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M. B. Akpan

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# *Black Imperialism : Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841-1964*

DR. M. B. AKPAN *

## *RÉSUMÉ*

*Entre l'année 1822 et les premières années du vingtième siècle, environ 15 000 nègres américains ont colonisé le Libéria sur un territoire qu'ils ont acquis des autochtones africains de la région. Ces colonisateurs aussi bien que les autochtones qui étaient beaucoup plus nombreux formaient la population du Libéria. Comme les colonisateurs possédaient la culture occidentale, ils se sentaient supérieurs aux autochtones qu'ils considéraient et traitaient comme leurs sujets de la même façon que faisaient les Anglais et les Français envers leurs sujets africains. Ils monopolisaient le gouvernement et s'emparaient de toutes les prérogatives civiles et politiques ; ils pratiquaient l'assimilation et l'administration des autochtones par un système de gouvernement indirect ; ils exploitaient le capital et le travail de ces derniers. Néanmoins, ayant à faire face au mécontentement de la part des Africains et aux déclarations d'indépendance dans plusieurs anciennes colonies européennes d'Afrique, les gouverneurs ont introduit en 1964 des mesures accordant des droits politiques aux populations autochtones.*

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Following the achievement of independence in the early 1960s by the majority of European colonies in Africa, the attention of scholars has, naturally, turned towards investigating the colonial era in Africa, particularly the character and methods of European colonial rule, the impact of this rule on the African peoples, and the latter's reactions to this rule. Impressive as the corpus of published material on this subject has already been, it has however thus far been concerned mostly with traditional, colonial powers like Great Britain, France, Portugal, and Belgium, and hardly with Liberia as a colonial power in its own right.[1] Even recently, when Professor Hargreaves rightly questioned whether the Americo-Liberian oligarchy which ruled the Republic "was not practising a sort of 'sub-imperialism' at African expense," [2] it

* College of Education, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria.

1. For example, in M. Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule* (Hutchinson and Co., London, 1968), only six references are made to Liberia, in general terms. Similarly, L. H. Gann and P. Duignan (eds.) *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960* (Cambridge University Press), vol. I (1969), vol. II (1970), and V. Turner (ed.), *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*, vol. III (1971) together make only tangential mention of Liberia, although they admit that she extended her domain during the Partition period (vol. I, p. 109), and that her Government "was based on a narrow ruling stratum of Afro-American settlers and their descendants" (vol. I, p. 464 ; also : vol. II, p. 1 ; vol. III, p. 275). J. Suret-Canale's *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa 1900-1945* (C. Hurst and Co. : London, 1971) deals, of course, with the French colonies, and makes only two references to Liberia (pp. 42, 104).

was not quite clear what Americo-Liberian rule was, and why it could be said to amount to imperialism. This paper attempts to fill a gap in the current scholarship on Africa under colonial rule by examining the attitudes and policies of the Americo-Liberian, ruling class towards Liberia's African population in the light of attitudes and policies adopted by European Governments towards African peoples under their rule.

## *THE AMERICO-LIBERIAN OLIGARCHY*

Liberia, founded by the American Colonization Society in 1822, expanded gradually from its nucleus at Monrovia as Negro immigrants from America, mostly manumitted slaves and freed-men, settled there annually up to the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1900, about 15 000 Negro immigrants from America [3] and over 300 from the West Indies [4] had thus settled in Liberia forming about a score of settlements on the Atlantic coast, grouped into five counties for administrative purposes with headquarters respectively at Robertsport, Monrovia, Buchanan, Greenville, and Harper.

Between 1822 and 1841, the Liberian settlements [5] were placed under white American Governors, appointed by the American Colonization Society and assisted by several Liberian officials and by a legislative council elected by the colonists. The final authority lay with the Board of Managers of the Society at Washington, D.C. which ratified, modified or annulled laws formulated for the colony by the Governor and legislative council.

As from the early 1840s, however, the influence of the Society in Liberia declined substantially. The Society was facing increasing shortage of funds and assault by abolitionists who questioned its motives and activities and charged the Managers with seeking to perpetuate slavery in America.[6] As the Managers cast about for solutions to these problems, they ceased to take active interest in the internal affairs of Liberia. Besides, the high death rate among the white governors of Liberia was indication that ultimately the management of Liberian affairs would be left to Liberians themselves, some of whom were already demanding autonomy of the colony from the Society's control.[7] Hence, when Thomas Buchanan, the last white governor, died in September 1841, it was a settler, Joseph J. Roberts, who was appointed by the Managers to succeed him. Thenceforth, the Liberians practically took over the management of their colony from the Society, although they did not formally declare their country independent till July 1847.

