

## The girl who became a nun and disavowed: A profile of the National Electoral Commission's Dr. Christiana Thorpe

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There is an old woman who lives somewhere in Freetown. She says she was a “very sound footballer”. Her head is now adorned with sparkling gray hair. She has a great sense of humor. She reads the newspapers daily. She has a daughter whom journalists can't help but write about often. Her daughter brings her the newspapers. Mother teases daughter every chance she gets. And that's very often because every week Dr. Christiana Ayoka Mary Thorpe is mentioned in the Sierra Leonean media.

“I see they went to town on you in the papers today,” is just one of several ways Mrs. Effumi Thorpe, the 85-year old mother of Christiana Thorpe, would greet her daughter when she arrives home from her daily task of seeing to it that Sierra Leone's landmark elections slated for August 11 are as credible as could be. And for the woman who always has a disarming smile that

could turn Lucifer into a saint, the joke is often well taken.

A rather curious fact about Effumi Thorpe is that she seems the least bit perturbed about the enormous task her daughter is taking on. She says Christiana had been prepared for the job when she was only a little girl. “She has been taught to say the truth, regardless of whosoever is around, she will say the truth. The truth never fails, my dear. She has been taught to be honest and truthful, my dear”. And even Christiana Thorpe seems the least bit daunted.

When I went to see the Chief National Electoral Commissioner recently I came armed with all the reasons why the coming historic elections are perhaps the most important development in Sierra Leone since the guns of war were made quiet here. And why, given that, the elections cannot be affected. Christiana Thorpe looks me directly in the eye, patiently wait for me to finish, and with an unimaginable sense of calm, smile and quietly says, “we all have a role to play, if we all play our various roles, in synergy, we would make it together”.

Christiana Thorpe's halcyon aura is the virtue the esteemed Sierra Leonean educator, Dr. Talabi Lucan, who saw a baby turned into woman, believes when Christiana was a girl, one “would not think that she would have the nerve that she has developed now”. The “nerve”, that is, to head NEC. And she has developed quite a bit of it. When Captain Valentine Strasser, Sierra Leone's youngest ever leader seized power, Christiana Thorpe was the only woman in his cabinet of 19 ministers. Now she's the first woman ever to be the Chief Electoral Commissioner in the history of Sierra Leone. And she's quite humble and practical about it. “For me, it's not much the fact that I'm a woman. I'm a citizen of this country, were ever I can serve my country, I serve”, she points out.

“Women's participation is necessary to further everything in this country, not just the electoral process. I keep saying that it takes two tango. The more women get involved in all aspects of national life the better for the nation. That would mean of course women coming in as voters, and candidates for the elections”.

Listening to Christiana Thorpe now, this is all baffling for Dr. Lucan, whom Christiana calls when tides are high. She recalls a “mild, very nice and quiet girl. The sort of child anybody would like. She was so quiet. She looks unassuming, but she's got so much in her, oh my goodness!” she screams. That which she had in her, she got from her grandmother whom Effumi calls a no nonsense terrible sympathetic woman.

### **A life transformed by “slavery”**

At a very young age Christiana realized why being poor is not an excuse from being human. The lives of the underprivileged she grew among were to later have a transforming effect on hers. She grew up poor tugging at her grandmother's heels as they trek to the river at Kroobay to wash clothes for those who could afford a wash-woman. “We grew up among many people who did not go to school. My younger sister and I were the only girls attending school in our neighborhood. I think, as early as age 7, I became conscious that there was a difference”. And that was the start of many changes in her life to come.

“When I would come from school, I would want to go play with my friends outside but my grandmother would say, no. She would ask, what did you do in school today, go bring your chalkboard. It ended up so that the children would come to our house and I would be the teacher. Throughout my schooling, teaching was just kind of part of me. Whatever I learned I shared”. But by the time she became a teenager, the “difference” had become pronounced.

“I saw my peers who were now labored with two, three children, trying to care for them. At that stage I was in form 6 and I was using my lunch money to help some of them with their babies. Well, they were my friends, same age, and they would say, here is the child and I don't have money to buy food for her, and I would, you know, give some of my lunch”. She gave her life later.

“That had very big impact on my decision to be a teacher, and then also to become a nun. So I said I want to be in a place where I can concentrate in educating girls to help them get out of this, what I will call a form of slavery”. So, while a teenager Christiana decided to leave the comfort of her grandmas' to enter the cold and distant protective towering walls of the Convent. She admits it was an unusual decision to make at nineteen. “Of course religious life was not kind of popular, but I felt I wanted to devote myself to helping girls in their education.”

