Freetown lawyer (who had judged a number of previous lantern parades). The fifth judge was Hilton Fyle, a talented musician and well-known radio journalist (formerly working for the BBC Africa Service) and the sixth was Alhaji M P Bayo, Principal of the Ahmaddiya Muslim Secondary School in Freetown. The other three judges were all respected Freetown personages.

For the purposes of the competition the participating *lantans* were divided as usual into three categories. *Lantans* depicting structures (ships, other forms of transport and architectural forms) without puppet figures fell into category A and often included human actors. *Lantans* comprising human and/or animal puppet figures (but no structures or human actors) fell into B. finally, *lantans* mixing structures and animal or human puppets (but no human actors) fell into C. Category C was by far the largest (comprising twenty five out of a total of forty three *lantans*) and Category B was the smallest (only eight *lantans* in all). The YMMA therefore decided (for the first time ever) to sub-divide Category C into C-1 (comprising *lantans* with mainly topical and historical themes and incorporating fairly limited animation) and C-2 (cultural and entertainment themes with a high degree of animation). Each of the nine judges had up to 100 points to allot each *lantan* so that the maximum achievable by any one *lantan* was 900. Six *lantans* achieved scores between 600 and 665 and a further nineteen achieved scores between 500 and 600. The scores of the rest fell below 500.

FIGURE 7

SUMMARY OF LANTERN PARADE RESULTS<sup>2</sup>  
FEBRUARY 1997

|    | <u>Lantern club</u>        | <u>Lantan title</u>              | <u>Lantan marks</u> | <u>Categ -ory</u> | <u>Overall position*</u> |
|----|----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1  | Super Combo                | Madam Yoko and the Sande dancers | 665                 | C:2               | 6                        |
| 2  | Firestone                  | Funfair                          | 662                 | C:2               | 8                        |
| 3  | King Tom                   | Ship                             | 652                 | A                 | 1                        |
| 4  | Crojimmy                   | Marriage Ceremony                | 646                 | C:2               | 3                        |
| 5  | Mighty Endeavour           | Jolly Festival                   | 630½                | C:2               | 4                        |
| 6  | Kossoh Town                | Green Revolution                 | 611                 | C:1               |                          |
| 7  | Baimbrace-Block Lane       | Afisatu and her Tortoise         | 585                 | B                 |                          |
| 8  | Ishrine                    | Aeroplane                        | 583                 | A                 | 2                        |
| 9  | Vimto                      | Nfali and the Kafiri             | 579½                | B                 |                          |
| 10 | Kissy Central              | Madam Yoko and the Sande society | 579                 | C:2               |                          |
| 11 | Ascension Town             | Ship                             | 559½                | A                 |                          |
| 12 | Mighty Spear               | St George and the dragon         | 556                 | B                 |                          |
| 13 | Murray Town                | Ship                             | 553                 | A                 |                          |
| 14 | Rainbow                    | Peace Conference                 | 550                 | C:1               |                          |
| 15 | Beatles                    | Train                            | 549                 | A                 | 5                        |
| 16 | Aberdeen Ferry Road        | Mosque                           | 547½                | C:1               | 7                        |
| 17 | Babylon                    | Al-Buraq                         | 539                 | C:1               |                          |
| 18 | Freetong Players           | The Amistad                      | 530                 | C:1               |                          |
| 19 | Portee Muslim              | Peace Conference                 | 520                 | C:1               |                          |
| 20 | Clinetonians               | Double Decker Bus                | 515                 | A                 |                          |
| 21 | Ashoebi Corner             | Conveyor Vehicle                 | 513                 | C:1               |                          |
| 22 | Lion Mountain              | Al-Buraq                         | 512                 | C:1               |                          |
| 23 | Kissy PWD                  | St George and the dragon         | 508                 | B                 |                          |
| 24 | Mandela Youth Organisation | Mosque                           | 507                 | C:1               |                          |
| 25 | Wellington                 | The Muppet Show                  | 501                 | C:2               |                          |

\* Calculated by totalling the points awarded a club's *lantana*, *aswebi*, comportment and music

<sup>2</sup> Records of the marks awarded in the 1997 lantern parade are contained in Appendix 9.

Interestingly the top six *lantans* comprised the winners in Categories A, C-1 and C-2 plus three further *lantans* from Category C-2. This indicates that, like ordinary *lantan* enthusiasts, the judges were particularly impressed by a *lantan's* action.<sup>3</sup> As noted above, Category C-2 comprised the most highly articulated *lantans* and four of the six top *lantans* (with over 600 points) came from this category. In all, *lantans* in Category C-2 did well in the competition, three quarters of them achieving marks of over 500.<sup>4</sup>

Several of the judges' decisions, however, proved controversial. In particular, Kissy Central Lantern Club's *lantan* (depicting Madam Yoko and the Sande dancers) came a disappointing fifth in Category C-2. Built by Tipó, it was very similar to his 1993 *lantan* (depicting the same theme and also built for Kissy Central Lantern Club) which took first place that year in Category C. In 1997, however, Tipó's *lantan* included four female puppet figures carrying a representation of the *kundeí* (the Sande Society medicine) contained in an oblong box covered in a white cloth.<sup>5</sup> No *lantan* builder had dared represent the *kundeí* before but Tipó sought and obtained approval from the leaders of the local Bundu lodges in the Kissy area where the lantern club was based. He maintained that his 1997 *lantan* was the most complete representation of the Madam Yoko theme ever made. For him, and for many *lantan* enthusiasts completeness (a notion closely allied in Freetown to that of accuracy) was of paramount importance. By contrast, they considered that Yaskey's winning *lantan* for Super Combo (depicting the same theme) was woefully incomplete because it comprised fewer relevant characters. However, several judges later commented that whilst Yaskey's *lantan* was well composed with every item clearly visible, Tipó's *lantan* was too densely packed, its composition was poor and the puppeteers had difficulty operating the puppet figures in the constricted space available to them. Tipó responded to this criticism when I explained it to him by complaining that Kissy Central Lantern Club simply could not afford to build a larger chassis and platform to

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<sup>3</sup> In Freetown the term 'action' is used to refer to the degree of articulation incorporated into *lantans* by means of mechanisms (articulated joints and moving components) as well as to the overall performance of *lantans*, whether through the use of human actors or through the operation of a *lantan's* mechanisms.

<sup>4</sup> A total of 500 or more marks was achieved by 75% of *lantans* in Category C-2, 66.6% of *lantans* in Category B, 60% in A, and only 56% in C-1.

<sup>5</sup> See page 167, note 102.

accommodate all the components which he, the builder, considered necessary for the *lantan* to be complete.

Crojimmy Lantern Club's 'Marriage Ceremony' was another *lantan* over which opinions were divided. It achieved third place in Category C-2 with a total of 646 points. Built by Lasisi its central puppets depicted a bride and groom splendidly bedecked in dazzling wedding attire. For added entertainment a small *debul* puppet figure was included although it did not appear to represent any identifiable *debul* type. A number of *lantan* enthusiasts criticised the judges' decision to mark the *lantan* so highly because they considered the wedding party incomplete and Lasisi's puppets to be undersized. Moreover, the *debul* puppet could not be recognised. They felt that instead of valuing what they considered to be the essential features of the *lantan* the judges had been swayed by its gaudy, decorative appearance.

Finally, the decision to accord first place in Category B to Baimbrace-Block Lane Lantern Club's *lantan* drew a great deal of criticism from *lantan* enthusiasts. Entitled 'Afisatu and the tortoise' the *lantan*, built by Biggi Joe, depicted the figures of a girl and a huge tortoise.<sup>6</sup> The shell of the tortoise was large enough for a boy to climb inside and operate the creature's forelimbs and head which protruded from underneath it. The limbs and head were made of hessian matting and by inserting his own head and arms into them the boy puppeteer was able to extend and retract them in a very realistic way. The judges clearly found this *lantan* imaginative and unusual (and some, I suspect, may well have been unaware that it was based on a tale from a primary school reader about a girl and her pet tortoise); at any rate it elicited a very positive and amused response at the judging point. However, many *lantan* enthusiasts were horrified that a *lantan* that relied on very few puppeteers could be judged better than other *lantans* in the same category which demonstrated a much higher level of technical skill (evidenced in the far greater number of mechanisms included in them).<sup>7</sup>

The criticisms levelled against some of the decisions made by the lantern parade judges in 1997 were fully explicable in terms of the information I had gathered in the mid-1990s about the principles of *lantan* evaluation. The evaluation of *lantans*, I had

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of this *lantan*, see page 271, note 70.

discovered, involved notions of resemblance and realism which were expressed through a combination of the choice of subject matter, the presence of a set of basic *lantan* properties and the degree, complexity and effectiveness of the action (human or puppet) that was incorporated into the *lantan*. These issues are explored in the following sections of this chapter and provide a basis for the concluding discussions about the nature of *lantan* art and the role of *lantan* builders and artists.

### 7.3 *Lantan* subject matter: recognisability

During the course of my research I encountered a variety of opinions as to why a particular image or theme was chosen by a builder or club for their *lantan* in any particular lantern parade. Sometimes it was simply a matter of an individual builder's particular skills and specialisation combined with the issue of cost. Often, however, additional factors influenced the choice of *lantan* subject, such as the appropriateness of the theme to the occasion. Since the lantern parade was firmly associated with celebrating the end of the month of Ramadan some people placed great emphasis on its religious connotations and favoured *lantan* themes that reflected the parade's connection with an Islamic festival. Others interpreted the sense of occasion more broadly and suggested that a *lantan* should depict 'something meaningful for the tradition of Sierra Leone' in a general way - be it religious, historical, cultural or national.<sup>8</sup> Some clubs and builders were content to rely on well-established *lantan* subjects drawn from the existing repertoire of imagery (discussed in chapter 5). However, others were keen to develop fresh subject matter particularly of a topical nature. Several of the judges of the 1993 lantern parade mentioned that they placed considerable importance on the choice of theme – what they called the *lantan's* idea – and awarded extra marks to *lantans* they felt reflected creative thinking. All the 1993 judges whom I interviewed insisted, though, that whether a *lantan* theme was already familiar to spectators or completely new, it must be meaningful. They explained that in order to be meaningful a *lantan* should not comprise just a mix of unrelated components with no obvious theme connecting them together, but should depict an identifiable subject that would both excite the interest of spectators and at the same

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<sup>7</sup> 'Afisatu and the tortoise' had one puppeteer inside the tortoise and one (or possibly two others) alongside who operated the strings attached to Afisatu and an accompanying puppet figure.

time be morally acceptable. The depiction of Bob Marley in *lantan* form in the early 1980s was mentioned as an example of a topic considered by many to be morally inappropriate, given Marley's known association with drugs.<sup>9</sup>

Not everyone with whom I discussed the issue expressed strong opinions about which *lantan* theme they preferred but nearly everyone was clear as to the type of subject matter that should *not* appear in *lantan* form. In addition to topics simply deemed uninteresting, disjointed (and therefore meaningless) or morally unsound, there was complete consensus that *lantans* should not touch on blasphemous subject matter. In 1973 one lantern club (from Brookfields in western Freetown) caused a major surprise by depicting Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The lantern parade that year fell in late October and was disrupted by a heavy downpour of rain that started around 10.15 pm. The judges left the scene and most of the *lantans* were destroyed by the rain before they reached the Law Courts.<sup>10</sup> The YMMA later declared the parade null and void.<sup>11</sup> About a week afterwards a letter appeared in the press that criticised the *lantan* depicting Christ for being offensive to Christians; it accused the builder (a Muslim) of mocking Christ's suffering.<sup>12</sup> The writer suggested that it was the Lord's disapproval that caused the thunderstorm that ruined the lantern parade and he predicted that the thousands who witnessed the storm would remember the event for years. His prediction proved accurate as the incident was described to me on numerous occasions in the 1990s and to my knowledge no one has repeated the subject matter of the

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<sup>8</sup> Interview 95/148. A similar view that I heard expressed (Interview 94/2a-b) – was that *lantans* should be 'educative' and should convey a message that was in some way beneficial to the public.

<sup>9</sup> Interview 95/140.

<sup>10</sup> DM: 30 October 1973.

<sup>11</sup> DM: 31 October 1973.

<sup>12</sup> DM: 5 November 1973. The letter pointed out that Muslims do not believe that Christ was the Son of God, died on the cross and rose again. It advised the builder to choose another theme in future to display his skill. I later learnt that the lantern club responsible for building the *lantan* included a number of non-Muslims and its Muslim *lantan* builder thought that the Christian theme might suit them. Instead it caused widespread consternation. I did not gain the impression that the YMMA or Muslims in general were concerned about the theme on religious grounds but more because of the offence it caused the Christian community. The club responsible was referred to as Brookfields (DM: 27 October 1973). I understand this was Mighty Spear (Interview 95/74).

offending *lantans*. *Lantans* depicting the birth of Christ have, however, been built on several occasions and seem not to have aroused any controversy.<sup>13</sup>

The boundaries that divided acceptable from unacceptable *lantans* themes were nowhere more firmly drawn than in the distinction made between secret and non-secret subject matter – the former referring to the secret knowledge controlled by different secret societies in Sierra Leone and accessible only to their members. People regarded the *debuls* that were associated with the control of secret society medicine and its associated secret knowledge as quite distinct from those *debuls* that were not.<sup>14</sup> Hence I was assured that *debuls* connected with such powerful secret societies as the Hunting, Otta and Ojeh Societies have never been depicted in *lantans* form, unlike *debuls* that had a largely entertainment role in Freetown.<sup>15</sup> The apparent exception to this rule has been the incorporation over the last thirty years of the Bundu/Sande theme within the general repertoire of *lantans* imagery.<sup>16</sup>

It became clear during the course of my research that the choice of *lantans* imagery and subject matter represented different levels of challenge to lantern clubs and *lantans* builders. Many clubs and builders relied on well established topics while others expended a considerable amount of time and imagination on developing fresh subject matter. YMMA records from the 1980s and 1990s indicate that each year a small number of *lantans* introduced new themes and imagery to the lantern parades and herein lay much of the *lantans* tradition's innovative potential. The names of certain builders and lantern clubs stand out as being in the forefront of this process of innovation. In particular, Tippo was prepared to confront and test the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable in his quest for new or more interesting *lantans* topics. His 1997 *lantans* depicting the Bundu Society and including a depiction of the *kunde* directly challenged the widely accepted convention prohibiting the depiction of the more secret aspects of Bundu practices. His action served to illustrate the principle that within the *lantans* tradition creative expression both embodied and actively reinforced

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Ashanti Lantern Club (1989). While Muslims and Christians disagree over the nature of Christ's death they both accept the fact of his birth.

<sup>14</sup> Phillips 1995: 55-57.

<sup>15</sup> See pages 165-166 and pages 267, 269-270.

<sup>16</sup> See pages 166-167 and pages 270-271.

indigenous thinking about the nature and use of secret male and female knowledge and power.<sup>17</sup> The ramifications of this will be further explored in Chapter 8.

## 7.4 Lantan properties

### 7.4.1 Strength and size

I quickly discovered that *lantans* were expected to incorporate certain basic properties. Older *lantan* builders in particular emphasised the need for *lantans* to be strongly built – especially those falling into the category of Ship *lantans*. These *lantans* usually had wooden frames and their construction required an extensive knowledge of carpentry. They often carried human passengers and needed, therefore, to be able bear a considerable amount of weight. It was especially important that a Ship *lantan* was mounted on a firm chassis with strong wheels.<sup>18</sup> Each lantern club was responsible for organising the construction of its *lantan's* chassis which usually comprised an iron frame and wheels (constructed by a local welder) with a raised wooden platform on top. The materials used were normally pieces of scrap metal, fence sticks and, if the club could afford it, planks of sawn timber. While strength and durability would never alone achieve a winning position for any *lantan* they were clearly features that affected a *lantan's* visual impact and performance: a *lantan* whose appearance and action were impaired by a broken chassis or by broken structures or mechanisms would inevitably be marked down by the judges.

Another pertinent factor was size. Many *lantan* enthusiasts mentioned that the larger the *lantan* the more likely it was to carry human passengers (in the case of Ship *lantans*) or contain a large number of puppet figures (Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans*). Furthermore, a large *lantan* was more easily seen by spectators and therefore

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<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately I was unable to conduct further research into public reaction towards Tipo's innovation and, more specifically, whether his failure to obtain first prize for this *lantan* was interpreted as evidence of the unacceptability of some of its content. However, in the course of building his *lantan* Tipo did confide that some members of the local Bundu lodge in Kissy were critical of the inclusion of the *kunde*.

<sup>18</sup> This factor was important for every *lantan*, but Ship *lantans* could be particularly heavy. In 1997 the dire condition of most of Freetown's streets combined with a road improvement project that involved extensive excavation work meant that most *lantans* that participated in the lantern parade (irrespective of how large or heavy they were) experienced one or more breakdowns along the route. One *lantan* actually missed the parade because of the number of times its chassis gave problems during the long trip to the city centre (see pages 39-40).

likely to have a much greater visual impact. People also expressed a strong expectation that the animal and human puppets that featured in Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* should be life-size. According to Tipo, miniature puppets could not look real and he criticised Firestone Lantern Club for building puppet figures the size of children but with adult-looking faces. On the other hand, *lantan* structures could not always be full-size and everyone accepted that, in the case of ship *lantans*, for example, though the actors on board were adult humans, the *lantan* structures themselves were miniature replicas.