By purchasing plots of public land, all the adult male settlers, many of whom

2. J. D. Hargreaves, "Liberia: the Price of Independence" in *Odu: A Journal of West African Studies*, New Series, no. 6 (October 1972), p. 3.

3. *Liberia Bulletin*, no. 16, February 1900, p. 28. Hereafter, *Liberia Bulletin* will be referred to as *Bulletin*.

4. MS. American Colonization Society, Library of Congress, Washington D. C. *Letter Book, McLain*, McLain to Dennis, Washington D. C., 4 September 1865. Hereafter, the Society will be denoted by its abbreviation A. C. S.

5. Excepting Harper and neighbouring settlements in Maryland-in-Liberia, which did not become part of the Republic of Liberia till 1857.

6. P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816–1865*, (New York, 1961), p. 245.

7. MS.A.C.S., *Despatches of Thomas Buchanan*, Buchanan to Wilkeson, Monrovia, 22 June 1841, Hereafter, these despatches will be denoted by *D.T.B.*

were illiterate and poor, possessed the franchise; they also filled most of the positions in the executive, legislative and judiciary bodies of the state, and staffed much of the Government service. Thus the settlers constituted the rulers, who ran the Liberian Government, in much the same way as the British and the French constituted rulers in neighbouring colonial territories like Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. However, actual power rested in the hands of prominent members of certain leading, settler families or lineages, particularly: the Shermans and Watsons of Grand Cape Mount; the Barclays, Colemans, Coopers, Dennises, Grimmeses, Howards, Kings, Johnsons, and Morrises of Montserrado county; the Harmons and Horaces of Grand Bassa county; the Grigsbys and Rosses of Sinou county; and the Dossens, Gibsons, and Tubmans of Maryland county, in a manner that maintained some balance of power among the families.[8]

The settlers on whom the Government of Liberia thus devolved as from 1841 were essentially American rather than African in outlook and orientation. They retained a strong sentimental attachment to America, which they regarded as their "native land."[9] They wore the Western mode of dress to which they had been accustomed in America however unsuitable this dress was to Liberia's tropical weather: a black, silk topper and a long, black frock coat for men, and a "Victorian" silk gown for women.[10] They built themselves frame, stone or brick-porticoed houses of one and a half or two storeys similar to those of the plantation owners of the Southern States of America.[11] And they preferred American food like flour, corn-meal, butter, lard, pickled beef, bacon, and American-grown rice, large quantities of which they imported annually, to African foodstuff like cassava, plantain, yams, palm-oil, sweet potatoes, and "country rice" grown by Africans in the Liberian hinterland.[12] They were Christians, spoke English as their "mother tongue," and practised monogamy. They held land individually in contrast with the communal ownership of the African population. And their political institutions were modelled on those of America with an elected president and a legislature made up of a Senate and a House of Representatives.[13] So that in spite of their colour, they were, as a rule, as foreign, and lacking in sentimental attachment to Africa as were European colonialists elsewhere in Africa like the British, the French, the Portuguese, and the Spaniards.

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8. M. B. Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association: the Background to the Abortion of Garvey's Scheme for African Colonization," *Journal of African History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1973, p. 108.

9. *The African Repository*, LII, January 1876, p. 16. Hereafter, *the African Repository* will be referred to as *Repository*.

10. Sir Harry Johnston, *Liberia*, (Hutchinson, London, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 354–355.

11. *Repository*, VI, June 1830, p. 112, Sherman to Hallowell, Philadelphia, 10 May 1832; C. Sherman (ed.), *Changing Liberia, A Challenge to the Christian* (Young Men's Christian Association, Monrovia, 1959), p. 47.

12. *Repository*, IV, March 1828, p. 16, Ashmun to Board of Managers, Caldwell, 28 November 1827; United States National Archives, Washington D. C. *Despatches of United States Consuls in Liberia*, vol. 7, Consular Despatch no. 84, Ellis to Secretary of State, Monrovia, 27 November 1904. Hereafter, these despatches will be denoted by *D.U.S.C.*, the Archives, by U.S.N.A., and the Board of Managers, by Board.

13. M. B. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers 1841–1932: A Study of the Native Policy of a Non-Colonial Power in Africa," Doctoral Dissertation, Ibadan University, 1968, Ibadan, Nigeria, pp. 11–14.

