

“My Christmas Story”

[Luke 2:22-35](#)

Christmas Celebrations in Sierra Leone

The Christmas season in Freetown, Sierra Leone is a joyous time for everyone. It's common to see Christmas decorations at shops, churches and homes. Often, trees are decorated with crafts, fake snowflakes, candles and bells.

The Krio word, “Fambul” is used over and over again. It is a word that denotes the importance of family, meaning that “I am what I am because of who we all are.” The city becomes full with people during the Christmas time. Many Sierra Leoneans living abroad come back home for the festive season. Families gather together for reunion and many customary ceremonies are performed. People go out and visit their friends and relatives. Everyone celebrates Christmas. It doesn't really matter whether you are a Christian, Muslim or others. Christmas is a two-day national holiday. On December 25th and 26th, all the schools, offices and businesses are closed, and this is a great opportunity for people to visit their families and friends.

Now, living here in America, I really miss the Christmas celebrations I used to have back home. I miss the hot weather, which is cooled by the harmattan winds blowing in from the Sahara desert. I miss the music, played in every corner on every street competing for your attention - the high pitch sound systems, on top of cars, tables, roofs, and the local drinks playing latest songs by local artists. And, of course, there are new dance styles and the latest fashion JC vs home base.

Christmas at the Church

Churches hold the worship service on Christmas Eve, and it's usually for three hours! To get a good seat, you have to arrive an hour before the service starts. Sometimes, you have to bring your own chair! The Christmas carols people sing in my home country are as same as the ones we sing here in America, but they are sung with the British accent, Local Christmas songs are sung with similar lyrics and tunes. Somehow, there are more swings and dancing to these music and hymns. After singing carols, prayers are said. Then, people share their testimonies of the Lord's goodness in their lives. These testimonies serve as an inspiration to others in building their faith. Most of time, Christmas Eve services end in massive carnival processions, as people sing and dance, saying repeatedly, “HAPI CHRISTMAS ME NOR DIE OH TELL GOD TENKI FOR ME LIFE OH.” Often, non-Christians in costumes and masks join these church processions, as they celebrate in anticipation for a new year.

Christmas at Home

This is what happens at homes on Christmas day. First, the food, of course. The main dish of jollof rice is made even tastier with sweet onion stew. Fofu and delicious soups, roast chicken and roasted pork ribs are accompanied by warm fried plantains, sweet potato, meat patties, coleslaw and delicious peanut butter soup. Next to come the heaped piles of cassava and yams to help mop up the steaming bowls of pepper soup. The huge tray of salad piled even higher with sweet juicy tomatoes, cucumber, tuna, beans, eggs and onions. I apologize for making you feel hungry.

In the sweet corners, where all the children are usually found, are the banana bread, rice cakes, coconut cake, sweets and biscuits. In the fridge would be huge jars of cold refreshing ginger beer flavored with limes and other spices. Crates of soft drinks, Guinness stout and Star Beer would be piled high in the corner in huge buckets filled to the with ice cubes.

Afternoons are saved for just eating, relaxing and catching up on conversations. That's another one that I really miss. People in my home country do not cook just for their own families but for others too. Our friends would send their best dishes to us, and we would do the same to them. And, this is not just about sharing food with others, but about seriously developing new relationships and having a deep sense of community building. Everyone makes sure that the next person is taken care of in the best possible way.

Children's Activities and Gift Giving

During the holiday, groups of children go door to door to performing tricks, singing and dancing Christmas songs to the accompaniment of homemade instruments, and in return, they receive small monetary gifts from adults. The Christmas gift giving culture in Sierra Leone is not as commercial as it is in America and other parts of the world. Generally, those who can afford will give gifts at Christmas. But, more emphasis is placed on the birth of Jesus as God's gift to us than on the gift itself. Most common gifts are new clothes to be worn for church or for other Christmas events. In rural areas, only a few people can afford fancy gifts or toys, and in any case there are not many places to buy them. Therefore, if gifts are exchanged in poor communities, they are usually school books, soaps, candles and other practical goods.

Christmas on a Personal Note

When I was a child, every Christmas time, I was busy with and worried about all the festivities around Christmas. I used to be actively involved in Christmas plays both in school and in church. One day, I asked my Sunday school teacher how Mary could stay so calm even when she heard the details of the message from the angel. I told her if I were Mary, I would be so scared and worried. This is what she told me: "Moore, the world is full of fear, and that's why Jesus came." Then, she went quiet. Years later, I became involved in the young people's ministry of the United Methodist Church Sierra Leone Annual Conference. The Christmas season was considered as an opportune time for the church to embark on outreach programs to non-Christian communities. It was mandatory for leaders to go and serve these communities, so I had to leave my own family to serve the church and others, year after years. It was not easy for me at first, but being a leader I just had to go. (here come again the story of Mary catch up with me.)

Least did I know that the Lord was preparing me for what I am currently facing. It's been four years of celebrating Christmas without my biological family, as my husband and some are still in Sierra Leone, not being allowed to come join me in America. However, I have managed to have a good time...

If you find this holiday season to be tough, remember that you are not alone. Please join me in saying 'Hapi Christmas me nor die oh Tell God Tenki for the Life Oh!'

In conclusion, always remember that GOD is pleased to use willing hearts more than able bodies. Let's celebrate Christmas every day!