#### 7.4.2 Scale, shape, colour and detail

While strength and size were deemed important, these two properties always needed to be combined with an exact sense of proportion and scale. Thus people expected a *lantan* depicting a specific ship or mosque to be made to scale in every detail even though it could not be built to size. They also expected animal puppets to be made in proportion to the human puppets that accompanied them (and preferably, therefore, full-size) and the latter to be in correct proportion with one another (male, female, adult, child) as they would be in real life. Several people criticised Ali Fofanah for the way he built ‘Marcus Garvey and the Black Star Line’ in 1993 because the figure of Marcus Garvey was huge in relation to the other figures on the *lantan*. Commenting on this one consultee told me that *lantan* figures should be ‘... more or less the same size – exaggeration puts me off.’<sup>19</sup> Two experienced builders, Degool and Papa Mansaray, both maintained that Fofanah’s *lantan* was simply inaccurate and, according to Degool, Fofanah should have studied more closely the picture of Garvey from which Degool assumed he had worked. No one considered that the builder might have deliberately built Marcus Garvey’s figure extraordinarily large in order to suggest Garvey’s significance as founder of the Black Star Line and of the Back to Africa movement.<sup>20</sup>

Closely associated with scale and proportion was the concept of shape. In the course of my research I was repeatedly told that *lantan* builders ‘must build to shape’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview 95/87. The informant clearly did not consider that a subject’s size could be indicative of social importance.

<sup>20</sup> See page 232.

<sup>21</sup> Interview 95/146.

Among the 1993 *lantans* that were frequently criticised for being shapeless were the ‘Statue of Liberty’, ‘Animal Farm’ and the two *lantans* depicting Sierra Leone’s coat of arms. In all these cases the subject matter was not ‘built in proper form’<sup>22</sup>: it simply did not resemble the real thing closely enough. Of the animal puppets comprising ‘Animal Farm’ Degool remarked derogatorily ‘They are like a primary school picture’ implying that they were like the shapeless artistic efforts of a child.<sup>23</sup>

Two factors – colour and detail – were generally considered by builders as enhancing a *lantan*’s resemblance to its subject matter. The colours of all the component parts of a *lantan* were expected to be correct and to correspond exactly to those of the people, animals or objects they depicted. Thus, as Degool pointed out, the figure of a dog could never be coloured bright red.<sup>24</sup> In the same way builders were expected to pay attention to other types of detail. Thus a *lantan* would be criticised if it included puppets that were out of character with its theme – as would be the case if a *lantan* depicting a Bundu scene included the figure of a male.<sup>25</sup> Similarly the figure of a woman playing a *segbureh* (a musical instrument comprising a long-necked gourd covered with beaded netting) was supposed to wear a woman’s wrapper (*lappa*) not western dress and the clothing worn by the puppet version of a Bundu dancer (*sampa*) should faithfully replicate a real *sampa* costume.<sup>26</sup> The emphasis placed on accuracy, correctness and exactness was demonstrated by the frequent use of these very terms in the course of discussions. I was repeatedly told that these qualities were what rendered a *lantan*’s structure and theme instantly recognisable and that this was always a *lantan* builder’s ultimate goal.

### 7.4.3 Finish

The way in which a *lantan* was finished was always carefully scrutinised. Time and again I was told that neatness was extremely important. For example, the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview 94/49.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 95/103.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. (Clearly, Freetown’s *lantan* builders would decry the Western Fauve aesthetic were they to be aware of it.)

<sup>25</sup> Interview 4/49. The Temne do not use male drummers in their Bundu performances (whereas the Mende Sande Society does). Interview 94/25.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 94/41.

paperwork designs (*takada*) that were customarily used to cover ship and mosque *lantans* needed to be neatly cut and applied. Similarly it was expected that the various structures (components) making up Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* should be carefully made and decorated and, in the case of puppet figures, should wear neatly produced costumes. Informants often used the terms decent and presentable in association with neat implying the general expectation that a *lantan* must be made with careful attention to every aspect of its appearance. A related factor was the choice of colour. Two leading *lantan* builders (who were both full-time commercial artists) mentioned the importance of colour contrasts and colour combinations. Joseph Mambu and Tipu both felt that adjacent colours should differ from one another – for example ‘...three red items should not stand together...’.<sup>27</sup> Neatness, decorative effects and colouration (colour choice) all contributed to a *lantan*’s beautification and it was in this context alone that consultees used the English term “beautiful”. ‘I like to see beautiful things – things that are neat’ the leader of Kissy Central Lantern Club told me.<sup>28</sup> An experienced, older builder similarly explained that ‘the beauty side of the *lantan*’ lay in the neatness of its papering and decoration – ‘That is what is attractive’.<sup>29</sup>

### 7.5 Notions of resemblance and realism

The combination of *lantan* properties discussed in the previous section formed the basis of a conception of mimesis which constituted the key criterion by which *lantans* were evaluated by *lantan* enthusiasts in Freetown. People expected a *lantan* to be a ‘true imitation’<sup>30</sup> of the subject it depicted and by concentrating on the properties described above *lantan* builders used their skills to achieve in their *lantans* as close a degree of resemblance to reality as possible. This helps explain why builders either selected a *lantan* topic from the established repertoire of *lantan* themes and subjects, or expanded that repertoire by using fresh imagery that was well-known and, however inventively used, would be instantly recognised. Themes and images drawn from popular books, the media, long-established cultural traditions and everyday life easily fitted these latter criteria. Imagery drawn purely from a builder’s imagination was

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<sup>27</sup> Interview 95/94.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 95/87.

<sup>29</sup> Interview 95/81.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews 94/8b, 94/35 & 95/134.

likely to be dismissed as meaningless because people simply could not recognise and relate to it. No value was attached to individual creativity when it moved beyond the bounds of people's personal and collective understanding and knowledge of the world around them.

These principles were clearly demonstrated in people's attitudes to street art where the same value was placed on accuracy and realism. In 1993 there was a huge surge of popular fervour in support of the military regime (the NPRC) which had overthrown the government of President Momoh in 1992. Young people throughout Freetown joined together in neighbourhood youth organisations to clean up the city, repair drains and roads, plant flowers and shrubs and paint exterior walls with a variety of images, including the portraits of historical and popular political figures, national emblems and cultural scenes. Joseph Opala described these murals, together with the cement sculptures and road-side decorations that appeared with them, as 'patriotic art'.<sup>31</sup> The most widely acclaimed example of street art that appeared in early 1993 was a series of some thirty portraits painted by Sergeant Alusine Bangura, a prison officer, on the walls of the Public Works Department located near the country's main prison on Pademba Road (which links western Freetown to the city centre). Bangura's portraits ranged from national figures (pre- and post-Independence) and international politicians and heads of state, to a popular Sierra Leonean boy scout who bicycled through Africa in the 1950s. According to Opala 'Bangura is a competent portraitist, and people are impressed with the technical skill he brings to individual subjects – Sierra Leoneans marvel that his pictures "look just like photographs"'.<sup>32</sup> Opala describes Bangura's portraits as painted '... in a realistic style, clear and sharp, with 'natural colours', and the writing [caption] outside the picture, like labels in a photograph album.'<sup>33</sup> They were admired, therefore, for the very qualities exhibited by the most acclaimed *lantans*.

The value placed on photographic realism in Freetown is unsurprising given that photography has long been part of the city's culture. Photography was introduced

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<sup>31</sup> Opala 1994:6-7. According to Opala Sierra Leone is unusual in having a very limited tradition of patriotic imagery dating back only to 1987. In fact many of the themes he identified in the street paintings (e.g., current political figures, national symbols like the coat of arms, religious themes, cultural scenes and even rastafarianism) had been depicted in *lantan* form prior to the mid-1980s.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid:12.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid:24.

in Europe in 1839 and by 1857 itinerant professional photographers were already visiting Freetown.<sup>34</sup> Photography became increasingly popular as evidenced by the many advertisements (for photographic supplies, equipment and services) that appeared from the 1880s onwards in Freetown newspapers. By that time visiting photographers were competing with local studios (run by Africans and Europeans), and Freetown residents were collecting photographs of family, friends, public buildings, events and local scenery and, according to Viditz-Ward, '...were preserving them in the ubiquitous photographic album, essential to the Victorian parlor whether in London or Freetown. Today in the homes of venerable Krio families one can still see photographic portraits from the last century displayed alongside more recent family snaps.'<sup>35</sup>

As the foregoing suggests the taste of most ordinary Sierra Leoneans has long been rooted in the photographic realism at which the builders of the most admired *lantans* (and the painters of the most acclaimed street portraits) excelled. The individual, idiosyncratic or social interpretation of subject matter was not generally valued by *lantan* enthusiasts. For example, when I spoke to the builder Ali Fofanah he reiterated the view that in general *lantans* should be of the correct shape and proportions and must be easily recognisable. Referring to his Marcus Garvey *lantan*, however, he told me that the commissioning club (Mandela Youth Organisation) had provided him with a sketch in which Marcus Garvey appeared disproportionately large 'because he was the head of everything'.<sup>36</sup> He dutifully copied the sketch in *lantan* form. Yet this interpretation of the subject matter was simply not appreciated beyond Mandela's leaders who were alone in wanting their *lantan* to bear a symbolic and social interpretation.<sup>37</sup>

In 1993 I learnt of a similar failure on the part of most Sierra Leoneans to appreciate the more imaginative examples of street art in the capital. While the talent of artists like Bangura was readily acknowledged in Freetown few people paid attention to the more individualistic paintings of the those artists who drew on their own

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<sup>34</sup> In 1857 a newspaper announced the arrival in Freetown of a daguerreotypist named A Washington who was said to have worked in the United States and in Liberia and was probably a black American. See Viditz-Ward 1985:46.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid:46.

<sup>36</sup> Interview 95/146.

<sup>37</sup> Interview 95/73. See also pages 127-128.

imagination and personal vision to produce compositions quite unlike Bangura's portraits. One such artist was Tom Sharka who painted a huge montage on the outside wall of one of Freetown's main supermarkets. It contained a variety of disparate images – a stone archway opening into a dark cavern containing a map of Africa dripping blood; scenes of war, starvation and death together with a holy book; young men in torn clothes seated despairingly on the ground; others working together to clean up the city; farmers tilling the fields; market women selling fruit; fishermen and school children. The largest scene in the montage depicted what Opala terms Sierra Leone's 'cultural heritage' – a performing group dressed in traditional costume. Opala wrote in April 1993 that the montage was not yet finished and around that same time I met Sharka and he complained that people simply did not appreciate his work and were not willing to contribute funds to help him complete it. Several years later I returned to Freetown where the weathered montage remained, still unfinished.

The foregoing examples serve to support my earlier observation that within the *lantan* tradition individual imagination and innovation have never been channelled into the reinterpretation of subject matter in a personal or symbolic way. Instead *lantan* builders with a particularly creative flare have applied their minds and skills to developing fresh (but instantly recognisable) *lantan* themes and imagery and to achieving a realistic representation of their chosen subject matter.

## 7.6 Lantan illumination

One property of *lantans* – their illumination – was mentioned by only a few *lantan* builders and enthusiasts in the course of my discussions with them. Given that lantern parades have always taken place at night the lighting of *lantans* may have literally appeared so obvious that people felt it required no comment. Oral and written sources suggest that right up to the 1950s *lantans* were covered with cut paperwork designs (*takada*) and were illuminated by candles placed inside their frames so that each *lantan* glowed as it moved along.<sup>38</sup> Their luminosity was, of course, the reason why floats were named *lantans* in Sierra Leone and *fanaals* in Senegal (and The Gambia).<sup>39</sup> In time, Freetown builders replaced candles with oil or kerosene lamps and

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<sup>38</sup> DM: June 9 1953,

<sup>39</sup> From the English 'lantern' and the French '*fanal*' (see page 13, note 4 and page 43, note 1).

then with light bulbs wired up to car batteries or generators. However, the principle remained the same –of light sources inside the *lantana* illuminating the night through its *takada* covering.

I was informed on numerous occasions that *lantana* floats, like ordinary lanterns, were not meant to be seen by day. This made little sense to me at first because the majority of *lantans* I saw in the 1990s were not covered with *takada* and luminosity played no part in their visual appeal. Many of them were performed in broad sunshine the day after the parade when lantern club members sought to entertain casual passers-by during the Id-ul-Fitr holiday. Their performance was no different from that given during the course of the previous night's parade except that by night they were lit up by means of fluorescent lights or bulbs strung above the *lantana* platform. The role lighting played was simply to spotlight the *lantana*'s structure and performance in order to make it visible to spectators in the surrounding darkness. In no sense was the *lantana* designed to be a source of illumination (a lantern in the strict sense of the term). Lighting, however, played a different role in the case of *takada* covered *lantana* floats where it was integral to the *lantana*'s visual appeal. This type of *lantana* was designed to be a luminous object (a source of illumination) and as such the *lantana* (and its luminosity) could only be appreciated in the dark and not by day.

The difference between *lantans* that were luminous as opposed to those (the majority) that were merely illuminated became very clear during the course of the two parades I witnessed in the 1990s. Most *lantana* builders contracted out the electrification of their *lantans* and the results varied according to the expertise of the various electricians involved. It was not unusual to hear of instances where the generator that powered the lights (and was mounted on the chassis) broke down along the parade route and plunged a *lantana* into total darkness. Certainly a great many *lantans* suffered from inadequate lighting as they relied only on bulbs to provide sufficient illumination, possibly because fluorescent lights were expensive. However, bulbs provided only a low level of illumination and this interfered with the ability of spectators to appreciate a *lantana*'s composition and performance particularly when it comprised many puppets. Needless to say a *lantana* that could not be seen properly was bound to be marked down by the judges. The situation was made worse by the fact that street lighting in Freetown was totally unreliable in the 1990s, and in 1993 and 1997 the parade route was largely unlit. *Lantans* therefore had to rely on their own lighting

without the help of any supplementary lighting from street lamps to render them more visible. However, the presence or absence of street lighting was immaterial to the *takada*-covered *lantans* since their impact depended on their own luminosity. Provided their own internal lights were properly wired to a reliable generator then the darker the area around them the more effective they were as illuminations in their own right.

Furthermore, seen at night with their lights twinkling through their *takada*-covered sides I realised that these *lantans* were intended, like all the rest, to represent their subject matter as realistically as possible. In daylight I thought they looked somewhat bizarre and their delicately cut paper patterned sides seemed incongruous given the monumental size and strength of their frames. However, after dark these *lantans* were transformed into replicas of ships and mosques exactly as these latter look when lit up on the horizon on a dark night. I do not consider that the technique of using *takada* was ever intended to provide a realistic depiction of a *lantan's* subject matter by day but was designed to achieve a high degree of realism at night. No one, however, specifically mentioned the principle of luminosity (and its relationship to realism) when discussing *takada*-covered *lantans*. People simply seemed to think in terms of the quantity of lighting required by a *lantan* to be visible (whether it was properly illuminated) as opposed to the quality of luminosity (whether or not a *lantan* served as an illumination).

In the course of my discussions with *lantan* builders I discovered a few who were clearly aware that the task of spotlighting *lantans* (to provide illumination as opposed to luminosity) raised some artistic challenges. Lasisi was one builder who had the necessary skill to undertake electrical work himself and he made certain that the *lantan* he built in 1997 ('Marriage Ceremony') showed up brilliantly along the darkened parade route. He fitted strong fluorescent lights and used bright, reflective colours and materials (like aluminium foil) for his puppets so that the presence or absence of street lighting, to supplement the *lantan's* own lighting, was largely irrelevant. One or two builders seemed aware of the expressive potential of lighting effects and Tipo explained that he used fluorescent strips on the *lantan* floor (to penetrate upwards) and on top (to penetrate downwards) to give a good white light at night. However, he always lit the *debul* house (in the case of his Sande Society

*lantans*) from inside by means of a red bulb.<sup>40</sup> I am not aware that the judges noted or gave any credit for such detail.

As this chapter-section has demonstrated the role of lighting has changed over the years. Originally all *lantans* were covered with *takada* and lighting served to create luminosity from within. In time, however, a number of factors combined to render the use of internal illumination unnecessary or impractical. The introduction of subject matter unconnected with the representation of luminous vessels or buildings at night meant that for some *lantans* luminosity and internal illumination were no longer relevant. Furthermore, once *lantan* builders started making use of alternative *lantan* coverings that were not translucent, external lighting became the only practical way of illuminating a *lantan's* overall structure. Just as important, though, was the developing interest in action, (the use of human performers, moving *lantan* parts and puppets) which turned *lantans* into a form of theatre. In order for a *lantan's* performance to be visible at night more than just internal lighting was required. This led to a blurring of the distinction I have drawn between luminous and illuminated *lantans*. In 1997, for example, King Tom Lantern Club's ship *lantan* was both luminous and illuminated: it was lit both internally from within its *takada* covered structure (to represent a ship lit up at night) and externally around and above the deck of the *lantan* (to illuminate its human performers). The distinction between *lantans* that are luminous (in order to convey a realistic representation of a night-time image) and *lantans* that are illuminated (in order simply to be visible at night) is critical to an understanding of the essential difference between a *lantan* float as a form of lantern, and a *lantan* float as a mode of performance.