## THE AFRICAN PEOPLES OF LIBERIA: THE LIBERIAN SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA AND THE LIBERIAN PROTECTORATE

Cape Mesurado, on which Monrovia, the nucleus of Liberia, was located, was "purchased" by agents of the American Colonization Society from the African chiefs of that district. Subsequently, Liberia gradually expanded both along the Atlantic littoral and into the interior in response to the need of the settlers for land for farming, and for establishment of new settlements (particularly a little inland from insalubrious swamps along the coast).[14] Moreover, the settlers reckoned that they could trade with, and evangelize the Africans more effectively if the latter were brought under the settlers' "sphere of influence."[15] And, as they were committed to terminating the slave trade on the coasts adjacent to the colony, they sought by treaties of amity or by force of arms to induce slave-trading chiefs on those coasts to abjure the trade and to co-operate with Liberian troops and British and American naval squadrons to break up slave depots, and to expel their European owners.[16] All this helped to extend the settlers' "sphere of influence." Furthermore, some of the Governors and leading settlers hoped that by territorial expansion the settlers would create a great, "civilized," Christian nation on the West Coast that would diffuse "light" and "knowledge" over the "barbarism" and "paganism" of Africa.[17]

Liberia's expansion, moreover, was hastened by two catalysts: the American Colonization Society, which generously provided funds and trade-goods necessary for acquisition of land from the African chiefs,[18] and British and French merchants on the coast who also sought to acquire land from the chiefs on which to build trading factories, and thereby generated competition with the Liberian Government for land.[19] Early in February 1842, for instance, a French man-of-war hoisted a French flag at Garaway "by royal authority";[20] by December 1845, the French had laid further claims to Cape Mount, Little Bassa, Butaw, and Bereby on the Liberian coast.

To forestall the British and the French, Governor Roberts made a lengthy trip along the Atlantic coast early in 1842, and an extensive journey up the Saint Paul's River and through the Queah, Dey, and Golah countries the following year inducing African chiefs to sign treaties of amity and commerce with the Liberian Government, by which they placed their territories under Liberia's jurisdiction.[21] And in Maryland-in Liberia, Governor John B. Russwurm, similarly anxious about the quest by English

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14. A.C.S., *Twenty-third Annual Report*, January 1840, pp. 3, 23-24.

15. A.C.S., *Twenty-eighth Annual Report*, January 1845, pp. 12-13.

16. D.T.B., Buchanan to Board, Monrovia, 24 March 1841; MS.A.C.S., *Liberian Letters*, vol. 3, Roberts to McLain, Monrovia, 19 March 1849.

17. A.C.S., *Tenth Annual Report*, January 1827, pp. 42-43.

18. MS.A.C.S., *Journal of the Executive Committee*, vol. 1, 18 June 1842, pp. 242-243; Ibid., 1 December 1842, p. 308.

19. MS.A.C.S., *Despatches of Joseph J. Roberts*, Roberts to Board, Monrovia, 1 July 1843. Indeed, by 1840, British merchants had already leased several tracts of land on the coasts adjacent to Liberia from the African chiefs on which they built trading factories. Hereafter, these despatches will be denoted as *D.J.J.R.*

20. Ibid., Roberts to Board, Monrovia, 9 June 1842.

21. *Repository*, XIX, June 1843, p. 74, Roberts to Gurley, Monrovia, March 1843. Roberts became President of Liberia after Independence 1847–1855 and 1872–1876.

and French merchants and naval officers for tracts of land on the coast,[22] undertook early in 1846 a lengthy trip along the Atlantic coasts adjacent to the Maryland colony at Harper, during which he negotiated treaties of amity and commerce with all the principal African chiefs, including those of Tabou, Bassa, Grand and Little Bereby, and Tahou, by which they "annexed themselves and [their] territories to Maryland-in-Liberia."[23] These, and similar annexations by President Roberts including the Gallinas district adjacent to the British colony of Sierra Leone gave Liberia by December 1850, the entire 600 miles coastline from the Sherbro River on the west to the San Pedro River on the east,[24] embracing the territories of the Vai, Dey, Queah, Bassa, Kru, and Grebo peoples. Thus while European Governments were yet largely apathetic to territorial expansion in Africa,[25] the Liberian Government had already acquired a large expanse of African territory.