Christiana left her grandmother, also named Christiana, for Ireland. She fondly describes her grandma, whom families and friends say is very much herself, as a “gentle, very respectful to whoever; be it a child or the president. As gentle as she was, she was not afraid to speak out and to let you know if you're wrong. She was generous - very, very generous. The main important thing I learnt from her was her sense of godliness. She was God-fearing, she was prayerful and faithful. She has great faith. And I think I imbibe some of those qualities from her”.

The young Christiana came to Ireland to learn more about a god who for two weeks kept his bright star from shining. She craved the sun and grew colder.

And later learnt two lessons about Ireland: that the Irish do not look to the sun for their warmth, they carry theirs in their bosom, and that a bright shining sun in Ireland is not always warm. But when the skies finally part for the sun she ran outside and "stood and looked at that thing up there, was that really the sun? I was very disappointed, there was the sun, but I was not feeling it. All my life I had associated the sun with heat." And during her studies at University College, Dublin, she found "the Irish people very, very nice, very accommodating, very warm." She says she really loved Ireland and made lots of good friends there. But she left Europe to join in her parents' footsteps to work as a civil servant at home.

### **"A very painful decision" changing lives**

While Christiana was away girls became child mothers and young women later great grandmothers. It turned out the "difference" she saw growing up was merely a microcosm of what was really wrong. She soon realized that when working as a nun and principal at St. Joseph's Secondary School for girls in Makeni. "We'd start the first year in secondary school with about 200 girls and five years later, when that crop should do their O' Levels, I think the highest number we ever got was 35", she says. This caused her to make the most painful decision in her life yet.

"When she decided to break away, that gave us quite a headache. We said how could you?" And she said to me, "I've prayed about it, but I think there is more work out there for me to do. I will continue to pray about it". She is the first person I ever know who did that," Dr. Lucan says.

There had been a struggle in Christiana's life lasting a few years. The Convent has rules and regulations; she had a mission to find out why the dropout rate among girls was so high. So she decides to pay home visits to parents. But to do so, she would have to wait until after dusk, when the farmers return home with their school going children who were their helping hands. But Convent rules require her back before dusk. So the woman who pledges that she will not rest until the present 70-percent illiteracy rate among women in Sierra Leone drops significantly had an epiphany: She walked out of the Convent as a Mother Superior, turning her back on the only world she had ever known.

"It was a very painful decision because how do you live 20 years of your life in a setup that you like and move out into the unknown? It was hard. I felt my real work was out there, among the people". And among the people Christiana Thorpe has stayed. She helped women who were raped and tortured by rebels during the war "restore their sense of worth". She gave them a chance at education. She knocked on doors at UNDP asking for help to create educational space for thousands of children affected by the war. She worked for peace and merely escaped an ambush while returning to bury her father who died during the war. She organized at addressing human rights of women and girls. She gathered other women in 1995 to form the Sierra Leonean chapter of Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which promotes the education of girls and women in Sub-Saharan Africa. And during the war, they established Emergency Displace School Camps for thousands of children and ran Peace Education Programmes in over a dozen chiefdoms. While displaced in neighboring Guinea, FAWE brought in over three thousand children, all of whom, Christiana Thorpe later told the United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002, "displayed one characteristic syndrome: violence" to form a make-shift school. FAWE has also helped about a thousand girl mothers survive the trauma. Haja Alimatu Abdallah, one of the women she called to FAWE, says Christiana Thorpe always "tries to see how she can make the best out of a worse situation".

And she continues working on the findings she made after leaving the Convent. That “the cultural strain of the girl is such that as soon as she enters puberty it's time to look for a man to get married. She's also a source of income, because she brings in dowry to the family. So these are things that kept girls from continuing their education”.

### **A “God-fearing” NEC chair**

And while she worked the world watched and took note. The results are adorning the walls at the FAWE secretariat in Freetown. At the Commission for Refugee Women and Children she picked up the “Voices of Courage Award” for working with displaced children during the war. And then the “Defenders' Day” award was given to Christiana Thorpe by the United Nations because she put her principles and life “on the line to protect basic freedoms”. At home she has received numerous other accolades. All of this work helped gain her a position that sees her now constantly in the spotlight.

“You must be joking”, was Christiana Thorpe's first reaction when told the president would like her to head the relatively new NEC. But when it became clear it was not a joke, she “prayed about it a lot” and turned to, among others, Dr. Lucan. “She asked me to accompany her to go see the president when she wanted to accept the position. When I doubted her, she said, “you know my principles”. She is doing it, under very strenuous circumstances. I'm not worried about her heading NEC, she has kept her reputation. Sometimes even when the president himself expects her to bend, she stands tall”.