## 7.7 Lantan action

I would suggest that *lantans* like King Tom's 1997 ship *lantan* were both lanterns and modes of performance because they combined luminosity with (human) action. Most *lantans* that participated in the 1993 and 1997 parades were, however, illuminated modes of performance using human or puppet actors. They were not in

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<sup>40</sup> Tipo (a Temne) did not explain the significance of the red bulb. Among the Temne red is associated with fire, blood and danger and actively attacks malevolent forces (Shaw 1982:212. See also Lamp 1978:41). According to Boone there are three basic colours in Mende thought: black, white and red. The Sande Society's standard colours are black and white; red connotes danger (Boone 1986:236).

essence lanterns. This change in emphasis from luminosity to illuminated action was becoming apparent by the late 1940s. Ageing *lantana* builders in Freetown agreed that in their childhood *lantans* were covered in *takada*, illuminated internally and were ‘stiff’<sup>41</sup> in the sense that they did not incorporate any action. By 1948, however, we know that some (if not all) *lantans* depicting ships and architectural forms were incorporating moving components and were making use of human performers. At the same time *lantans* depicting animal (and probably human) figures were incorporating mechanisms that transformed these figures into puppets.<sup>42</sup> By the mid twentieth century, then, the *lantana* tradition had begun to constitute two types of theatre: live theatre and puppet theatre.<sup>43</sup> The former was confined to what later became designated by the YMMA as Ship *lantans* and the latter to Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans*. In Freetown a sharp distinction has always been drawn between these two types of *lantana*, and human actors and puppet figures must never be mixed on the same *lantana*. I heard several stories of occasions when lantern parade judges mistook a realistic puppet for a human being, only to discover their error. I was told, however, that on one occasion they were proved correct and the *lantana* was disqualified.<sup>44</sup>

When Ship *lantans* incorporated human performance the latter mimicked the actions of those people normally associated with the *lantana*'s subject matter in real life. Thus human actors sat drinking around the base of the ‘Clock Tower’ (1993); in another *lantana* a group of children slowly circled the structure representing the Kaaba (1997) as pilgrims do in Mecca. The best example, however, remains the ship *lantans* that typically carried human crews. Forty or so years ago when *lantana* builders and lantern club supporters faced less straightened economic circumstances than in the 1990s, they constructed ship *lantans* that not only carried human crews but even incorporated restaurants on board. One of the judges of the 1993 parade could remember as a child paying to board a ship *lantana* and then travelling with it through the streets of Freetown, eating Jollof rice (served by a crew member) as he went.<sup>45</sup> In

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<sup>41</sup> Interviews 92/5, 92/24 & 92/64.

<sup>42</sup> It is not clear whether human actors were introduced into the *lantana* tradition before puppetry techniques or *vice versa* because neither was documented prior to 1948.

<sup>43</sup> The nature of live action and puppet action is discussed in Chapter 8.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews 95/94 & 95/92.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 95/155. Jollof rice is a popular Sierra Leonean dish originating among the Wolof of Senegal.

1997 King Tom Lantern Club's *lantan* 'HMS Clarkson' maintained the tradition whereby the anchor was dropped, its gangplank lowered and the captain and first officer descended to salute the judges who were seated in front of the Law Courts Building. In 1993 the *lantan* most admired for its human interest was not a ship *lantan*, however, but Clinetonian Lantern Club's 'Double Decker Bus'.

From the mid twentieth century Animal (and thereafter Miscellaneous) *lantans* routinely incorporated varying degrees of puppetry. So-called cultural *lantans* were generally the most highly animated, the most popular with the audience and were regarded as the most difficult to make. I met just two builders who expressed regret that so much emphasis was being placed on *lantan* action. Sammah Sesay maintained that there were three criteria for evaluating a *lantan* – its structure, decoration (beautification) and mechanism –and that all three should be given equal weight.<sup>46</sup> Imran Rasheed went even further when he told me that a *lantan*'s 'demonstration' (action) should be a 'side issue'<sup>47</sup>. He considered that the structure itself was of prime importance, not its animation. However, as Sesay explained, animated figures always attracted the attention of the audience and of the judges, and people admired the skills involved in making objects and puppets move.

Thus over the years *lantan* builders came to focus more and more attention on devising the mechanisms needed to effect the movement of puppets and other *lantan* components. Just as the development of fresh *lantan* themes and imagery provided a focus for innovation so too did the creation of *lantan* action. However, *lantan* builders and club members did not animate their creations simply for fun. For although there was every indication that animation added interest to a *lantan* and amused people (and gained a *lantan* more points in the competition) I was assured that it achieved far more: it 'gives the explanation of the story the *lantan* is telling'<sup>48</sup>. This was the core reason why *lantan* action was so important – because it allowed the subject or theme of a *lantan* to be acted out and thereby represented in full. It constituted the ultimate means of achieving the closest approximation to reality. When people in Freetown described a

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<sup>46</sup> Interview 95/74.

<sup>47</sup> Interview 95/93.

<sup>48</sup> Interview 95/83. As one of the 1993 lantern parade judges commented, a *lantan* 'should not be a dummy, it should be moving' (Interview 95/148).

*lantan* as telling a story they were not drawing on the concept of semiotics but intended a literal meaning. By performing a *lantan* it was actually possible to demonstrate the key piece of action associated with the story, theme or object which the *lantan* depicted. The *lantan*'s live or puppet demonstration thus achieved a heightened sense of reality.

In conclusion, then, I would suggest that *lantans* helped concentrate people's attention on key features of the world in which they lived. These features might be part of the built environment (like ships, mosques or monuments) or part of the political, social and conceptual environment (such as national heroes, well-known stories, myths, historical and cultural events and collective values). Like photographs and representational art, *lantans* captured a particular moment or 'frame' in the life of the object, person, story or event they depicted.<sup>49</sup> As with Freetown's street portraits, it was important for people to be able to identify the characters depicted, hence the need for *lantan* imagery to be immediately recognisable. However, by the mid twentieth century a *lantan* had become more than a three-dimensional equivalent of a photograph or picture – it was an animated version of the very moment in time or frame of action it sought to depict. As such it was able to imitate the moment or frame over and over again, thereby emphasising the significance of the subject matter and suggesting the context or narrative of which it was a part.

It appears, therefore, that the notions of resemblance and realism have remained unchanged throughout the history of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown and that *lantan* action – whether human or puppet – developed, at least in part, as a means whereby *lantans* could achieve the closest likeness to reality possible. The emphasis on action constituted not a change in the criteria by which *lantans* were evaluated but a subtle shift from what a *lantan* 'is' to what a *lantan* 'does' in creating the maximum degree of resemblance between a *lantan* and its subject matter. I further suggest that this shift from product (a luminous object to be carried and admired) to process (an illuminated performance to be experienced and enjoyed) has had significant implications for the relationship between *lantans* and their audiences and for the lantern parade in general.

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<sup>49</sup> I use the term 'frame' in the sense of a frame in film photography.

## 7.8 Lantan technology as art

So far this chapter has been concerned with the way in which the people who actually made and paraded *lantans* perceived and evaluated them. It has discussed *lantan* subject matter, *lantan* properties, notions of resemblance and realism, *lantan* illumination and *lantan* action. I have suggested that the value placed on resemblance and realism remained unchanged throughout the history of the *lantan* tradition in Freetown but what altered over time were the techniques involved in achieving the ultimate goal of mimesis. Technical processes that allowed the enactment and re-enactment of *lantan* subjects were developed and incorporated into *lantan* building thereby shifting the emphasis towards action and performance as the ultimate means of achieving realism.

Throughout the history of the *lantan* tradition, the degree of realism achieved by a *lantan* largely depended on the technical knowledge and skill of its builder. In the case of Ship *lantans* resemblance was usually achieved through skilled carpentry work (that allowed the *lantan* to carry human performers), exactness in terms of shape, form, proportion and detail, and, in the case of ship and mosque *lantans*, decoration involving cut paperwork (*takada*) designs (that allowed a *lantan* to be luminous). In the case of Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* resemblance was achieved mostly through the manipulation not of wood but of other materials (like cane, raphia pith and cloth) and through the construction of mechanisms to articulate *lantan* components. The most highly acclaimed *lantans* then, have been those that were technically most proficient at achieving a close photographic resemblance to their subjects in terms of structure and action. Such *lantans* were described to me by *lantan* enthusiasts as ‘well presented’<sup>50</sup> or very *fayn*<sup>51</sup> – meaning that they excelled in terms of naturalistic representation. A *lantan* that was merely *fayn* was one that was slightly less successful in representing its subject matter to the expected standard but that nevertheless was still built with sufficient technical competence to be instantly recognisable. A *lantan* that fell short of this standard (perhaps because its proportions or colouring were inexact, or because it

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<sup>50</sup> Interview 95/137.

<sup>51</sup> The Krio term *fayn* derives from the English word ‘fine’. It is sometimes (mis)translated into English by the term ‘beautiful’ for which there is in fact no direct Krio equivalent. Note that in the context of the Alikali *debuls* she studied in Bo, Cannizzo interpreted ‘fine’ to mean ‘costly, bright, new’ (Cannizzo 1979:70.)

was roughly made or was stiff and lacked articulated or natural movement) was considered 'not very *fayn*'. Thus *lantan* enthusiasts clearly recognised that their desired end-product depended ultimately on the technical mastery exercised by a human agent (the *lantan* builder): a *fayn lantan* achieved resemblance to and re-enactment of its subject matter by means of technical excellence. Using Alfred Gell's exposition (based on Trobriand canoe boards) of the 'technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology',<sup>52</sup> I intend to argue that in a very real sense a *fayn lantan* is indeed a work of art.

As I understand him, Gell argues that any object that demonstrates a technically achieved level of excellence is a work of art (art object). Gell thus privileges the role of technology. He posits that an art object is the product of exceptional technical mastery – the result of a technical miracle that transcends ordinary understanding. He notes that the technical miracle that produces an art object is performed by a human agent, the object's maker (the artist), who has exceptional skill and creative power. It is the awareness of the mismatch between an observer's own skill and creativity and that of the artist that enthrals and fascinates the observer. The artist somehow manages to transform the materials with which he is working into something else completely different. According to Gell art always involves some sort of 'occult transubstantiation' which is beyond the realm of ordinary human analysis. Gell suggests that an art object is like some sort of magical product and the artist is a form of magician.<sup>53</sup> He considers that it is the fact that an art object is the product of a technical miracle that enables it to enthrall those who see it. Herein lies what Gell calls the 'enchantment of technology' – the apparently magical power that the product of extraordinary technical excellence (an art object) has of entrancing, even bewitching, those who find themselves in its presence.

How then does this much of Gell's exposition help illuminate our understanding of *lantans*? Firstly, in the course of my research I discovered that *lantan* enthusiasts in Freetown did indeed regard really *fayn lantans* as technical masterpieces resulting from

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<sup>52</sup> In Coote J & A Shelton (eds) 1992: 40-63.

<sup>53</sup> Gell points out that art objects are often regarded as transcending the technical schemas/powers of their creators as well as those of mere spectators. In many cases an art object is considered to be the work of divine inspiration or of some spirit that possessed the artist. Gell 1992:59.

the ability of their creators to transform simple materials, like wood, cane, pith, paper and cloth, into an illusion of the real thing – be it a ship, a mosque, some other form of transport or architectural form, a person, an animal or a *debul*.<sup>54</sup> In the case of Ship *lantans*, the quality of the finished product depended on superior draughtsmanship, high quality carpentry work and often painstaking *takada* paperwork. *Lantan* builders who commanded such skills were widely admired but the basic skills themselves were largely within people's comprehension<sup>55</sup>. It was the builders of Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* (particularly those skilled in creating the different types of mechanism used to animate them) whose technical skills exceeded people's imagination and comprehension and who were often considered to have acquired them by magical means. In Freetown many *lantan* enthusiasts used the word 'powerful' to describe any person or product that exhibited exceptional skills or attributes. Where the latter were deemed beyond ordinary comprehension they were explained in magical terms. Thus a *lantan* might be described as powerful when it incorporated a type of mechanism that was responsible for a particularly spectacular or unusual form of action. As one informant explained, the technique that enabled a puppet to climb a tree, dance on top of it and then return to the ground was truly extraordinary: 'People say it is very powerful and will ask – How can they [the *lantan* builders] do this thing?'<sup>56</sup> In particular, there were certain *lantan* types (especially so-called cultural *lantans*) that made extensive use of hidden mechanisms which had been perfected by such builders as Eustace Yaskey, who had developed ways of activating his *lantans* using strings that ran internally through the skeletons of the puppets and hence were covered by their costumes. Such hidden techniques were the least comprehensible to ordinary onlookers and were most likely to be considered powerful. It was puppetry then – particularly the type of puppetry that revealed little or nothing of the technical feats on which it depended - that was quite simply magical.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Gell makes the point (1992:51) that illusionism may be regarded as just one form of technical virtuosity, identified, in particular, with a brief interlude in our Western art tradition (knowledge of which would have reached Freetown with its founders). So-called primitive art is generally considered to be strikingly devoid of 'illusionistic trickery'.

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, those who exclusively built ship *lantans* never referred to themselves as artists.

<sup>56</sup> Interview 95/137. See also 94/44.

<sup>57</sup> *Lantan* builders were not alone in being credited with supernatural powers when they succeeded in producing extraordinary effects. Musicians were often referred to in the same way when their talent exceeded human comprehension. See Appendix 7.

Gell maintains that it is the exceptional, even magical, technical activity that goes into the production of an art object which is the source of the object's prestige and of its power to entrance and fascinate those who behold it. Certainly in 1997 of the five *lantans* that achieved over 650 marks in the lantern parade, four incorporated a high degree of action using often hidden mechanisms. They clearly impressed the judges. Others (like Tipo's version of 'Madam Yoko') that also exhibited an exceptional level of action (but which, for other reasons, were not ranked highly by the judges) were nevertheless highly regarded by *lantan* enthusiasts. My observations in Freetown certainly support Gell's contention that an art object is one that is valued according to the degree of difficulty conceived to be involved in transforming the component materials into the finished product. I would suggest that a *fayn lantan* can be defined as an example of technical excellence (on the part of its builder) applied to the production of a meaningful form (the *lantan* itself). The criteria used by *lantan* builders and enthusiasts to assess whether or not a *lantan* was meaningful were those of appropriateness and recognisability grounded in mimesis which, in turn, was achievable through the mastery of technical skills coupled with the use of human actors or of puppetry techniques. Only a *lantan* that achieved this standard would be esteemed as very *fayn* on the grounds that it told an appropriate story in an instantly recognisable way. Such a *lantan* constituted for *lantan* enthusiasts in Freetown, a true work of art.

Gell's exploration of what he calls the enchantment of technology is part of his wider interest in the 'technology of enchantment'. An anthropologist interested in the anthropology of art, Gell suggests that art objects are components of a vast technical system essential to the reproduction of the species and which Gell calls the technology of enchantment. As part of this system, art objects (themselves the products of the enchantment of technology) are orientated towards producing social consequences: they have a certain efficacy in the domain of social relations. He explains that among the Trobrianders the works of art (the canoe boards) which form the focus of his discussion are physical entities mediating between the commissioning agents (the owners of the canoes) and the overseas Kula partners of the Trobrianders who, bewitched by the brilliant canoe boards as the Kula flotilla approaches the shore, will be disposed to be far more generous in their offers of shells and necklaces than they would otherwise be. The canoe boards are supposed to dazzle the beholder and weaken his grip on himself. Gell explains the efficacy of the canoe boards in terms of the

magical power believed to emanate from these boards. I found no evidence in Freetown that people thought that any such power emanated from *lantans*. To the contrary, *lantans* were playthings not power objects.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the lantern clubs that commissioned the *lantans* certainly intended that, as physical entities, they would wreak some sort of emotional and social effect on spectators. My research suggests that *lantan* enthusiasts hoped that, in the presence of a *fayn lantan*, spectators would experience a sense of pleasure, satisfaction and admiration which would generate a degree of recognition for the individual lantern club responsible for it. As discussed in Chapter 4 lantern club members wanted more than just to entertain their audience, they wanted to impress on it their own importance and sense of identity. The production of a *fayn lantan* was intended to help change people's attitude towards its owners, from one of semi-contempt to one of acknowledgement and even respect. This, in turn, would hopefully achieve a social consequence – a change in people's behaviour towards the urban underclass which was so closely identified with the *lantan* tradition.

### 7.9 Concluding remarks: the artist as producer, puppeteer and interpreter

Thus I suggest that *lantan* art resides in the technical excellence that creates an art object (a *fayn lantan*) which itself constitutes an illusion of reality. As the human agent through whom such art is realised, a *lantan* builder is a producer, and, in the case of a *lantan* that includes articulated components and puppets, he is usually also a skilled puppeteer.<sup>59</sup> The highest compliment the audience and judges could pay any *lantan* builder was to mistake his puppets for human actors and assume them (wrongly) to constitute live theatre.