Moreover, the methods by which the expansion was effected were hardly different from those later employed by European, colonial powers to acquire territory in Africa, namely, by "purchase" with European trade-goods, often of doubtful worth and quality;[26] by voluntary cession of territory by the smaller and weaker tribes like the Deys and Queahs, anxious to secure Liberia's protection against powerful, slave-raiding chiefs further inland like the Golahs and Condos;[27] by formal treaties of cession with some African chiefs, like Bob Gray of Little Bassa, who hoped to profit from trade with the Liberian settlers and to have schools established in their territories by the Liberian Government;[28] and by forceful acquisition, especially after military victory over the African peoples gained mostly through the aid of American naval officers and men-of-war.[29]

In most instances of acquisition of territory by the Liberian Government, the African peoples were required, in return for protection and schools which the Government would provide them, to accept the sovereignty of the Liberian Government over their tribal governments; to acknowledge the laws of Liberia as also binding on themselves; to refer all interclan and intertribal disputes to the Liberian authorities for settlement, the offenders being punishable according to the laws of Liberia; to repudiate the slave trade and "uncivilized" customs like trial by sassywood ordeal; to keep the paths open for free movement of people for trade, and never to go to war against one another without first consulting the authorities of

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22. *Maryland Colonization Journal*, vol. III, April 1846, p. 149, Russwurm to Latrobe, Harper, 10 December 1845. Hereafter, the *Journal* will be denoted as *M.C.J.*

23. *M.C.J.*, III, August 1846, pp. 211-21, Russwurm to Latrobe, Harper, 16 March 1846.

24. *M.C.J.*, IV, July 1847, pp. 3-4, Russwurm to Board, April 1847; D. B. Henries, *The Liberian Nation: A Short History* (New York, 1954), p. 74. Some African chiefs like Prince Mannah of the Gallinas however denied claims by the Liberian Government that they had ceded their territories to Liberia and resisted the imposition of Liberian rule.

25. Crowder, *op. cit.*, p. 47; Gann and Duignan, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 2-3.

26. *D.J.J.R.*, Roberts to Board, Monrovia, 9 June 1842; Public Record office, London: F.O. 47/1, Murray to Hothman, H.M.S. Sloop "Favourite", at Sea, 18 July 1847.

27. *Repository*, VI, p. 52, Mechlin to Gurley, 20 March 1830; *Repository*, XIX, June 1843, p. 169, Roberts to Gurley Monrovia, 1 March 1843.

28. *D. T. B.*, Buchanan to Wilkeson, Monrovia, 13 December 1840.

29. H. Bridge, *Journal of an African Cruiser* (Dawson of Pall Mall, London, 1968), pp. 63-64; *D.J.J.R.*, Roberts to Board, Monrovia, 28 December 1843.

Liberia.[30] Thus the African peoples came into a protectorate relationship with the Liberian Government, just as later in the nineteenth century African territories elsewhere became protectorates of European, colonial powers. In practice, however, the Liberian authorities, beset by grave political and economic problems, seldom actively interfered in the internal affairs of the "protected" peoples, who continued to administer their own laws and to be governed by their natural rulers.

However, having thus gained possession of the coastal districts, the Liberian leaders proceeded as from the late 1850s to extend Liberia's "sphere of influence" over the hinterland, rich in export products like gold, cattle, hides, camwood, and ivory. Accordingly, a series of Liberian expeditions concluded treaties of commerce and friendship with certain of the interior chiefs.[31] Thus, between April and December 1858, a Liberian, George Seymour, led a party that explored the Bassa hinterland up to the Nimba mountains.[32] From February 1868–March 1869, another party under Benjamin J. K. Anderson traversed the Dey, Golah, Condo, Loma, and Mandingo countries up to Musardu, an entrepot in the Sudan heartland. Significantly, on his return, Anderson recommended that the Liberian Government occupy the region between Monrovia and Musardu with four "trading forts" to be staffed by Liberian civil and military officers,[33] thereby proving that the Liberian explorers were agents of Americo-Liberian imperialism in the hinterland, just as elsewhere in Africa explorers like H. M. Stanley and de Brazza were agents of European, imperial expansion.