All parliamentarians, including the opposition, unanimously supported Christiana Thorpe's nomination. But that has not quiet her detractors. An on-line forum frequented by Sierra Leoneans in the diaspora presumably got uncivil during exchanges on her and it was shut down and the Sierra Leonean media have mostly not taken advantage of the open door policy on information she has at the NEC. No one has had any substantive complaint against Christiana Thorpe's personal or professional credibility. Yet someone in an on-line forum argued: “Christiana Thorpe by all indications cannot take an independent position. Does her defense team realize that she is the fiancée of Sam Maligie? Another wrote: “Christiana Thorpe has a responsibility and MUST explain to the nation what went wrong between her and her faith.”

With her usual calm and pleasant demeanor Christiana Thorpe slowly beamed as I put these points across to her. “I'm not bothered with detractors, no, no. If you bother with them, they'd only distract you” she said, smiling. “I'm focused on delivering credible elections within the mandate of NEC”. Really the criticisms of Christiana Thorpe are not really about her. They are the legitimate fears of those who have seen the political ineptitude of governments that have had NEC within their embrace.

Christian Thorpe met Sam Malige, a member of the ruling party, over a decade ago, long before she was appointed to head the NEC. She says they have remained friends because “when it comes to areas of national development, we have a lot in common”. Mr. Malige runs a non-profit outfit, the Opportunity Industrialization Center, where children who dropped out of school get a second chance. “Him [Sam] being a member of the SLPP does not affect my professionalism with my job at NEC. No man in an island, everybody in this country know somebody who may or may not be of the same political affiliation”, she points out.

Some of the sagely on-line posts focus on the credible public services the NEC chair has rendered over the years. One notes “Miss Thorpe's in fighting for the rights of girl children

that suffered during the war will remain indelible in the minds of human rights and civil society activists". The Executive Representative to the United Nations Secretary-General in Sierra Leone, Mr. Victor Angelo, believes Christiana Thorpe has done a great job securing the independence of the Commission. Victor Angelo also commented publicly that "as long as Christiana Thorpe heads the National Electoral Commission, we will have a strong commission". FAWE's Haja Abdallah says the NEC chair is a "very determined woman. She does not let anyone distract her. She is not one that can be manipulated or influenced to do what she does not believe. She's also very God-fearing".

"At NEC we're doing our best to establish credibility in all that we do. Our approach has been to get everybody in the process and let the nation know that collectively we all have a role to play in ensuring that the elections are credible and acceptable", Christiana Thorpe says. And the United Nations Chief Elections Specialist, Carlos Valenzuela, sent here to assist the NEC, agrees that the approach has been working well. "I am very impressed. I felt that she [Christiana Thorpe] is a very strong woman, who would really give credibility to the elections, that it was good to work with somebody like her", Mr. Valenzuela says.

Perhaps Christiana Thorpe's pragmatic leadership style could also be credited for the successes the Commission has made in just over a year after it was formed. When I repeatedly pointed out to her that given the history of previous commissions, the fears about the independence of NEC could be understandable. She succinctly notes, "that's the past, let's move into the future". And she has done more than talking about moving into the future. She has given ownership of the electoral process to ordinary Sierra Leoneans. That has never been the case. "We work with political parties, civil society organizations, NGOs, school children, getting everybody in on the process". Of course, Christiana Thorpe is not naïve. "It takes two to tango" she says. The dance here is between the NEC and election stakeholders. She explains that "we're doing our best to establish a level playing field" and while the NEC takes the lead they expect everyone to follow.

Christiana Thorpe may be a mild mannered, soft spoken lady who always has a smooth warm smile but she's also a principled woman who says she does "not suffer fools gladly", and is always keen on setting the record right. When someone introducing her recently at a public event notes that she has "an enviable track record" and that "the destiny of this nation lays in her hand". She promptly quips, "the destiny of this nation lies in each of our hands".

Dr. Lucan who has known Christiana all her life, "looking at her, you would think that this is somebody you could work over until you actually meet her. She's firm but not overpowering". The NEC chair accepts the corridors of political power are lined with men and that she feels intimidated at times, "but you know, you say, sorry I can't allow you to intimidate me", she says. "I do what I have to do, regardless of my sex. I just take it like that and I don't think it's a man - woman thing. To be honest with you, it's easier working with men than with women". And she spent the next half minute laughing.

The elections are not yet here and Christiana Thorpe is yet to be carried "sky high" after the elections as Dr. Lucan promises. But the NEC chair has her eyes set on the future. She says the nation needs to be better prepared for future elections. She would like to see an more civic education, children taught the virtues of democracy; the rights and responsibilities of a citizen, and the population better informed on their duties during the electoral process. All that may be the way forward, but for Christiana Thorpe's mother, Effumi, "honesty, honesty, my dear" is what Sierra Leone needs to forge ahead. And she's certain, her daughter Christiana has plenty of that in her because she was "taught to be God-fearing, honest and truthful".