If, as I suggest, *lantan* enthusiasts regarded true artistry as residing in the achievement of technical standards that produced an illusion of reality then wherein lay the scope for individual innovation on the part of the *lantan* artist-builder? Was he purely in the business of imitating reality rather than representing his individual perception of it and his response to it? I have already suggested that the development

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<sup>58</sup> Chapter 8 explores the nature of power and play.

<sup>59</sup> I discovered that some *lantan* builders had to delegate the operation of their *lantans* to a team of boys who were small enough to squeeze below the *lantan's* platform, but even in this case the builders generally directed and supervised operations themselves. Leading *lantan* builders (like Eustace Yaskey and Tipo) who used complicated mechanisms were expert in operating them and were highly skilled puppeteers in their own right.

of fresh subject matter on the one hand, and technical innovation and refinement on the other, constituted two opportunities for individual creativity on the part of *lantan* builders. However, *lantan* elements themselves had to conform to audience expectations of what their subject matter would have looked like in real life and could not, therefore, be a vehicle for a *lantan* builder's personal imagination. In the process of creating a *lantan* the builder had to interpret the collective imagination and perception of the community of *lantan* enthusiasts for whom he was building. In this sense the builder was an interpreter rather than an innovator. He had a subject that he had to render immediately recognisable in *lantan* form by combining technical virtuosity and interpretive powers in the same act – the process of production. He must not go so far as to substitute his personal vision for that of his audience's collective vision of what the finished work should be like – namely an illusion of the real thing.<sup>60</sup>

In conclusion, then, I am not suggesting that *lantans* (or any other art forms in Freetown) were collective works without individual creators but simply that *lantan* builders interpreted in their own distinctly individual ways the collective vision of the community of which they were a part. I contend that a *lantan* builder was a producer and interpreter –and that ultimately his artistry lay in the technical excellence with which he was able to create a truly *fayn lantan*.

Since the incorporation of puppetry into the *lantan* tradition in the 1940s many *lantan* builders became puppet makers and operator-performers. The use of puppet figures (like human actors) provided a unique way of creating and sustaining an illusion of reality and in the process transformed *lantans* from being luminous but non-performing lanterns into illuminated modes of performance. The next chapter addresses the emergence of *lantan* puppetry in Freetown and examines its conceptual

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<sup>60</sup> These observations apply to other forms of art in Freetown (not only to *lantan* art) and Gell (1992:54) makes a similar point in relation to Trobriand canoe board carvers. In Sierra Leone the artist is the interpreter of collective expectations when he carves a Sande Society headpiece or creates a *debul* costume. He works to type and in the process renders an interpretation that accords with the conventions and expectations of his audience. His is the work of an inventive interpreter-performer and should he move beyond the collective imagination (and beyond the boundaries of accepted interpretation) then he would effectively create a new *debul* character (type) which may or may not prove acceptable to his audience. If it meets with endorsement then other artists will undoubtedly take it up and create their own interpretations of it, making sure, however, that their products are recognisable within the recently defined parameters laid down by the newly recognised *debul* type. See Ruth Phillips 1995:70-71 & 143-144 and Cannizzo 1979:70.

basis in an attempt to understand puppetry in a wider sense and in relation to other Freetown performance traditions - particularly those involving *debuls*.

## PART 3

### LANTANS. PUPPETRY AND PERFORMANCE IN FREETOWN IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES

#### *Chapter 8*

#### NOTIONS OF IMITATION AND CHARACTERISATION, POWER AND PLAY

##### 8.1 Introduction

By the end of the twentieth century there was a general expectation on the part of *lantan* enthusiasts and audiences that every *lantan* should constitute a performance of some sort.<sup>1</sup> The role of human performers was to represent the people who were normally associated with the *lantan*'s subject matter (such as the crew of a ship, pilgrims processing round the Holy Kaaba or passengers on a school bus) and to imitate their behaviour as closely as possible. These human performers did not follow any written script but worked out in advance the order of the actions they wanted to perform. Where the human performers spoke (as in the case of the captain of a ship *lantan*) it was purely to issue instructions (to the crew) or address the lantern parade judges. There was no dialogue as such between performers, no characterisation and no dramatic development of any plot, as in conventional theatrical productions. Instead human performers on *lantans* simply repeated a set of actions (and sometimes issued spoken orders or joined in the singing of a song or chanting of a slogan) as the *lantan* progressed along the parade route. They thereby enacted and re-enacted the core subject matter but did not dramatise it in any way.

Puppets performed exactly the same role for *lantans* in the Animal and Miscellaneous categories: they repeated a set of actions which mimed the *lantan*'s subject matter. For *lantan* puppets never engaged in dialogue nor did they ever speak or sing. It has already been noted that in Freetown the two types of *lantan* performer (human and puppet) were not supposed to be combined on the same *lantan*. Human

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<sup>1</sup> As already explained (page 151) in 1993 only three *lantans* (all in the Ship category) were entirely static in the sense that they incorporated no moving parts and no performers (human or puppet). I was not able to investigate every *lantan* in 1997 but I suspect that very few failed to incorporate any type of action.

performers were confined to Ship *lantans*, while puppets were a feature of Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans*. Sometimes it was the presence of either human or puppet performers that defined the category into which a particular *lantan* fell.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, I wish to explore the emergence of *lantan* puppetry in Freetown and, using insights drawn from puppetry theory I shall examine the nature of the puppet performances which characterised the Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* that I witnessed during the 1993 and 1997 lantern parades. I thereby hope to identify the conceptual basis on which these *lantan* puppet performances were founded.

From this conceptual analysis it should, secondly, be possible to determine whether any other forms of puppetry exist in Freetown, and if so, what technological and conceptual features distinguish *lantan* puppetry from other Freetown puppet performance forms. I shall suggest that in Freetown the distinction between imitation (or 'pretending', as performance theorists like John Emigh call it<sup>3</sup>) and characterisation (or 'acting in character') illuminates the complex relationship that exists between *lantan* puppetry on the one hand, and masquerade (*debul*) forms on the other. I shall seek to show that *lantans* and 'debuls' are in fact different types of puppetry and that the conceptual distinction between string and rod *lantan* puppets on the one hand and 'debuls' (which I call 'body puppets') on the other resides in the distinction between imitation and characterisation, between 'pretending' as a mode of performance, and 'acting in character'.

Thirdly, I shall use the opposing notions of 'power object' and 'plaything' (which are widespread within various West African artefact traditions) to help distinguish between different types of *debul* traditions in Freetown and to illuminate the essentially 'playful' nature of *lantan* performances as an entertainment form.

## **8.2 The origins of string and rod puppetry in Freetown's *lantan* tradition**

The Freetown *lantan* tradition is associated with two types of puppet figures – rod puppets and string puppets but it is not possible to determine the exact date when

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a mosque *lantan* with human performers should be categorised as a Ship *lantan*. A mosque with puppet performers should be classed as a Miscellaneous *lantan*.

<sup>3</sup> Emigh 1996:22-31.

figurative forms were first developed (or introduced) We know, however, that artificial figures were being used in end-of-Ramadan celebrations when Robert Wellesley Cole was a boy.<sup>4</sup> Cole never said whether the dolls and charades he saw were articulated nor did he ever describe how they were carried, but later in his life he recalled that they and the other forms of *lantans* were not large (only a few feet).<sup>5</sup> It is possible that what he saw were different types of hand *lantan*. Alternatively, they may have been miniature *lantan* floats each carried by a group of people on their shoulders.

Cole's childhood memory, however, dates the use of human imagery in end-of-Ramadan celebrations to around 1918 and specifically associates it with the Temne. Cole did not suggest the source of this imagery and it is only possible to speculate whence the Temne derived their inspiration. An earlier part of this thesis contains references to the close relationship between the Temne and Mandingo inhabitants of Freetown and, in particular, to the fact that for a period in the early twentieth century both groups worshipped together at a new mosque established in the early 1900s specifically for non-Yoruba Muslims.<sup>6</sup> I have suggested that it was during this period that they may have adopted the *lantan* tradition and adapted it to suit their own particular tastes and expectations. In the course of my research I was repeatedly told that the first person to make a *lantan* in the form of an animal was a Mandingo *lantan* builder called Sampha Conteh and several informants insisted that this happened in the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> By the 1990s, however, no one could describe Conteh's first animal *lantan* in any detail nor remember whether or not it was articulated. Likewise, no one would hazard a guess as to where Sampha Conteh got the idea for building an animal *lantan*.

It is just possible, however, that the Mandingos and Muslim Temnes may have drawn on an existing puppet tradition among the Mandingos of what is now Mali, for inspiration. For by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the Bamana (Bambara Mandingos) of the Segou region had started incorporating puppets depicting humans and animals into some of their masquerades.<sup>8</sup> From this development in their homeland the Mandingos

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<sup>4</sup> Cole 1960:126.

<sup>5</sup> Interview 25 June 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See pages 58-59.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews 92/10, 92/11 & 92/16

<sup>8</sup> Arnoldi 1995:24-30. By masquerades I am referring to what in Freetown are known as *debul* performances. Arnoldi suggests that blacksmiths from the Shianro area (of what is now Mali) expanded the Bamana repertoire of grass and cloth masquerades with carved masks and puppets in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and

in Freetown, and by extension the Temnes too, may have derived the idea of carrying miniature figures and groups of figures or of mounting them on the top of rods, to accompany their own end-of-Ramadan festivities. By this means they could create a distinctive, material focus for their celebrations similar to that constituted by the ship and mosque *lantans* of the Aku Krios. Perhaps these indeed were Cole's 'dolls and charades'.

Mary Jo Arnoldi has studied the history and contemporary manifestation of Segou puppet theatre and has distinguished three puppet types.<sup>9</sup> Of these the miniature rod puppets she describes would seem to coincide most closely with Cole's dolls and charades. The Mandingo population of Freetown has always comprised both settled residents as well as traders who regularly moved between their homelands in the interior and the coast. It would presumably have been possible for the concepts, skills and artefacts associated with puppet theatre to have travelled with them.<sup>10</sup> Although the Segou puppets are carved out of wood it would not have been difficult for the Mandingos and Temnes in Freetown to adapt their construction using the Yoruba Muslim *lantan* technique of building a wooden or raphia pith frame covered with paper. It will always remain a matter for speculation as to whether the small figures that Cole described were indeed of Bamana derivation. Whatever their origin, the dolls and charades he witnessed were most probably the forerunners of the larger figures, articulated or otherwise, that constituted the first animal *lantans* in the 1930s and which were attributed by my informants to Sampha Conteh.

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early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. If this is the case then the Mandingos and Temnes of Freetown were not only quick to adopt the Aku Krio *lantan* tradition for themselves (once they had established their own mosque) but were also quick to introduce into the tradition new forms that had only recently emerged in the Mandingo homeland.

<sup>9</sup> The first type comprises wooden rod puppets representing different animal heads (ranging from two to six feet in height). Often these heads have articulated parts (such as ears or jaws) which are separately carved. A few of these heads also have what Arnoldi calls secondary figures which are fixed to their horns or crown. These small figures may be set in motion by the main puppet head or operated separately by the puppeteer using strings. In performance the main puppet head appears out of the front end of a costumed construction which serves as the body of the animal. The puppeteer hides beneath the costumed stage and operates the puppet head from below. Secondly Arnoldi describes miniature rod puppets which depict a variety of human characters, animals and spirits. They range in height from about a foot to several feet, appear out of the back of the costumed stage and are manipulated from below by rods and strings. Thirdly, there are what Arnoldi terms 'body puppets', each of which comprises a carved figurative bust representing the head and torso of a human being or spirit. Such a puppet is usually three or four feet tall and is mounted on a costumed armature which the puppeteer carries on his shoulders. (Arnoldi 1995:ix, xi).

<sup>10</sup> Both Skinner (1997:1-20) and Howard (1997:21-63) have studied the history of Islam and trade in Sierra Leone and provide useful bibliographies.

### 8.3 The essence of *lantan* puppetry: imitation and scenic action

For the purposes of interpreting my research data I have derived some helpful insights into the nature of puppetry from the work of Professor Henryk Jurkowski, an eminent scholar in the field of European puppetry. In this section I rely heavily on a series of his papers written between 1978 and 1986.<sup>11</sup> In his writings Jurkowski reiterates that in puppet theatre the puppet serves both as an (inanimate) artefact and as a (living, animated) stage character.<sup>12</sup> As an artefact a puppet is a lifeless object or figure, a work of fine or plastic art, a kind of sculpture. These expressions convey the essential fact that a puppet as an object is a passive, artificial form created by its human maker from the material of his or her choice. In the case of *lantan* puppets the materials used and the building technology involved have been discussed in chapter 5.

To turn an object into a puppet the object must be capable of being animated by some form of manipulation. Thus the puppet's creator must make it in such a way that it has movable elements that can be operated by a separate power source that is not, by definition, an attribute of the puppet form itself. The power source is, of course, the human puppeteer whose skills turn the puppet's inanimate form into an animated artificial creature that lives at the behest of its operator.<sup>13</sup> In Freetown the techniques used to animate *lantan* puppets were, of course, primarily strings and rods and the operators were mainly young boys trained and directed by the *lantan* builders.

Jurkowski maintains that puppets can assume a variety of functions which he divides into two categories (ritual-magic functions and theatrical functions). He suggests that what he calls the theatrical functions of puppets have changed through time, beginning with puppets as simple objects of curiosity and ending with them

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<sup>11</sup> Published in Jurkowski 1988:1-83. In 1988 Professor Jurkowski was Lecturer in the history and dramaturgy of puppetry in the Faculty of Puppet Theatre Direction in the State Higher School of Drama of Warsaw and Bialystok, Poland, visiting lecturer at the Institut International de la Marionette of Charleville-Mézières, France and President of the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA) (Jurkowski 1988: vii). His ideas, though not espoused by all puppetry theorists are very widely respected according to John McCormick, a practising puppeteer and formerly professor of Drama Studies and Theatre, Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College, Dublin. (Verbal communication, June 2001.)

<sup>12</sup> Here Jurkowski acknowledges the ideas of Otakar Zich, a member of the 'Prague Circle', who published a study 'Small Art – Great Artefacts' in 1923 (Jurkowski 1988:14).

<sup>13</sup> Jurkowski maintains that it is the puppeteer who is the essence of puppet theatre and who uses the puppet as an instrument and means of expression. The relationship between the puppet and puppeteer is paramount (Jurkowski 1988:4). I address this issue further on pages 254-257.

attaining their place as full theatre performers.<sup>14</sup> What is helpful when considering his classificatory and evolutionary schemes is not the schemes themselves but Jurkowski's consideration of puppets not only from the point of view of their creators and operators, but also from the point of view of their audiences. According to Jurkowski the public may perceive a puppet purely as an artificial human being (an android) that arouses both curiosity and amazement on the part of the spectator on account of the puppet's close resemblance to the real thing.<sup>15</sup> Jurkowski regards this as the first stage in the theatrical transformation of the puppet and his comments are worth quoting in full:

In the first period of the history of puppets in theatre they were received ... as an artificial substitute for a human being. Because of this puppeteers were often accused of magic-making, and the creators of mediaeval and renaissance androids were persecuted by the Church for violating God's rights. For a while the puppet stage remained mute; then it started to speak in a distorted voice. Its audiences grew, mainly attracted by the semblance of life that it held.<sup>16</sup>

Jurkowski points out that this interpretation of early forms of puppetry is not new. An earlier theorist (Otokar Zich) suggested that one way in which puppet theatre can involve its audience is '...by accentuating the life-like properties of the puppet, thus underlining its magical origins. In this way the puppet evokes wonder and mystery.'<sup>17</sup> Jurkowski also points out that 'For centuries puppeteers looked for ways in which their puppets might be taken for human beings ... So of course they hid, as the closest professional secret, the manner of their animation.'<sup>18</sup> Though couched in unverifiable evolutionary terms Jurkowski's observations are nevertheless useful. His description of 'the puppet as android' – as an artificial being that amazes and mystifies its audience – is wholly applicable to the best *lantán* puppets and their reception in late twentieth century Freetown.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Jurkowski 1988:37-40.

<sup>15</sup> Jurkowski 1988:38.

<sup>16</sup> Jurkowski 1988:45.

<sup>17</sup> Jurkowski 1988:52.

<sup>18</sup> Jurkowski 1988:54. Puppeteers also hid the secret of how they provided their puppets with voices.

<sup>19</sup> Jurkowski maintains that as the theatrical transformation of the European puppet proceeded from the seventeenth century to the present day so puppets assumed new functions, ceasing to be just artificial humans and assuming much more complex theatrical functions. He suggests, however, that all the different types of theatrical transformations identified in his evolutionary scheme of puppet development are still to be found in present-day puppetry in different parts of the world.

Freetown *lantán* puppets, of course, represented not just humans but animals, mythical and spirit creatures and even some types of *debul*. In all cases the criterion for success was the degree of resemblance between the puppet and the real thing they represented (or, in the case of mythical creatures and Mammy Wata (a spirit being), the collective understanding of what the real thing looked like). At the same time *lantáns* with complicated mechanisms, and the *lantán* builders responsible for those mechanisms, were described by Freetown *lantán* enthusiasts as ‘powerful’ (in the sense of extraordinary) – a concept that corresponds closely to Gell’s term ‘magical’. Furthermore, particularly skilled *lantán* builders were extremely secretive about their *lantán* building techniques and took great precautions not to reveal them.<sup>20</sup>

I want to suggest that the Freetown *lantán* puppets I witnessed were perceived by their audience as artificial human, animal, mythical, spirit or *debul* beings; they did not present imaginary characters according to some given or improvised drama. They therefore did not constitute true theatre and were certainly not stage characters bound up in the momentum of a dramatic plot. Rather they engaged in impersonation whereby they demonstrated (played out, enacted and re-enacted) the essence of the *lantán*’s subject or theme<sup>21</sup> through mime. As such, *lantán* puppets were really mobile sculptures imitating life (real or collectively imagined) in an instantly recognisable way.

However, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, *lantán* performances were part of processions that included other performance elements. Although the visual element provided by the *lantán* was dominant (and the *lantán* puppets were mute) Freetown *lantán* processions included songs that accompanied the various *lantáns*. One needs to consider whether these songs turned *lantán* performances into some type of drama. My research, however, suggests they did not. It is true that each lantern club strove to produce a newly composed song based on the subject of its *lantán* which helped mediate and reinforce a *lantán* theme to the audience. However, such songs did not comprise a detailed commentary that meshed with the *lantán* puppets to produce a unified, integrated performance. I consider that *lantán* songs constituted a major

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<sup>20</sup> See page 136, note 1. It is important to remember that just because a *lantán* was regarded as extraordinary or its builder as particularly ‘powerful’ this does not mean that any power emanated from the *lantán* itself (see pages 271-274).

<sup>21</sup> Jurkowski calls this *Puppenspiel* (play with puppets) after Purschke (Jurkowski 1988:68 & 83).

component of a *lantán* procession but not a key element of the *lantán* performance itself (which would have been just as intelligible without the accompanying song lyrics). At best the lyrics served to highlight the *lantán*'s subject; they did not synchronise with the actions of the actors (puppet or human) to dramatise the *lantán* story.<sup>22</sup>

Another practice (unique to one lantern club, Babylonians) involved producing pamphlets relating the stories of the club's *lantáns* in an attempt to explain their meaning.<sup>23</sup> Mohammed Lascaff, one time President of Babylonians claimed that the pamphlets were distributed among the crowd and to the judges during the lantern parades when the club built 'Nebuchadnezzar' (1983), 'Daniel in the Lion's Den' (1984), 'Story of Jonah' (1985 & 88), and 'Wise King Solomon' (1986). Such pamphlets would have provided the few who might have read them with basic information but clearly did not have any dramatic or theatrical function. In other words, neither these (optional) pamphlets nor the (obligatory) *lantán* songs comprised a 'story teller system' whereby a *lantán*'s puppet (or human) action illustrated an accompanying spoken (or written) narrative.<sup>24</sup>

#### 8.4 The technology of body puppetry: *debuls* as puppets

Puppetry in Freetown is most obviously represented by the string and rod puppets of the *lantán* tradition. Although cardboard cut-out figures manipulated by strings are remembered as childhood toys by older Krios,<sup>25</sup> it appears that no other forms of puppetry exist in Sierra Leone except for the puppets made by *lantán* builders for their Animal or Miscellaneous *lantáns*. However, this assumption begs the question of what puppetry actually is. Perhaps we do not find puppetry because we do not properly understand its conceptual basis and we do not therefore use a definition of it

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix 7 for examples of songs.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 95/124.

<sup>24</sup> Jurkowski (1988:64) describes Renaissance puppet theatre as a 'storyteller system'. The human narrator (a boy) stood in front of the stage (*retablo*) and narrated the story which the action of the puppets illustrated. Occasionally he would respond to remarks from the audience. The story, however, was the main element of the whole presentation and the puppets merely illustrated the narrative. In Freetown, *lantán* puppets have, in the case of Animal and Miscellaneous *lantáns*, always been the main component of the *lantán* performances/presentations.

<sup>25</sup> This type of simple puppet was called a 'Saliwansay' (Fyle & Jones 1980:322).

that makes it recognisable in its various forms. Jurkowski, writing about the history of European puppetry, suggests that a puppet is essentially a

...speaking, acting subject[that] makes temporal use of the physical sources of its vocal and driving powers, which are outside it, which are not its own attributes. The relationships between the subject (the puppet) and its power sources are constantly changing, and this variation has essential semiological and aesthetic significance.<sup>26</sup>

Jurkowski's definition touches the technical heart of puppetry. A puppet is an artificial creation – an object – which is capable of moving (and speaking) but whose movement (and speech) are not attributes of the puppet object itself, but derive from another power source – a human being.<sup>27</sup> However, if this definition is applied in Freetown then a type of phenomenon falls within its scope that is not usually recognised as a puppet by Westerners or indeed by Sierra Leoneans: namely *debuls* (or masquerade figures as they are called by anthropologists). For *debuls* are artificial creations, comprising costumes (with or without wooden headpieces that Westerners call masks) that are large enough to cover and obliterate the whole of a human body. When temporarily inhabited by a human being a *debul* costume can be animated; it becomes a performing object and can move and speak by making temporal use of the human power source inside (but independent of) it. This artificial creature (*debul*) is in fact what I propose to call a body puppet.<sup>28</sup> I use the phrase in the same sense as the widely accepted term 'hand puppet'. A hand (or glove) puppet has a hollow cavity (usually formed and enclosed by the puppet's cloth costume) into which the puppeteer inserts his or her hand and arm. The puppeteer's fingers are inserted into the puppet's head and limbs so that they can move. I suggest that the same principle applies to the *debuls* which I witnessed in Freetown, except that in their case the puppeteer inserted his or her whole body into the body of the puppet (the *debul*). The body comprised a single costume (as in the case of *goboi* for example) or a series of costume pieces (as in

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<sup>26</sup> Jurkowski 1988:55.

<sup>27</sup> Where the power source is mechanical then the puppet becomes something else – an automaton.

<sup>28</sup> See page 250, note 9 for Arnoldi's use of the term 'body puppet'. Dagan (1990:74) describes a sculpted object, large enough to cover the entire body of the manipulator, as a body puppet/mask. The only example she provides is a Yoruba (or Fon) wooden, polychromed sculpture 'probably used in a street dance' (Dagan 1990:117). Darkowska-Nidzgorski (1998:50-51) provides an illustration of a similar puppet/mask which she describes as a 'Masque-tronc *gelede*' from Bénin. She considers it to be a type of habitable puppet operated by means of a puppeteer located inside the hollow interior of the sculpture. According to Darkowska-Nidzgorski *marionnettes habitables* have been reported in Nigeria, Bénin and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

the case of the Bundu *debul*). The puppeteer was obliterated from view but the body puppet was completely visible and performed for its audience in an open space. By contrast European hand puppets are only visible from the waist up and usually perform in a booth (which hides the puppeteers). Nevertheless, the principle whereby a costume is animated from within by a human being remains the same.

Jurkowski has pointed out that in Europe hand puppets usually represent archetypal characters like traditional folk heroes that are often ‘... comic in the tradition of burlesque, using robust language rich in proverbs, gibberish, idioms and primitive playing with words’.<sup>29</sup> Punch is a well-known example in Britain. Another, well loved by television audiences in the 1970s and 1980s, was puppet fox called Basil Brush.<sup>30</sup> To compare a comic TV hand puppet with a Freetown *debul* may seem absurd and even insensitive given that some Freetown *debuls* are associated with secret societies and with deep-held beliefs about concepts of power and authority. However, the key to the comparison lies in the perception on the part of its audience of each performing object as a believable, visible character. Both types of puppet character (TV hand puppet and Freetown *debul*) have always been instantly recognisable by those watching them as a result of their various forms of distinctive dress, voice, mannerisms and movement. The costume and headpiece of a puppet character may be created several or many times over by different makers and may be animated by different puppeteers on different occasions but if the character’s appearance, movements or voice, stray too far from the character’s conventional form and attributes then the puppet will not strike a chord with its audience.<sup>31</sup> For the character to ‘work’ an illusion must be created and for the illusion to be sustained not only must the character be instantly recognisable but its operator must be totally concealed.<sup>32</sup> The regular, often large audiences commanded by

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<sup>29</sup> Jurkowski 1988:22. Dagan (1990:144) suggests that in Africa drama for puppet theatre uses characters drawn from oral traditions transmitted as legends, myths, folk tales and so forth. She does not distinguish between hand puppets, which she virtually ignores in her study, and other puppet types (see page 258, note 38).

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*: 21 October 2000. Basil Brush was an eighteen inch puppet created in 1963. The puppet was designed in such a way that the puppeteer’s right hand would fill the head, his left thumb moving the jaw, and wires controlling the arms. It was the puppeteer, Ivan Owen, who brought Basil Brush to life, gave him his raucous voice, his catch-phrase (‘Boom! Boom!’), his gags and his quick repartee.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix 13:201 for an advertisement from *The Times Magazine* (21 October 2000). The impact of the advertisement depends entirely upon the public’s instant recognition of the Basil Brush puppet figure in the photograph.

<sup>32</sup> Ivan Owen, the puppeteer who created Basil Brush recognised this. His obituary (*The Times*:21 October 2000) noted that he always remained behind the scenes believing that Basil Brush’s character depended on his own invisibility

Freetown *debuls* and by TV puppets like Basil Brush indicate that adults are quite capable and willing to suspend their belief and accept an artificial puppet as a living character.

### 8.5 The essence of body puppetry in Freetown: characterisation

To further my argument that Freetown *debuls* can be understood conceptually as body puppets I shall now address a number of related issues: firstly, the relationship between hand (and, by extension, body) puppets and puppetry in general, and, secondly, the relationship between Freetown body puppets (*debuls*) and *lantan* puppets in particular. According to Jurkowski, Fritz Eichler, writing in the 1930s as a result of directly observing puppet theatre practice in Germany, came to the conclusion:

... that the glove puppet is not to be considered as a 'pure' puppet, for it is actually the hand of the puppet-player which is its soul. The glove puppet is thus a 'prolongation' of the actor. Contrary to the string puppet, the glove puppet acts directly, spontaneously, which is why it should be considered as an extension of mime theatre. From mime, the glove puppet has inherited archetypal characters, above all the 'folk-fool' of Germany, Kasper. Any puppeteer who would animate Kasper ... has to identify with him to achieve success. Everything depends on the performer, on his invention, on his ability to project his folk characteristics to the full. Kasper has constantly to improvise, especially when talking to the audience.<sup>33</sup>

According to Jurkowski many authors now accept this conclusion: that hand puppets are more akin to mime because they act as direct expressions of their human manipulators. They differ from other puppets (such as string and rod puppets) because the latter are separated from the bodies of their manipulators and have their own mechanical laws.<sup>34</sup> Dagan points out that these laws allow such puppets to defy gravity and make disproportionately large movements in relation to their size.<sup>35</sup> They move in what Dagan calls 'double time and space' because they are disconnected from the puppeteer's own body. Dagan implies in her analysis of puppetry that in Africa only objects that move in double time and space are puppets. She does not compare them with hand puppets but with masks.<sup>36</sup> She correctly points out that the mask and its

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<sup>33</sup> Jurkowski 1988:21-22. For Kasper one could easily substitute Basil Brush.

<sup>34</sup> Jurkowski 1988: 22.

<sup>35</sup> Dagan 1990:164. The rest of this paragraph relies on Dagan.

<sup>36</sup> There are few examples of hand puppets reported in Africa. As already noted Dagan treats hand puppets very cursorily in her study, possibly because she could not find well-documented examples in Africa. However, she mentions that the Kanuri of north eastern Nigeria have a tradition of rug dolls

wearer move in harmony (unison) in what she calls 'single time and space' since the mask is attached to the wearer's body; moreover, the force of gravity limits the range of the wearer's movements and the mask is not subject to its own mechanical laws. But she does not appreciate that these comments apply to hand puppets just as much as to masks and their wearers. My contention is that masquerade costumes (masks) may in certain circumstances, actually constitute puppets (which I call body puppets). I suggest that in Freetown *debuls* are body puppets and that like hand puppets, *debuls* differ from string and rod puppets because their movements constitute the exact movements of their animators, in single time and space, just as Eichler and Dagan describe.

Given the apparent lack of hand puppetry in Africa and her focus on objects that move in double time and space, Dagan fails to recognise the technical similarities between hand puppetry and forms of masquerading. Nor does she appreciate the conceptual difference between puppets (like *lantan* puppets) that imitate (and pretend to be) actual, recognisable phenomena, and puppets (like Freetown *debuls*) that portray characters, which, in Sierra Leonean terms, are generally 'more than human'.<sup>37</sup> Dagan is right in recognising that African puppets and masks cannot be differentiated except by studying the context of their uses. However, she proceeds to seek out superficial differences and at times reaches highly questionable conclusions.<sup>38</sup>

Jurkowski, although not writing about Africa, seems to achieve a deeper understanding of puppetry by concentrating on the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer and by emphasising that, as performing objects, puppets should also be

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which she classifies as non-sculptural hand puppets (Dagan 1990:76). They are slipped onto the hand like gloves, with the operator's fingers inserted into the hands of the doll. Darkowska-Nidzgorzski (1998:52) illustrates what is apparently a unique type of 'hand mask' from Cameroon. It comprises a hollow wooden head with an aperture for a mouth. The operator slips his hand inside the head and pushes a finger through the mouth to simulate a tongue

<sup>37</sup> It was not unusual for a Freetown *debul* to be described as 'man pass man' meaning 'more than human' (superhuman or supernatural). One consultee told me 'Everyone knows the *debul* is a person. But it is a person pass person. It is not an ancestor. It has medicine on it'. (Interview 94/20b.)

<sup>38</sup> Dagan's work is confusing in places. She defines an African puppet as '... a polychromed object made from mixed materials, depicting an anthropomorphic and/or zoomorphic image, articulated or not and manipulated by man in a ritual or secular drama in order to animate a character's story in a tragic, lyric or satirical dialogue'. (Dagan 1990: 38. My translation.) Her analysis concentrates on puppets made in the form of wooden sculptures and she maintains that African puppetry involves secular dialogue drawn from past and present reality, whereas 'masquerades' involve ritual, religious monologue of a mystic or spiritual nature (Dagan 1990: 164). Her assumption that dialogue is a feature of all African puppetry should exclude Freetown *lantan* puppets from Dagan's definition of a puppet but as she was not aware that they are mute Dagan in fact included them in her work (Dagan 1990: 124).

understood from the point of view and perception of their audiences. In his discussion of Eichler's contention, that hand puppets (and therefore body puppets in the sense in which I am using that phrase) are not real puppets because they embrace a part (or all) of the human body and thus are direct expressions of human beings, Jurkowski states 'He [Eichler] was right concerning the psychology of acting, but wrong concerning the perception of glove puppets....for the public they are puppets because they are artificial creatures, they behave in their own typical way, and they are able to present different characters ...'<sup>39</sup> Following Jurkowski I maintain that Freetown *debuls* (body puppets) constitute a form of puppetry partly because they are animated by an independent operator (the wearer of the costume) but also because people in Freetown regard them as artificial creatures (albeit more than human) with their own distinct characters. This then makes them homologous to hand puppets in the European tradition of puppetry.

Jurkowski's work is important because he highlights two essential aspects of puppetry – the relationship between the puppet object and puppeteer and the relationship between the puppet object and the audience. He maintains that hand puppets are puppets because the audience perceives them as recognisable characters. He seems less sure that they are puppets from the point of view of what he calls 'the psychology of acting' because their movements are the direct expression of the puppeteer (i.e., they move in single, not double, time and space). However, more recent scholarship, particularly by John Emigh, focuses on the psychology of acting and thereby throws additional light onto the nature of masked performance (what I term body puppetry in Freetown) as a mode of characterisation.

Emigh focuses on the performer and the psychology of performance – what the performer is doing and experiencing in the course of performing.<sup>40</sup> He identifies four main modes of performance on the basis of the different kinds of play between 'me' and 'not me' in which the performer engages. As a tool for discussion Emigh suggests a continuum of experiential states or modes of performing involved in the activities covered by the term 'performance'. Each state or performance mode is distinguished by a different relationship between 'me' and 'not me' on the part of the performer. Emigh suggests the continuum begins with the experience of performing in everyday

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<sup>39</sup> Jurkowski 1988:76-77.

<sup>40</sup> I base the following discussion on Emigh 1996:22-31.

life where individuals reserve one persona (one kind of 'me') for, say, formal, public occasions and another persona (another 'me') for informal, personal dealings with friends. This use of multiple selves in different situations is distinguished from other modes of performing in that the play is between one 'me' and another 'me' – between different ways of being oneself.

Emigh suggests that a performer starts indulging in definite play between self and other – between 'me' and 'not me' - when he pretends to be what he is not. So the state of pretending is the next performance mode on Emigh's continuum. According to Emigh 'To pretend to be what one isn't implies a putting-on of the attributes and characteristics of another without integrating those attributes into the self'.<sup>41</sup> In a sense the performer *demonstrates* a character's behaviour without creating the illusion he has transformed himself into that character. Interestingly Emigh suggests that performers involved in pretending to be other people (or characters) function as iconic representations of 'others'. The performer becomes an iconic reference and takes on the appearance and assumes the behaviour of the person or character to which his role refers without actually internally identifying with the person or character that is referenced. There is no real synthesis of self and other. Emigh suggests that carnival processions, pageants and *tableaux vivants* are all examples of this mode of performance. I suggest that Ship *lantans* involving human performers provide another example. Just as the puppets incorporated into Animal and Miscellaneous *lantans* play an imitative role, so human performers who demonstrate the activities appropriate to different Ship *lantans* engage in the act of pretending. For they do not (and do not intend to) create the illusion of what Emigh calls character transformation.