Partly to implement Anderson's recommendations, and partly to promote further explorations, the Liberian Government sponsored an expedition early in 1870 under a Liberian, William Spencer Anderson, which travelled as far as Polaka, the capital of the Barline country, where it hoisted the Liberian flag to signify Liberia's authority over the Barline people. However, the expedition could erect only one block-house, by the Du Quay River, which subsequently served merely as a resting place for travellers to, and from the interior.[34]

The last, significant, Liberian exploring venture took place from May to December 1874 under Benjamin J. K. Anderson. It traversed the Kpelle, Vai, Golah, Loma, and Mandingo countries up to Musardu, making treaties of commerce and friendship with the African chiefs, and settling intertribal disputes.[35] In his subsequent report, Anderson again drew attention to the wealth of the hinterland in export products, food crops, and African labour, urged the Liberian Government to establish "some show of power" in the Kpelle, Loma, and Mandingo countries by building a chain of military posts, and by educating sons of the leading chiefs in Liberian schools;[35] and he warned that "it will not be wisdom for Liberia to remain another year out of the Soudan commercially or politically."[36]

30. C. H. Huberich, *The Political and Legislative History of Liberia* (Central Book Company Inc., New York, 1947), vol. 1, p. 248; J. J. Roberts, "Annual Message," 4 January 1847, in *Repository*, XXIII, May 1847, p. 151.

31. J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Evolution of Privilege* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1969), pp. 18-19.

32. *Liberian Letters*, 9, Seymour to McLain, Monrovia, 17 December 1858.

33. B. J. K. Anderson, *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu, the Capital of the Western Mandingoes 1868-1869* (S. W. Green, Printer, New York, 1870), pp. 100-101.

34. *Repository*, XLVI, November 1873, pp. 340-341.

35. B. J. K. Anderson, *Narrative of the Expedition Despatched to Musardu by the Liberian Government under Benjamin J. K. Anderson, Sr., Esq., in 1874* (College of West Africa Press, Monrovia, 1912), pp. 27-28, 40–42.

36. Ibid., p. 35.

On the basis of the Liberian explorations and various acquisitions of land from the African chiefs – and even before European powers had commenced the Scramble for Africa – the Liberian Government claimed jurisdiction over the territory extending about 600 miles along the Atlantic littoral from the Sherbro to the San Pedro River, and between 150 and 250 miles inland, and even unto the River Niger.[37]

Yet the Liberian Government, lacking funds, competent troops, and efficient administrative personnel, could not for many years establish "effective occupation" over this territory by building garrisoned posts at strategic positions (except the one by the Du Quay River), or by dividing it into districts administered by Liberian civil or military officers, or by actively intervening to settle intertribal disputes. So that almost throughout the nineteenth century, the political influence of the Liberian Government was hardly felt in the hinterland beyond the immediate neighbourhood of the Liberian settlements.[38]

Thus when European powers commenced the Scramble in the early 1880s, Liberia was likely to lose portions of her domains because in the situation created by the Berlin Conference (1884), which attempted to regulate the Scramble, claims to territories could only be justified or validated by the establishment of "effective occupation." Liberia's position regarding the Scramble as stated by the Liberian Secretary of State, Edwin J. Barclay, in June 1887 was that:

> Liberia is neither a European Power, nor a signatory of the decision of the Berlin Conference; she was not invited to assist in those deliberations and is therefore not bound by its decisions, and further those decisions refer to further acquisitions of African territory by European Powers and not to the present possessions or future acquisitions of an African State.[39]

However, Liberian leaders were cognizant that portions of their territory not in "effective occupation" would be lost to Great Britain and France which were advancing nearby into the Sudan. They were therefore very anxious during the Scramble (1880–1890) to consolidate Liberia's hold on this territory by establishing the necessary "effective occupation" or some form of Liberian presence. The means they advocated were the construction of military posts at strategic positions;[40] the building of railways and highways;[41] the establishment of a chain of Afro-American settlements up to the banks of the River Niger and along "un-occupied" portions of the Liberian coast; and co-operation with interior chiefs by granting them stipends and inviting them to partake in deliberations of the Liberian legislature.[42] Yet as in the 1870s, the Liberian Government lacked the resources or sufficient troops to establish

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37. A.C.S., *Seventy-seventh Annual Report*, January 1894, p. 9, *Eighty-second Annual Report*, January 1899, p. 18.

38. Anderson, *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu...*, p. 30; B. Wallis, "A Tour of the Liberian Hinterland" in *The Geographical Journal*, XXXV, (1910), pp. 280–287.

39. U.S.N.A., *Despatches of United States Ministers at Monrovia*, vol. 10, diplomatic despatch no. 12, enclosure: Barclay to Taylor, Monrovia, 8 June 1887. Hereafter, these despatches will be denoted by *D.U.S.M.*

40. J. S. Payne, *Annual Message*, 12 December 1877, pp. 5, 7; *Repository*, LXI, January 1885, pp. 29-30, Anderson to Coppinger, Monrovia, 9 July 1884.

41. *Liberian Letters*, 25, King to Coppinger, Greenville, 21 July 1888.

42. A. W. Gardner, *Inaugural Address*, 7 January 1878, H. R. W. Johnson, "Inaugural Address", 7 January 1884, in *Repository*, L, October 1884, p. 118.

further military posts or to pay regular stipends to chiefs.[43] Its attempts to interest the United States Government and European and American financiers and engineering companies in railway and road projects in the Liberian hinterland failed.[44] While, owing to decline in Afro-American immigration to Liberia, the projected chain of "interior settlements" could not materialize.[45]

Yet, if the Liberian Government was concerned during the Scramble primarily to preserve territory it had already acquired, it did, at least in one respect, take part in the Scramble itself when it essayed to annex Medina and Jenne, not previously visited by any Liberian explorer, which it feared might be annexed by the British or the French. To this end, some secret correspondence was exchanged with the Medina ruler, Ibrahima Sissi, during 1879 and 1880, the Liberian Government desiring to "annex interior territory without its being known to or felt by" either Britain or France;[46] while in November 1881, it addressed "an Arabic letter" to prominent chiefs in the interior including Ibrahima Sissi and the ruler of Jenne to attend deliberations of the Liberian legislature meeting the following month. In the end, the British Government got wind of Liberia's "move" to annex Medina, and successfully opposed it lest it might "result in disturbances which would be most prejudicial to the commerce and dangerous to the peace of the neighbouring British settlements."[47]

Thus in the final analysis, during the Scramble for Africa, the Liberian Government could neither establish "effective occupation" over its domains nor acquire fresh territory. Rather, it lost a large portion of these domains: in March 1882, the British annexed the Gallinas district, and in November 1885, an Anglo-Liberian Agreement defined Liberia's western boundary with neighbouring, British colony of Sierra Leone largely to Liberia's disadvantage.[48] Similarly in May 1891, the French annexed the littoral between the Cavalla and San Pedro Rivers.[49] Helpless, Liberia concluded a boundary agreement with France in December 1892 by which the French abondoned their claims by "ancient treaties" to Cape Mount, Buchanan, Butaw, and Garaway on the Liberian coast, but gained possession of a vast hinterland stretching up to the River Niger, previously claimed by Liberia.[50]

As defined by the Boundary Agreements of 1885 and 1892, Liberia's territory embraced besides the Liberian settlements some sixteen ethnic groups including the Vai and Kru along the coast, and the Kpelle, Golah, Loma, Mano, Gio, and Kissi further inland. These Africans were very different culturally from the settlers; they were Animists or Muslims; they spoke their own languages, not English; they lived mostly in huts in village communities, governed by chiefs and village elders; and they held land communally. Besides, they had age-group organisations and secret societies, the most prominent of which were the *poro* (for men) and the *sande* (for women),

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43. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...", p. 180.

44. *Liberian Letters* (uncatalogued), King to Coppinger, Monrovia, 3 February 1891.

45. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...", p. 140.

46. *Liberian Letters*, 19, Warner to Coppinger, Monrovia, 3 November 1880; Ibid., Blyden to Coppinger, Monrovia, 2 December 1880.

47. MS.A.C.S., *Letter Book, Coppinger*, 24, Coppinger to Syle, Washington D.C., 27 July 1882. It is most unlikely that the rulers of Medina and Jenne attented the Liberian legislature.

48. F.O. 84/1633, Havelock to Earl of Kimberley, Sierra Leone, 3 April 1882; A.C.S., *Seventy-second Annual Report*, January 1889 p. 5.

49. *Liberian Letters* (uncatalogued), King to Coppinger, Monrovia, 31 July 1891.

50. *D.U.S.M.* 11/70, McCoy to Gresham, Monrovia, 27 April 1893; French National Archives, Paris: *Franco-Liberian Boundary Agreement* (1892), M. 12.8972.

which had important economic, political, and social functions. In view of the differences in culture between the settlers and the Africans, it might be asked what relationship subsisted between both peoples.