Emigh considers character transformation (acting in character) as a further performance mode along his continuum. It involves what he calls the illusion of 'character' – an illusion, he explains, that is both controlled and experienced by the performer. At its most effective the illusion created by the performer makes it difficult for spectators '...to distinguish between the actor as engaged in the internal logic and resultant actions of the character and the fictional character that is being enacted'.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that it is this mode of performance, based on the illusion of character and not on

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<sup>41</sup> Emigh 1996:23.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid:26.

pretence, that distinguishes the performance mode of body puppets (*debul*) in Freetown.

The final point on Emigh's continuum between the 'me' and 'not me' performance modes is what he calls visitation (a term he prefers to possession). Here, as far as the performer is concerned '... the "illusion" experientially *becomes* "the reality."'”<sup>43</sup> According to Emigh, 'Visitation is characterised by a loss of the sense of 'me' and an engulfment of the self by an entity that is considered 'not me' – with an attendant loss of conscious control and a scanty memory of what took place while performing'.<sup>44</sup> He suggests that masks and masquerade costumes are often used to help effect this transference of identity (but my knowledge of Sierra Leonean masked performances is not sufficient to enable me to identify any *debul* performances where transference occurs and/or where possession is the key performance mode).

The performance modes defined by Emigh are fully discrete for '... though there may be degrees of accomplishment within each mode of performance, a quantum leap seems to be required to get to the next mode along the "continuum"'.<sup>45</sup> However, Emigh is well aware that performance traditions may shift from one mode to another. In some traditions the choice of mode may be determined by external circumstances or may be left to be determined by the flow of performance. Furthermore the modes of character acting and visitation may alternate within the same (particularly masked) performance. Jurkowski has also ably demonstrated that performing objects (puppets) may function in very different ways in any single performance (or in different performances) even though there may be no immediate visible difference. Similarly, a material phenomenon may be a performing object (puppet) in one situation but may be something else in a different situation.<sup>46</sup> Everything depends upon the nature of the relationship between the performers and the material phenomena concerned – a

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid:29.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid:29.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid:30. In support of this assertion Emigh, a Professor of Theatre, Speech and Dance and of English, and an actor in his own right points out that ritual performers know very well whether they have been acting or in a trance just as accomplished actors have a clear sense as to whether or not they are pretending.

<sup>46</sup> For example, an astronaut's head and body suit could, in theory, be used to clothe a *lantan* string and rod puppet (in imitation of an astronaut), or clothe an astronaut himself; in both cases spectators see the same body suit but in one case it helps constitute a puppet and in the other it serves as a person's protective clothing in space.

relationship that is central to the psychology of acting (Jurkowski) and to the mode of performance (Emigh) – and on the relationship between the material phenomena and the way they are perceived by the audience.

Both Emigh's and Jurkowski's insights point to the importance of ethnographic research in the study of puppetry and masquerades. Without specific ethnographic data about the various relationships encapsulated in these phenomena, about the performers and about the perceptions of the audiences, it is impossible to understand what is actually happening in any given performance situation. By combining the results of my own ethnographic research with the separate insights provided by Jurkowski and Emigh it is possible to understand the conceptual difference between *lantan* performances (involving human and puppet performers pretending to be what they are not) and *debul* performances (involving the acting out of believable (albeit non-human) characters). From the very start of my research I was puzzled by the fact that *lantan* puppets regularly depicted *debuls*. It meant that a string and rod puppet was representing a *debul*, which in itself was already some form of representation. It raised the following question: if a string and rod puppet clothed in a *debul* costume was an acceptable part of a *lantan*, why did the lantern club go to so much trouble to make it instead of using the actual *debul* itself? Given that the lantern parade audience was being invited to suspend its belief in the *lantan* puppet (as a costumed construction made of palm pith sticks and wire) and to see it as the real thing (the *debul* itself) wherein lay the difference between the two puppet forms? Only later did I realise that it was not just the visual appearance of these puppets that was critical, but their different modes of operation and of performance. In the case of the *lantan* puppet, the puppet operators manipulated a rod and a series of strings to impersonate the way the real *debul* performed. The *lantan* puppet was an imitation of reality and its performance was an act of pretence. On the other hand, a real *debul* body puppet was manipulated by a hidden human animator who acted out the character and movements of the *debul* in minute and knowledgeable detail.<sup>47</sup> The *debul* therefore created an illusion of character and its performance constituted reality itself. The audience always knew that the two types of performance were not the same however realistic the *lantan* puppet might be. Essentially *lantans* are an exercise in impersonation. The lantern parade is a

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<sup>47</sup> Lynne Heidi Stumpe has examined Emigh's modes of performance in relation to the Sande/Bundu *debul* and concludes that 'Acting in character is probably the main mode of performance for the masker' (1997:19). I am grateful to Stumpe for drawing my attention to Emigh's work.

competitive forum in which lantern clubs and *lantana* builders try to outshine each other in the art of imitation and it would therefore be an act of gross deception to introduce a real *debul* onto a *lantana*. It would be pitting reality against imitation. This also helps explain why *lantanas* bearing human performers should not at the same time include *lantana* puppets. If human and puppet performers were to be mixed indiscriminately on the same *lantana* then it would become difficult or impossible to distinguish between human actors imitating reality and puppet actors imitating reality. As in every competition fairness dictates that like must only compete with like otherwise the audience and competitors feel cheated.

Before concluding this discussion of puppetry and performance two important points need to be emphasised. Firstly, I am not suggesting that every type of *debul* throughout Sierra Leone is necessarily a performing object (a puppet) and that the puppeteer (the masked dancer inside the *debul* costume) is necessarily acting out the character of the *debul*. I am simply following Jurkowski by observing that where performing objects are found to exist then one key to understanding them lies in exploring the relationship between the object and its operator as well as the object's 'theatrical function'.<sup>48</sup> I certainly found this to be true in the case of *lantana* representations of Freetown *debuls* (which constitute string-and-rod puppet imitations of *debuls*) and the *debuls* themselves (which constitute body puppet characters). It is likely that *debuls* from different parts of Sierra Leone and in different contexts, (and masquerades more generally), may seem to a Western observer to look the same and be behaving in the same way, but they might actually be, and be doing, very different things. However, not every African costumed masquerade figure necessarily constitutes a performing object - in which case it is not a puppet at all. For example, the wearer of a masquerade costume and accompanying mask might be a human male child undergoing transformation into an adult (involving a dangerous, liminal state requiring the initiate to be protected by a body costume).<sup>49</sup> In this case the costume and mask is not a performing object with a separate power source. This is not, of course, to deny that the costume performs a function but it is not, in and of itself, a puppet. During the course of my research in Freetown I attended many *debul* performances and further research might one day reveal whether or not all the different types of *debul* I

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<sup>48</sup> Jurkowski 1988:38. Using Emigh's terminology, the mode of performance is critical.

<sup>49</sup> Such as among the Teriki in Kenya (Appendix 13:202.) See Mack 1994:34.

observed were in fact body puppets. Only if the masked performers (*debul* dancers) were 'acting in character' (Emigh) and only if what mattered to the audience was the 'material reality of the artefact' (Picton), would the *debuls* be body puppets in the sense I have described.

Finally, it is significant that what Jurkowski has done in highlighting the importance of the relationship between puppets and puppeteers is actually very similar to what John Picton has suggested should be done in relation to the anthropological notion of mask/ masquerade in Africa. Picton points out that we should not take the relationship between the mask and masker for granted. Furthermore, just as Emigh distinguishes between different modes of performance, so Picton suggests that we should not treat all forms of masquerading as if they are the same. What is actually happening between the mask/masquerade costume and the person wearing it may vary greatly from instance to instance. Masking need not necessarily transform the wearer of a masquerade costume nor necessarily be about disguise or secrecy, any more than, in Emigh's terms, two actors who wear identical costumes need be engaging in the same performance mode.<sup>50</sup> Only careful ethnographic research can provide insight into what is really going on in any particular performance situation.

#### **8.6 The representation of *debuls* in *lantan* form: notions of power and play**

I soon learnt during the course of my research that some of the *debuls* I witnessed performing in Freetown were controlled by secret societies and their members (and were closely associated with the power of those societies) whilst other *debuls* were not. *Debuls* of the former type were never represented in *lantans*, whereas many of the latter type were regularly imitated in string and rod *lantan* puppet form. In order to understand this distinction between different *debuls* I have borrowed the notions of power objects and playthings from Mary Jo Arnoldi. I shall argue that *debuls* that are controlled by Freetown's secret societies are power objects, whereas

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<sup>50</sup> Picton devised what he calls a typology of polarities, of end points in a continuum. He suggests some masks/masquerades are simply a dramatic tool to create dramatic distance between the performer and the audience. Other masks not only effect dramatic distance but at the same time deny human agency. (This part of the typology coincides closely with Emigh's concept of visitation.) A third type of mask not only creates dramatic distance but constitutes a literal embodiment of metaphysical energy. What matters in this case is the visible, tangible, material reality of the artifact. According to Picton (and Jedrej on whom Picton draws) examples of such masks included the Sande masks of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Using Emigh's notions of performance and Jurkowski's of puppetry, I would say that the Sande/Bundu *debul* is a body puppet whose material reality (animated by the puppeteer within) constitutes a metaphysical character. See Picton 1990:181-202.

those that are not controlled in this way, constitute playthings. Only *debuls* that are objects of play and that perform as sheer entertainment can be imitated in the form of *lantan* puppets which themselves are playthings rather than power objects.

Arnoldi discovered this distinction in the course of her research among the Bamana of Segou who regarded the youth association puppet masquerade theatre (which was the focus of Arnoldi's research) as entertaining play and their masquerades and puppets as playthings.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand the performances of certain men's association masquerades were classified by Segou people as a rite revolving around the use and manipulation of power objects (such as masks) that were infused with *daliluw* (power).<sup>52</sup> However, none of the characters (whether puppets or masquerade forms) used in youth association festivals was infused with *daliluw* (power). Furthermore, if and when a power masquerade appeared during a youth association festival in Segou its performance was strictly managed by the elders who controlled it (not by members of the youth association). Its performance was considered qualitatively different from the youth association masquerades.

Arnoldi observes that 'No mask or masquerade is inherently powerful; it must be constituted as a *boli* [power object] through the use of a specific set of *daliluw*.'<sup>53</sup> According to her, identical masks and masquerades called by identical names might constitute power objects in one village but might be performed as youth association masquerades (and hence as playful entertainment) in another village. Thus:

'Whether a sculpture or masquerade is a power object or a plaything required knowing who owns and controls the masquerade, as well as discovering its particular performance history within specific communities.'<sup>54</sup>

The distinction between powerful and non-powerful forms of masquerade in Segou is not unlike the classification of *debuls* that Phillips found to exist among the Mende of southern Sierra Leone. She notes that in the area (Bo District) where she undertook her research the most powerful *debuls* '... personify and embody the

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<sup>51</sup> Arnoldi 1995:21. This paragraph relies on Arnoldi 1995:21-24. Arnoldi uses 'masquerade' etc in the usual anthropological sense to refer to what in Freetown are called *debuls*.

<sup>52</sup> Arnoldi does not make it clear whether *daliluw* takes the form of herbal medicine or not.

<sup>53</sup> Arnoldi 1995:24.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid:24.

powerful spirits belonging to the medicine societies ...<sup>55</sup> These include *gbini* and *goboi* of the Poro Society and *sowei* of the Sande Society. According to Phillips each of these societies (or sodalities as she prefers to call them) possesses *hale* or 'medicine' peculiar to it. *Hale* is a material product (comprising leaves and other naturally occurring substances from the bush) which possesses powerful inherent properties (probably toxic) which officials of the society in question know how to manipulate (for good or ill). Each masker (*goboi*, *gbini* and *sowei*) embodies the spirit (*ngafa*) of the medicine society to which it belongs as well as the power associated with its medicine (*hale*).

In addition to powerful society *debuls* the Mende have others which '... personify spirits of a lesser order, representing not the corporate identity of whole sections of society, but the private entrepreneurship of small cliques of individual men.'<sup>56</sup> According to Phillips these minor *debuls* (which include *jobai*, *falui* and *yavi*) have more limited powers than medicine society *debuls* and embody considerably less-powerful metaphysical characters (spirits). She describes them as having no ritual role and no healing power: they are primarily entertainment *debuls* which perform at times of public celebration. Interestingly images of these *debuls* were often painted on the walls of houses in Mendeland as a form of decoration.<sup>57</sup> Finally, Phillips identifies a third group of Mende *debuls* which includes the male *gongoli* and female *gonde* maskers who, she states, '... are not believed to personify strong medicine powers. Greatly beloved, their purpose is to entertain through comic grotesqueness, clowning, and the inherent humor of their juxtaposition with the serious masks which they claim to imitate.'<sup>58</sup>

Thus Phillips presents three categories of what she terms maskers. The most powerful are those belonging to medicine (secret) societies and have important ritual roles. The least powerful are the comic maskers which are pure entertainment. The third category comprises maskers associated with small cliques of individual men.

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<sup>55</sup> Phillips 1995:53. Phillips uses the term 'maskers' to refer to Mende *debuls* and calls secret societies 'medicine societies'.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid:55.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid:55-6. Phillips points out that the literature often refers to these *debuls* as minor Poro spirits but 'They are only Poro spirits in the sense that virtually every activity of adult men falls ultimately within the domain of Poro authority.'

<sup>58</sup> Ibid:57.

They too are entertainment maskers but they also embody spirits and medicine (but of a less powerful kind than those maskers directly associated with secret societies).

I discovered that it was Arnoldi's notions of power and play that provided immediate insight into the distinctions that *lantán* enthusiasts made between different types of Freetown *debul*. My consultees distinguished between Freetown *debuls* that were empowered as a result of a close association with active secret societies in Freetown and *debuls* that were not. The latter were not considered dangerous and could perform for purely secular entertainment purposes, but the former were thought to embody varying degrees of power and were supposed never to be performed outside the context of secret society ritual events (which could, of course, still be highly entertaining).<sup>59</sup> Included in the category of powerful *debuls* were those belonging to the female Bundu Society and to the Yoruba-derived male secret societies in Freetown (such as the Ojeh, Otta and Hunting Societies). The entertainment *debuls* included those belonging to various up-country secret societies, especially such *debuls* as *jobai*, *nafali* and even *goboi*. Clearly, in the case of Mende *debuls* Phillips' categorisation and the subtle gradation of power inherent in it had been considerably reworked in Freetown.

### 8.7 Freetown *debuls* as power objects or playthings

The different male secret societies in Freetown formed a hierarchy according to their varying degrees of power: the Hunting Society was positioned towards the lower end whilst the Ojeh (*oje/egungun*) and Otta (*gelede*) Societies were located towards the top.<sup>60</sup> There were other societies (like the Jolly society) that owned various *debuls* but were not regarded as secret societies because they did not control (by means of secret knowledge) their own unique forms of medicine nor have sacred places where it was kept. There were varying opinions, however, as to whether the network of *ode lay* groups in Freetown constituted a secret society although Nunley maintains that at the

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<sup>59</sup> On 1 February 1997 I came across an exception to this generalisation. I attended an afternoon's entertainment organised by the Mammy Yoko Cultural Group which included performances by a variety of *debuls* including *nafali*, *goboi yavi*, *gongoli* and, to my surprise, a Bundu *debul* (whose performance I was allowed to film). Unfortunately I was unable to pursue any enquiries as to why this was permissible.

<sup>60</sup> These three are the secret societies with which I had most contact. Interestingly all three have Yoruba origins. Otta is a town north of Lagos where most *gelede* masks in Lagos used to be carved, while *oje* is the generic term for *egungun* performers. The Yoruba deity of iron and war is *ogun*. I was told of more secret societies in Freetown, some of them with Nigerian, though not necessarily Yoruba origins (e.g., *gunugunu*, *gerifay*, *enshor*) and I suspect there were others that were never mentioned to me.

time he studied them (in the late 1970s) they did.<sup>61</sup> In the 1990s key members of Firestone assured me that the group still had its own shrine where it kept its medicine, but the weight of evidence eventually persuaded me otherwise. I suspect that Firestone members were probably keen to overstate the importance of their group in terms of the secret power it wielded. Leading members of Paddle (another well known *ode lay* group that, like Firestone, was allowed to parade its *debul* in the early 1990s) admitted that their group did not maintain a shrine and they likened themselves to an imitation of a unit of the Hunting Society.<sup>62</sup> There is no doubt that the lodges and units of the Otta, Ojeh and Hunting Societies controlled powerful medicines and that it was this medicine, the shrine where it was kept and the secret knowledge pertaining to it that members were bound (possibly on pain of death) to protect. Although I witnessed many performances staged by Freetown secret societies I was never party to information about the metaphysical characters (spirits) embodied in the *debuls* themselves. However, I was certainly provided with information indicating that the medicine controlled by each society was a fundamental source of the power of its *debuls*.<sup>63</sup>

Arnoldi's observations are useful in understanding how a *debul* that is deemed extremely powerful in one part of Sierra Leone may be powerless in another. Most of the Mende *debuls* described by Phillips are well-known in Freetown (as indeed are many others that originate from other ethnic groups in Sierra Leone). Thus, for example, *gongoli* (a totally powerless *debul* in secret society terms) regularly appeared on the streets to entertain spectators (during public holidays for example) when I was in Freetown and he was often included in the cultural performances that cultural groups arranged to celebrate special occasions.<sup>64</sup> Also included in such performances were the more powerful Mende *debuls* such as *nafali* and *jobai* which fall into Phillips' intermediate category. So too did *goboi* which, according to Phillips, is considered extremely powerful up-country. All these *debuls* were featured by the National Dance Troupe in Freetown and *lantan* builders often depicted them in *lantan* form, calling

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<sup>61</sup> Nunley 1987:68.