## SETTLER-AFRICAN RELATIONS

Like European settlers in Algeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, the Liberian settlers, reared up in Western culture, and possessing some knowledge of modern, political organisation and modern, technological science regarded their own culture as superior to that of the African population. They, for instance, disapproved of the scanty dress worn by many of the African peoples, whom they regarded as semi-nude, "untutored savages." [51] They despised African forms of religion as paganism, heathenism, and idolatory; [52] and they looked with contumely at African social and political institutions like the *poro* and *sande* societies.[53]

Most symptomatic of their cultural arrogance was perhaps their lack of intermarriage with the African peoples: in 1836, the Acting-Colonial Governor, Reverend B. R. Skinner, reported that "the marriage of a colonist with any one of the neighbouring tribes was considered exceedingly disreputable, and subjected the individual to the contempt of his fellow citizens"; [54] while as late as May 1879, Liberia's vice-president, Daniel B. Warner, who advocated intermarriage as a panacea for breaching the cultural and social cleavage between both peoples, nevertheless noted that "it would require on the part of the man of the least culture, strong moral courage to break through the strong prejudice against the intermarriage of the colonists and natives which prevails here among the Americo-Liberians." [55] About the early 1830s, moreover, at least one colonist openly maintained that the Africans ought to be slaves.[56]

All this, however, is not to imply that the Africans themselves were not culturally prejudiced against the settlers; they too disapproved of, and despised many aspects of the settlers' way of life. In particular, many of them sneered at the slave antecedents of the settlers, whom they regarded as socially inferior to themselves, just as in African society slaves were inferior to free men. Thus an American visitor to Liberia observed in March 1844 that on the one hand the colonists "would never recognize the natives otherwise than as heathens," while on the other hand "many of the natives look with contempt on the colonists and do not hesitate to tell them that they are merely liberated slaves." [57] Besides, the Africans deprecated the somewhat permissive, sexual

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51. H.A. Jones, "The Struggle for Political and Cultural Unification in Liberia 1847–1930", Doctoral Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1962, p. 151; J.J. Roberts, "Annual Message" in *Repository*, XXVII, April 1851, p. 117.

52. *Liberian Letters*, 15, Ryant to Coppinger, Louisiana, 20 April 1870.

53. Anderson, *Narrative of a Journey to Musardu...*, pp. 68-69.

54. A. Archibald, *A History of Colonization on the Western Coast of Africa* (Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 511.

55. *Liberian Letters*, 19, Warner to Coppinger, Monrovia, 24 May 1879. Also *Liberian Letters*, 18, Warner to Coppinger, Monrovia, 2 April 1878.

56. *Repository*, X, December 1834, pp. 316–318.

57. Bridge, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

standards among the settlers, some of whom carried on irregular, sexual relations with African women, particularly African girls apprenticed to settler families.[58]

Not surprisingly, these cultural differences, together with differences over economic matters like trade, prices, wages, and encroachments of the settlers on farmlands and town-sites of the African peoples became sources of friction, and sometimes of bloody wars, between both groups of peoples. Yet Liberian leaders correctly blamed the exacerbation of the cleavage between both peoples largely on the dogged superiority complex of the settlers who, as a minority group, hoped to perpetuate their privileged position in Liberia by emphasizing the cultural differences between themselves and the African population. In May 1879, for instance, Vice-President Warner decried their persisting "in the chronic error of interposing barriers" between themselves and the Africans and urged them to cultivate respect, in place of their "haughty bearing," towards the African peoples.[59] And in January 1906, President Arthur Barclay (1904–1911) similarly charged that:

> ...the Americo-Liberian citizen may do and has in the past done the most harm in connection with national unification by maintaining a contemptuous, ungracious, and unjust attitude towards his aboriginal brother by a want of politeness and good feeling.[60]

## *LIBERIA'S "NATIVE POLICY"*

### *A. Assimilation*

Before political power devolved on the Liberian settlers as from the early 1840s, questions concerning their relationship with the African population were, as a rule, determined by the Managers of the American Colonization Society guided by reports from the colonial governors. The Managers and the Governors shared the superiority complex of the settlers, whom they looked upon for fulfilment of one of the objects for which Liberia was founded, namely the "civilization" and christianization of Africa. To this end the Managers encouraged Christian missionary and educational work among the African in Liberia and the establishment of "civilized" settlements of Afro-Americans among them to diffuse the settler civilization.[61] Thus they envisaged cultural assimilation of the Africans by the settlers, which later became a leading aspect of the "native policy" of the settlers themselves.

What with the role assigned them of emissaries of Western civilization to Africa, their own frequently avowed sense of this "civilizing mission," [62] and their superiority complex, the Liberian settlers on assuming the management of their own affairs as from the early 1840s thought generally in terms of cultural and political assimilation of the African peoples. They concerned themselves with replacing the Africans' "barbarous" customs, religious and political institutions with the "superior" values,

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58. *D.U.S.M.* 5, "Complaint of the Cape Palmas Tribe," Big Town, Cape Palmas, 30 July 1875.