<sup>62</sup> Interview 93/101.

<sup>63</sup> One particular informant who was well placed within a number of secret societies was prepared to talk about different types of medicine and the shrines associated with them.

<sup>64</sup> These occasions included public holidays and the birthdays of eminent members or patrons.

them ‘Dance Troupe’, ‘Cultural Devils’<sup>65</sup> or ‘Masked Devil Dancers’. The latter description indicates that when up-country *debuls* were performed (or in the case of *lantans*, were imitated) in Freetown they were powerless: they constituted masked dancers (rather than actual *debuls*) and provided pure entertainment. I deduced that the reason for this was because none of the male secret societies from up-country actually operated in Freetown at the time I was undertaking research. Away from the active presence of the secret societies with which they were associated and which controlled the medicine that empowered them, cultural *debuls* were perceived as playthings rather than as power objects (to use Arnoldi’s terms). This even applied to *goboi* – one of the more powerful Mende *debuls* - whose inclusion in the National Dance Troupe clearly implied that in this context he was totally unempowered.

This reasoning, of course, explains why it was not dangerous for *lantan* builders to imitate Mende *debuls* that were either entertainment *debuls* per se or were unempowered in Freetown. However, it was extremely dangerous to imitate in *lantan* form the *debuls* associated with the Yoruba-derived secret societies that were active in Freetown. These secrecy societies controlled secret knowledge and power and their control was partly embodied in and reinforced by the ritual performances of their *debuls*. Any imitation of such a *debul* would be extremely dangerous for all concerned because it might compromise or expose the society’s secrets. For this reason Freetown *lantan* builders never risked making *lantan* representations of *debuls* associated with Freetown’s Otta, Ojeh and Hunting Societies. The builder responsible for making and directing the operation of such a *lantan* puppet would undoubtedly be a member of the society concerned.<sup>66</sup> He might therefore be able to achieve too great a degree of likeness so that the two puppet types - the imitative (string and rod) *lantan* puppet and the actual (body puppet) *debul* character – might be absolutely indistinguishable to the audience and to society members alike. Such an eventuality would be dangerous because it might unleash powerful society forces outside their appropriate ritual (and therefore controllable) context.

The difference between empowered (society controlled) *debuls* and unempowered and entertainment *debuls* also helps explain why Freetown secret society

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<sup>65</sup> By cultural devil people meant *debuls* from up-country Sierra Leone as opposed to Freetown *debuls* which, being mainly of Yoruba origin, were regarded as non-Sierra Leonean in origin.

<sup>66</sup> A non-member would not know how to achieve a proper likeness and it would not interest him to try.

*debuls* never appeared during non-society events (such as national cultural festivals) and were never featured in the National Dance Troupe. In Freetown their performances needed to take place under the strict control of the various society lodges that actively owned them and these performances needed to be orchestrated by the society members who had the secret knowledge to direct and contain the power embodied in them. Any attempt to imitate or invade the domain of such societies in Freetown was fraught with danger.

The one apparent exception was constituted by the female Bundu Society which is very strong (especially among the Temne) in the eastern areas of Freetown.<sup>67</sup> I was told that there were many Bundu lodges in the city, each of which would have had under its control its own Bundu medicine and each of which had its own officials, many of whom had the right to own and perform a Bundu *debul*. At Christmas time it was not unusual to see a Bundu *debul* on the streets of the city marking the end of the initiation ceremonies organised by a particular lodge or group of lodges.<sup>68</sup> However, Bundu *debuls* were regularly represented in puppet form in *lantans*. Given the secret knowledge controlled by the Bundu Society through its lodges and their leadership hierarchies it was understandable that lantern clubs had to seek permission from their local Bundu lodge before embarking on building a *lantan* depicting a Bundu *debul*. The fact that permission was frequently granted did not mean that members of the Bundu Society were prepared to risk the potential revelation of Bundu secret knowledge or any diminution of their power. In fact, in 1993 Kissy Central Lantern Club had to allow three members of the male Poro Society (which is closely linked with the Bundu Society) to walk in front of the *lantan* float they built depicting 'Mammy Yoko and the Sande dancers' on the night of the lantern parade. This constituted both a statement of authority and a strong defence of society values and power. Ultimately, however, I was told that imitation of the Bundu *debul* in string and rod float puppet form was permissible because the *lantan* builders responsible for such puppets were always male. They were not party to the secret knowledge of the Bundu Society and as

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<sup>67</sup> I am not clear whether Mende women in Freetown belonged to the city's Bundu lodges, whether they formed separate Sande lodges or whether they maintained allegiance to the Sande lodges into which they would have been initiated in their home towns and villages up-country.

<sup>68</sup> These ceremonies always took place around Christmas to coincide with the dry season and school holidays.

a result could not expose any of its secrets through the puppet *debul* imitations they built. It was simply impossible for them to reveal what they did not know.<sup>69</sup>

### 8.8 Freetown *lantans* as an entertainment form

I discovered in the course of my research that puppet types, functions, power and play overlapped in an apparently diffuse, but to a Freetown audience, distinguishable manner. All the *lantan* puppets I saw (with the one exception of ‘Afisatu and her pet tortoise’) were string and/or rod puppets and imitated life, past, present, mythical and metaphysical. On the other hand the *debuls* (body puppets) I saw constituted (as far as I could determine) more-than-human characters. I consider that the tortoise puppet was an anomaly in the context of the lantern parade.<sup>70</sup> As far as I am aware, this *lantan* was unique within the history of the *lantan* tradition because it was an imitative form (like all the other *lantan* puppets) but it was not operated by the usual strings and rods. It was a body puppet (like a *debul*) but it did not constitute a character.<sup>71</sup>

While *lantan* enthusiasts recognised a distinction between objects that were empowered by secret society medicine and those that were not, there was not always consensus as to the category into which a particular object fell. For example, some people regarded *ode lay debuls* as power objects and other people did not. However, no one disputed that *lantans* were always objects of entertainment, never power objects.

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<sup>69</sup> Although this did not mean that they were never accused of doing so (Interview 94/8a & 8b).

<sup>70</sup> This *lantan* was built in 1997 by Baimbrace-Block Lane Lantern Club and was based on a children’s story about a girl called Afisatu and her pet giant tortoise. Afisatu was represented by a string and rod puppet but after the lantern parade I discovered that the tortoise was in fact a type of body puppet. It comprised a huge shell made out of painted cardboard with legs and a head made out of hessian sacking. The shell was large enough for a boy to climb inside to operate the creature’s forelegs and head which protruded from underneath it. By inserting his own head and arms into the appropriate pieces of sacking and by moving them backwards and forwards the boy puppeteer was able to extend and retract the tortoise’s head and forelimbs in a highly realistic way. Although the result was extremely tortoise-like a lot of *lantan* enthusiasts criticised the *lantan* for its use of such simple technology. This basic technology was, in fact, identical to that of a body puppet, involving as it did the direct animation of the tortoise figure by the movement of the human being enclosed within it. This, of course, is the same principle as that used to animate *debuls*. There were, however, several major differences between the tortoise puppet and Freetown’s other body puppets (*debuls*). A *debul* constitutes a character with a name and a set of defined, widely recognised characteristics by which it can be easily identified. On the other hand the tortoise body puppet was an imitation of a real tortoise – it was not a character in and of itself. Moreover, although the tortoise puppet derived its power from an invisible source (just like a *debul*) spectators readily admitted that the source was a human being concealed within the puppet/*lantan*. In the case of many *debuls*, however, people claim that their source of power is non-human.

This remained true even though *lantan* builders (and lantern club members) often attempted to strengthen themselves and their *lantans* through the manipulation of the metaphysical powers inherent in fetish substances.<sup>72</sup> Not all *lantan* builders engaged in such practices: indeed a number of builders who were devout Muslims hotly denied any involvement. They explained how, to strengthen their *lantan* endeavour they called on the Imam of the neighbourhood mosque, or a local Muslim elder, to come to the lantern house to pray for their *lantan*'s success.<sup>73</sup> One builder, Lasisi, boasted that he had no need to use fetishes in the *lantan* building process, such was his innate talent and technical skill. He described various instances where other *lantans* had been undermined by opponents using fetish means but added that, as a society man his own secret knowledge of powerful society medicine was such that he and his *lantans* were immune to fetish attacks.<sup>74</sup>

Other builders were prepared to admit that they had been subject to hostile attacks of a magical or occult nature. Alusine Conteh who built 'Mammy Yoko and the Sande Dancers' in 1993 for Mighty Red Lions Lantern Club maintained that the *lantan* was subject to sustained witchcraft attacks on the part of Bundu women in the neighbourhood. When the *lantan* appeared on the night of the lantern parade it was met by the head of the nearby Bundu lodge who demanded that the club members should remove certain items. These included the cowries, bell and piece of red and white cloth attached to the puppet *debul* and the cowries adorning the puppet *sampa* dancers. The club members complied but later the wooden stick (rod) used to turn the puppet figure of Mammy Yoko came apart and Alusine interpreted this as evidence of witchcraft on the part of the Bundu women who were still unhappy with the *lantan*. The builder stated that he would not want to repeat this particular theme again.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Appendix 11 considers instances of other possible past anomalies where string and rod *lantan* puppets functioned as dramatic characters.

<sup>72</sup> Fyle & Jones (1980:105) define the Krio word *fitish* as 'inanimate objects through which the magical powers of (evil) spirits are expressed, the practice of dealing with such objects and with the spirits associated with them'.

<sup>73</sup> Interviews 92/20, 92/21, 92/46 & 94/1.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Bronx Lantern Club had serious problems with its generator in 1989 when it built its *lantan* representing the famous boxing match between Tyson and Bruno. When the *lantan* was ready to join the parade the generator inexplicably failed. Lasisi (Interview 92/38) attributed the failure to someone having made a fetish against the club to reduce its chances of success.

<sup>75</sup> Interview 95/8. A witch is someone with extraordinary knowledge who uses it for individual ends that usually harm others. According to Shaw (1982:49-62) who studied divination among the Temne, people

Many *lantan* builders maintained that the use of fetish substances and witchcraft was particularly prevalent in the provinces where success was not a matter of what a *lantan* builder could achieve technically but how best he could put his witchcraft into practice. Some builders believed that if they travelled from Freetown to construct *lantans* for groups up-country then they would place themselves at considerable risk.<sup>76</sup> Another informant claimed that in the provinces success in *lantan* building ‘... is not a matter of what you know but how best you can put your witchcraft into practice’.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, in Freetown itself, provincial *lantan* builders were credited with particular skill in these matters. Residents of Wellington and Portee (city suburbs where many provincial people lived) were reputed to be knowledgeable where fetish and witchcraft practices were concerned. Tipo, whose skill in building *lantan* mechanisms was widely acknowledged (and who had strong connections with Portee), admitted attaching fetishes to different parts of his *lantans* to protect them from attack by jealous rivals. Many *lantan* builders described how they undertook a ceremony known as *sara*<sup>78</sup> when they started the building process and again when the *lantan* was completed. According to one, the type of *sara* performed is called *sara fangadama* and consisted of assorted foods (such as kola nuts, rice and bananas) which were ritually offered to the dead founders and members of the lantern club concerned, to invoke their support in the *lantan* building enterprise.<sup>79</sup>

Although various procedures existed as ways of safeguarding a *lantan* and its builder, and people were free to use diverse means, there was never any suggestion on anyone’s part that *lantans* in Freetown were associated with the institutionalised power of secret societies. I met a good many individual *lantan* builders and lantern club members who, like Lasisi, were active or even senior society men and who might well

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‘with eyes’ (i.e., who have four eyes, two of them invisible and used to see the world of spirits) include diviners, secret society officials, herbalists, blacksmiths, white people, powerful chiefs, warriors, hunters, traders and ‘big men’. Since all witches ‘have eyes’ the aforementioned people are more likely than ordinary people to be considered witches.

<sup>76</sup> *Lantan* builders Mohammed Bangura (Interview 93/75) and Degool (Interviews 95/84 & 95/133) described mysterious and unfortunate experiences up-country which they ascribed to witchcraft.

<sup>77</sup> Interview 94/53.

<sup>78</sup> *Sara* is something given away as charity (alms) to ward off ill luck or evil. It also refers to pieces of uncooked food deposited in the street (often at crossroads) for the same purpose ( Fyle and Jones 1980:323).

<sup>79</sup> Interviews 93/79 & 95/133. *Fangadama* comprises bits of cooked food thrown away or given away in order to secure protection by good spirits (Fyle & Jones 1980:98).

have been able to use their secret knowledge of society medicines to their own advantage. However, all them insisted that *lantans* in Freetown were not empowered by secret societies: they were not power objects.

This contention was borne out by the behaviour surrounding *lantan* building and *lantan* processions. Although builders and clubs were keen to keep their building techniques hidden from their competitors there was no ritual secrecy surrounding the *lantans* and enclosures (*lantan* houses) where they were built. The very fact that I, after gaining appropriate permission, could freely visit *lantan* houses, take photographs and spend hours watching and discussing the progress of *lantans*, was evidence of this. Never could I have obtained such access to secret society locations and activities, other than to public performance sessions where I was never allowed to take photographs. Furthermore, *lantans* were always openly paraded in the course of lantern parades which took place in front of thousands of spectators: anyone could join any procession to dance to its music and move with its *lantan*. *Lantan* processions and the lantern parades of which they were a part were, therefore, totally inclusive in a way that secret society events were not. If the latter provided entertainment (which they certainly did for their select audiences) it was within the context of the controlled, institutionalised power of the secret society concerned.

## 8.9 Conclusion

Whatever category they fell into, as models of architectural and transport forms or as puppet replicas of natural, mythical or metaphysical beings, *lantans*, and the processions and lantern parades of which they formed a part, constituted a form of inclusive entertainment. They were rivalled only by the *ode lay* processions which were once so popular and which experienced a strictly limited revival in the 1990s.

The fact that *lantans* were playthings as opposed to power objects does not in any way trivialise them or their performances. This becomes very clear when we consider the event – the end of Ramadan – which has been inextricably linked with lantern parades for over a century and which has imbued *lantans* and *lantan* processions with a particular sense of occasion. What constituted this sense of occasion and how critical it was in defining the *lantan* tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the subject of the final chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 9

### CONCLUSION: LANTANS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

My research and thesis have addressed Freetown's *lantan* tradition from two main perspectives. Firstly, I have explored the history of the tradition from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, looking at the tradition's introduction, spread and development in Freetown as well as the roles that prominent individuals, politicians, parade organisers and lantern clubs have played in nurturing the tradition and exploiting its potential. Secondly I have focused attention on the artefacts at the core of the tradition – the *lantan* themselves. This has involved exploring how they were built, the imagery they employed and the network of *lantan* builders I encountered in the 1990s. I then identified the principles that underpinned the evaluation of *lantans* in Freetown, seeking to answer the question as to whether *lantans* were in fact works of art. Finally I used insights drawn from puppetry and performance theory to examine the nature of *lantan* performances and relate them to other types of performance, in particular those associated with Freetown's *debul*s. I discovered that the techniques and concepts underlying puppetry provided tools that enabled me examine Freetown *lantan* and *debul* traditions within a single conceptual framework. I was then able to identify related notions of performance, involving imitation/pretending on the one hand and characterisation/acting in character on the other, as the defining features of *lantan* performances and *debul* performances respectively. Lastly, the opposing concepts of 'power object' and 'plaything' (which are widespread notions within various West African artefact traditions) helped distinguish between different types of *debul* traditions in Freetown and illuminate the essentially 'playful' nature of *lantan* performances as an entertainment form.

During the period of its existence Freetown's *lantan* tradition has inspired and embraced diverse forms of creativity, especially on the part of *lantan* builders. Furthermore, by the 1960s the annual lantern parade had established itself as probably the most inclusive performance tradition in Freetown's history. However, the tradition had at various times in its history been a focus of internal tensions among Muslims and by the 1990s it was under fierce attack from a young Fourah Bay Muslim fundamentalist, Sheikh Mucjabah. The 1997 lantern parade went ahead amidst robust popular discussion in the media and persistent opposition from a vociferous

minority of Muslims. The organisers of the parade (the YMMA) refused to be influenced in public, but in private its executive members admitted that in 1998 they might have to consider shifting the date of the lantern parade from the eve of Id-ul-Fitr. However, at the 1997 prize giving ceremony, some weeks after the parade, the YMMA leadership proclaimed that the date of the parade would remain unchanged. Unfortunately, soon afterwards the security situation degenerated and the worst phase of the civil war overtook Freetown in May 1997. Since then nine years have passed and no further end-of-Ramadan lantern parades have been held.<sup>1</sup>

Nine to ten years is possibly not the longest lapse in the tradition of *lantans* building in Freetown. There was a lengthy gap during the period of World War II when the colonial government refused to give permission for *lantans* to be paraded. However, in those days the annual *lantans* processions were informal affairs and they were exclusive to the Muslim community. We know that between 1939 and 1945 *lantans* of some form or another were taken out surreptitiously in parts of Freetown. Later, however, the YMMA formalised the processions into a huge public, competitive parade with such an inclusive audience that it was too major an event to organise and hold in safety during most of the recent civil war.

Most important to any revival of the lantern parade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the creation (or reinvention) of an organising group (whether or not the YMMA), the revival of lantern clubs and the availability of *lantans* builders, materials and funds. The latter might be forthcoming from the commercial, government or NGO sectors or from individuals, such as politicians. But there will still remain the question of the most appropriate date for any future lantern parade to be held. Any attempt to revive the parade to mark the end of Ramadan might generate further unwelcome religious dissension within the Muslim community. My research suggests, however, that a permanent change in date might alter people's attitude towards future lantern parades and might eventually effect a fundamental change in the theatrical function of *lantans*.

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<sup>1</sup> I understand, however, that an attempt was made to resurrect the *lantans* tradition and to organise a lantern parade in April 2005 to coincide with Independence Day. The organiser was the former Organising and Publicity Secretary of the YMMA although I do not believe that he was acting in this capacity or that the YMMA was involved in the endeavour (Alhaji Unisa Alim Sesay, personal communication).

This latter suggestion (relating to the theatrical function of *lantans*) is highly speculative and is considered in Appendix 11. The former suggestion (that the date of the lantern parade affects people's attitude towards it) is, however, central to an understanding of the role of the *lantan* tradition from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the late 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is also fundamental to the nature and success of any possible revival of the tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Between 1895 and 1997 *lantans* were associated predominantly with the end of the month of Ramadan, a month that constitutes a break in continuity within the year when, for practising Muslims, normal life is disrupted by a period of fasting. During Ramadan Muslims participate in a number of special religious performances and procedures (in addition to fasting) that culminate in the observances associated with Lailut-ul-Kadri which falls on the twenty sixth or twenty seventh day of the fast. Hence within the period of fasting (itself a time of dislocation in the everyday routine of normal life) there is a short but important transitional phase when, on the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri Muslims celebrate the beginning of the revelation of the Koran and the transition from a state of spiritual ignorance to a state of spiritual knowledge. By this time the old moon is waning fast and is about to disappear for several nights altogether, before re-emerging as the new moon that marks the beginning of the month of Shawwal.<sup>2</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the disappearance of the moon towards the end of Ramadan was commonly referred to as its death and burial, and the period of watching and waiting for its rebirth reinforced the sense of dislocation and anticipation created by the month of fasting. The moon's disappearance was marked by crowds of Muslims who congregated in the streets to 'escort the moon to its grave' or 'resting place'<sup>3</sup>, to

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Turner introduced the concept of liminality as a way of describing the state of 'betwixt and between' and noted that performance activities tend to cluster around what he called liminal occasions, marking and filling the gaps in continuity created or acknowledged by these occasions. (Turner 1986:24-27.) I consider that Lailut-ul-Kadri and the ensuing days leading to the end of Ramadan constitute a state of liminality that marks a transition between ignorance and enlightenment, between physical darkness and light and between a state of separation, abstinence and fasting and a state of normality.

<sup>3</sup> SLT: March 30 1895. Interview 94/23.

'bury the moon'<sup>4</sup> or 'to carry the moon home'<sup>5</sup>. These 'watch processions'<sup>6</sup> were repeated each night until the moon was finally sighted and the month of fasting came to an end. It was for these nightly watch processions that *lantans* were first built in Freetown. As such, I suggest that *lantans* constituted what John Emigh has called 'transitional objects'<sup>7</sup> in that they helped bridge gaps in continuity, between the world as it used to be (before the moon disappeared) and the world as it would become (when the reappearance of the moon marked the end of the fast and a return to normality). Thus *lantans* built for the end of Ramadan processions actually embodied and helped effect the transition that both the physical world and Muslim believers within it were undergoing. The *lantans* and processions hurried the moon to its grave, physically lit up the consequent darkness and focused people's expectation that soon everything would return to normal.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1930s *lantan* processions became confined to the 'watchnight' (the evening when the moon is sighted thus heralding the festival of Id-ul-Fitr on the following day). *Lantans* thereby remained part of the transitional process from the month of Ramadan to that of Shawwal but they were no longer paraded during the moonless nights immediately preceding the eve of Id-ul-Fitr. I suggest as a hypothesis that the change in date of the *lantan* processions (from the night of Lailut-ul-Kadri to the eve of Id-ul-Fitr) precipitated changes in the way people thought about *lantans*. All the time they were built to head the processions that marked the death of the moon they had, quite literally to illuminate the moonless nights during which they were paraded: they had to be lanterns. As such they fulfilled a practical function and they also constituted a vigil – anticipating and activating the moon's reappearance and a return to normal life. They were true transitional objects helping bridge the gap between the death of the moon and its return at the dawn of a new month.

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<sup>4</sup> *SLT*: March 14 1896 & March 21 1896.

<sup>5</sup> *SLT*: February 11 1899.

<sup>6</sup> *SLT*: April 7 1894.

<sup>7</sup> Emigh 1996:3. Emigh makes use of the work of D W Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst, in his attempt to understand 'the genesis and ontology of performance as a human phenomenon' (Emigh 1996:1-3).

<sup>8</sup> I suggest that the closest parallel in the Church calendar would be the period between Good Friday (which marks the death of Christ, the Light of the World) and Easter Sunday (which celebrates His resurrection).

However, when the date of the *lantana* processions was shifted to the eve of Id-ul-Fitr in the mid-1930s, the connections between *lantans*, luminosity and vigil were broken. *Lantans* still helped ease the transition between the end of fasting and the return to normality celebrated at the Id prayers but they no longer had to light the dark nights which heralded the Id festival: they no longer needed to be true lanterns. This shift in function and emphasis may well have been the enabling factor that allowed *lantana* builders to experiment with new ways of conceiving and building *lantans*. Perhaps it was this changed conceptual climate that made way for the development of illuminated (as opposed to luminous) *lantans* incorporating articulation and puppetry.

Despite the change in date, lantern parades and *lantans* themselves still marked the transition from a month of fasting back to normal life. They therefore embodied considerable affective content and power and this may explain why so many ordinary Muslims exhibited such a strong commitment to the lantern parade. For them the parade and the *lantans* that constituted its material focus encapsulated and effected the transition that the month of Ramadan and its completion implied. Transition indicates movement, and the lantern parade embodied movement above all else. It comprised a succession of lantern club processions each of which focused on a mobile float which was not only physically propelled along the streets but which also displayed the movement of human performers or puppets. *Lantans*, therefore, were still an intrinsic and highly visible celebration and focus of the transition process involved in the ending of Ramadan.

However, by 1997 the pressure to separate the *lantana* tradition from the eve of Id-ul-Fitr had become very strong. It seemed that, in order to survive, the annual lantern parade might have to be shifted to a different date in order to satisfy those Muslims who regarded the parade as an irreligious distraction at the end of the sacred month of fasting. The worsening of the civil war precluded the staging of any further lantern parades and the issue ceased to be of immediate practical relevance. However, should the *lantana* tradition be revived then a change in the date on which future lantern parades are scheduled may herald a shift in attitude towards them. If lantern parades were to cease being transitional events (and *lantans* no longer constituted transitional objects) the current repertoire of *lantana* imagery might very well change and *lantans* might be free to develop from being a form of imitation into a form of dramatisation. If this were to happen then *lantana* performers (human and puppet) would move from a

mode of performance involving pretence to a mode that involves characterisation.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the implications of this hypothesis (although Appendix 11 explains it in more detail). Suffice to say that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the *lantán* tradition faces an uncertain future. It was particularly opportune that I happened to research the tradition in the 1990s and it is my hope that this research has achieved two worthwhile results. First, it has provided in-depth data on a tradition that has developed in a way that is unique to Sierra Leone and that hitherto was little known and little understood. My research has placed the *lantán* tradition within the context of the wider float tradition that exists in the Senegambia region of West Africa and it has provided comparative material that can be used in studies of festival traditions elsewhere in Africa and the Americas. Secondly, my research has addressed theoretical issues as they relate to the *lantán* tradition. In particular, it has considered how concepts of art and performance, of power objects and playthings apply to *lantáns*, and in so doing has shown that notions of puppetry can be usefully extended to illuminate the inter-relationship between *lantáns* and *debuls* in Freetown. There is clearly room for more research in the future, both into the *fanaal* tradition in The Gambia and Senegal and into notions of puppetry and performance as they relate to masquerade traditions within and outside Sierra Leone. It is my hope that a third achievement may also result from my study of the *lantán* tradition: namely that it might, at some future date, contribute to the tradition's reinvention, albeit in a different form from the one described herein.

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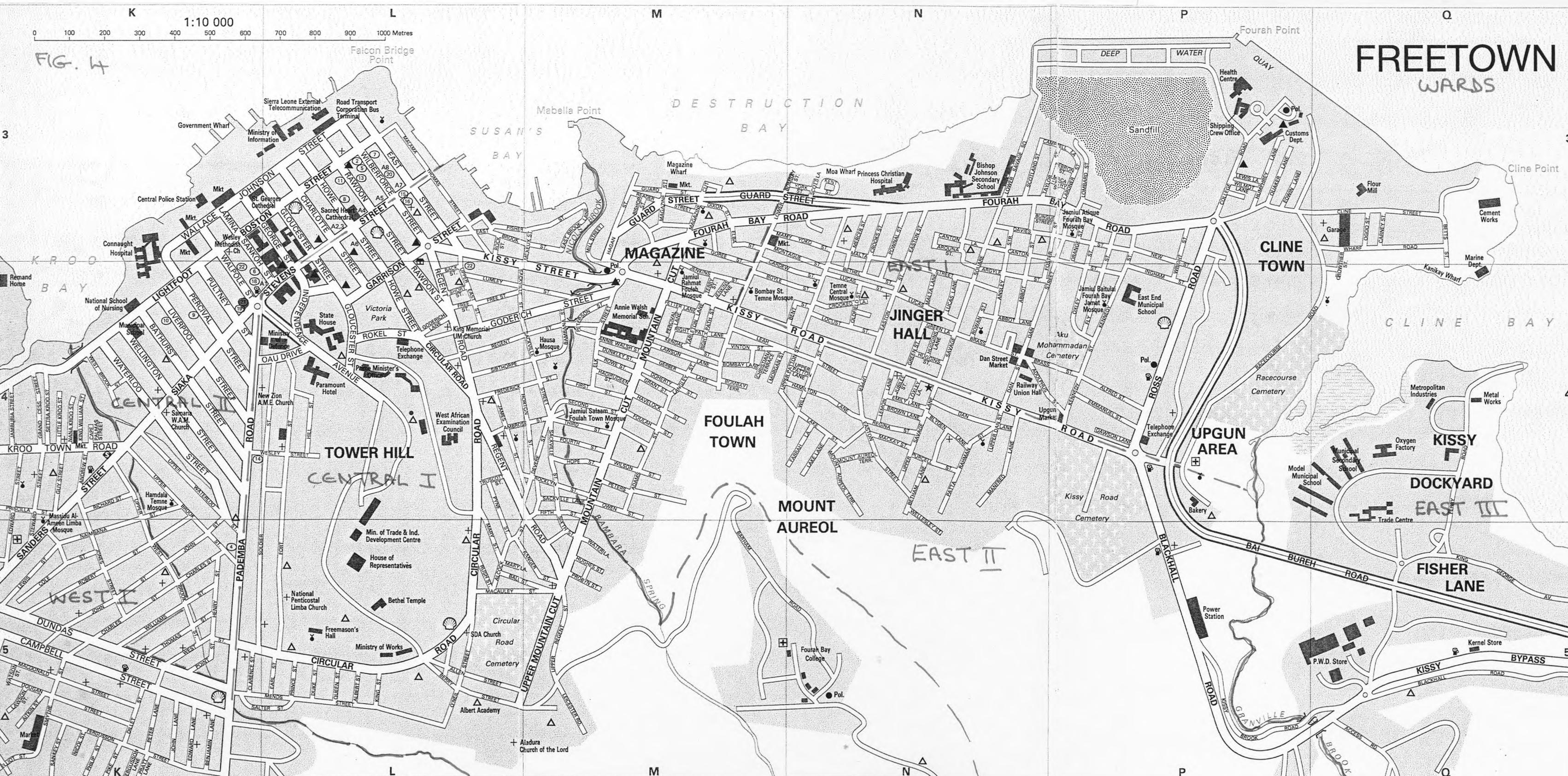
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FIG. 4

# FREETOWN WARDS



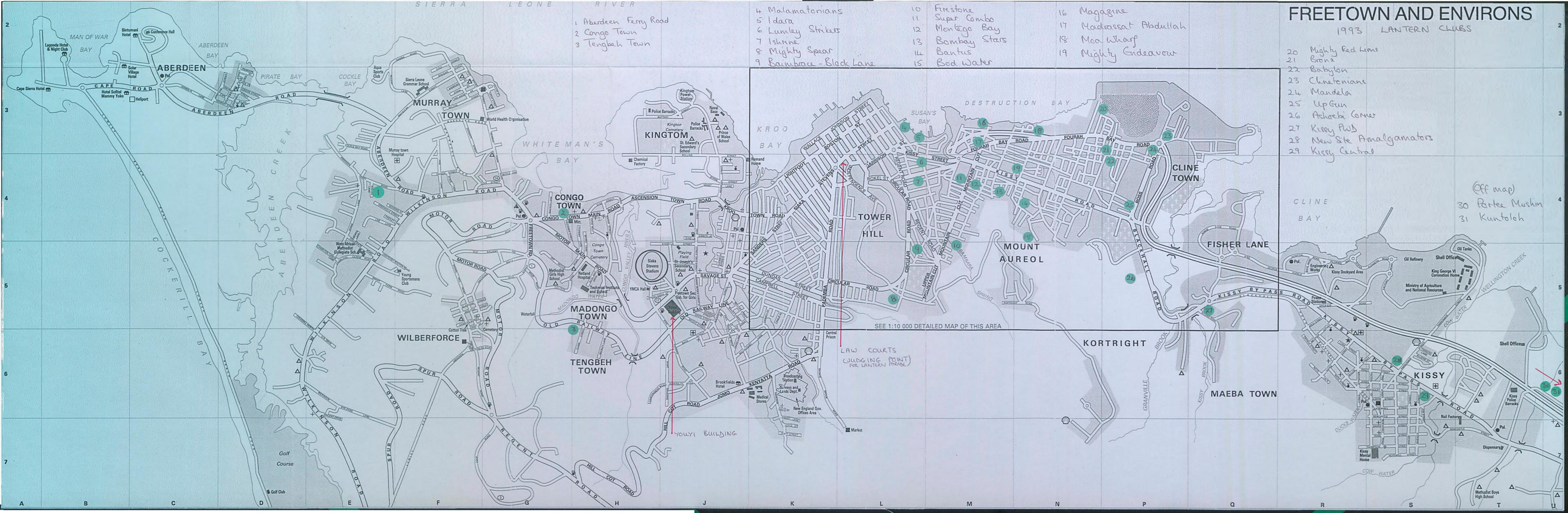
# FREETOWN AND ENVIRONS

1993 LANTERN CLUBS

- |                       |                          |                 |                      |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1 Aberdeen Ferry Road | 4 Malamatonians          | 10 Firestone    | 16 Magazine          |
| 2 Congo Town          | 5 Idara                  | 11 Super Combo  | 17 Madrasat Abdullah |
| 3 Tengbeh Town        | 6 Lumley Strikers        | 12 Montego Bay  | 18 Mea Wharf         |
|                       | 7 Ishrine                | 13 Bombay Stars | 19 Mighty Endeavour  |
|                       | 8 Mighty Spear           | 14 Bantus       |                      |
|                       | 9 Bainbrace - Black Lane | 15 Bod Water    |                      |

- |                          |
|--------------------------|
| 20 Mighty Red Lins       |
| 21 Bronx                 |
| 22 Babylon               |
| 23 Christianians         |
| 24 Mandela               |
| 25 Up Gun                |
| 26 Ashobi Corner         |
| 27 Kissy Pub             |
| 28 New Site Amalgamators |
| 29 Kissy Central         |

- (off map)
- |                  |
|------------------|
| 30 Portee Muslim |
| 31 Kuntoloh      |



SEE 1:10 000 DETAILED MAP OF THIS AREA

LAW COURTS  
(JUDGING POINT  
FOR LANTERN TROUPE)

YOUYI BUILDING

Key

- Blood relatives
- Teacher - pupil relationship
- Colleagues/friends
- Club relationship

# LANTAN BUILDERS' NETWORKS