59. *Liberian Letters*, 19, Warner to Coppinger, 24 May 1879.

60. Barclay, *Inaugural Address*, January 1906, p. 13. For further evidence of settler contempt for the Africans, see T. M. Stewart, *Liberia: the American African Republic* (New York, 1886), pp. 75–78.

61. *Repository*, XIV, February 1838, p. 61.

62. A. W. Gardner, *Annual Message*, 10 December 1879, p. 7; W. D. Coleman, *Annual Message*, 13 December 1898.

customs, and institutions of the settler culture, and of making the Africans citizens of Liberia in common with the settler population.[63]

Thus only a few Liberians like Edward W. Blyden, a Liberian scholar, came to believe that the African peoples possessed any distinctive or tangible culture of their own which was worth preservation or deserved their study. Elsewhere in Africa, European colonialists, particularly the French and the Portuguese, similarly imbued with feelings of cultural superiority over their African subjects, sought to apply a policy of cultural and political assimilation.

The Liberian settlers, like the Managers of the American Colonization Society, sought to assimilate the Africans culturally by three principal means, namely by formal education of African youths in Liberian schools, by the establishment of Afro-American settlements in the Liberian interior and by the apprenticeship of African youths to settler families by some African parents, anxious that their children should acquire a Western education which could be a means to success and influence.[64] In the schools, and to a lesser extent in the Liberian families, the settler language, modes of dress, and religion could be systematically imposed on these youths, who would also be taught Western political values and loyalty to the Monrovia Government. While, as noted above, "civilized" townships in the interior, where the Liberian settlers would lead an ordered and "cultured" life, build churches and schools, and engage in various mechanical and agricultural skills, would set patterns of behaviour for the neighbouring African peoples to emulate.[65]

In practice, however, assimilation was most consistently applied towards the approximately 5 000 recaptured Africans[66] seized from slavers in the Atlantic waters by American navy-men particularly between 1845 and 1862, and apprenticed for a term of years to Americo-Liberian families, which maintained them with funds provided by the United States Government. After their apprenticeship, most of them made their homes in the Americo-Liberian settlements; the rest, in "Congo Towns" adjacent to these settlements. They received from the Liberian Government almost equal civil rights with the settler population including the franchise and, having lost contact with their original homes in west and central Africa, they eventually became very closely assimilated into the cultural milieu of the Liberian settlers, speaking English, wearing the settler mode of dress, and practising monogamy and the Christian Faith.[67] This situation was, however, understandable, for the recaptives were neither many, nor cohesive enough to pose a serious threat to the settlers' privileged position, and were indeed useful as buffers between the settlers and the African peoples.

The African peoples of Liberia, who out-numbered the settlers in a ratio of almost 100 to one, had not been assigned any political privileges or citizenship rights by Liberia's Independence Constitution of July, 1847. Subsequently, they were largely denied political privileges by the settler-controlled Government such as the franchise

63. J.J. Roberts, *Annual Message*, 20 December 1855; J.S. Payne, "Annual Message", 10 December 1868 in *Repository*, XLV, pp. 45-46.

64. *Liberian Letters*, 8, Roberts to Gurley, Monrovia, 15 September 1858.

65. *Liberian Letters*, 20, King to Coppinger, 8 December 1881.

66. Most of the recaptives were Ibos and Akus (Yorubas) from Nigeria, and Africans from the region of the River Congo called generally "Congos". In Liberia, gradually the term 'Congos' came to be applied to all the recaptives.

67. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...," pp. 80–82.

and employment in the Government service, and were *de facto* subjects of the Americo-Liberians. Of the educated Africans (who in Maryland county of Liberia in particular outnumbered the settlers four times over), only a very small number was given political privileges; in the late 1910s and early 1920s, they included Dr. B. W. Payne, a Bassa man educated in medicine in America, who was for many years between 1912 and 1930 secretary of Public Instruction; Momolu Massaquoi, a Vai man, who was acting secretary of Interior, and subsequently Liberian consul in Germany; and Henry Too Wesley, a Grebo man, who was vice-president of Liberia from 1922–1927.[68] Such highly-placed Africans were, however, the exception rather than the rule; the vast, illiterate or semi-literate African majority were not granted the franchise; rather, each group like the Kru or Bassa or Vai was as from the late 1870s represented in the Liberian legislature by one or two chiefs designated "delegates" by the Liberian Government after paying to the Government "delegate fee" of $100 per "delegate." As most of these "delegates" were illiterate, were called upon to "speak" through an interpreter at the closing sessions of the legislature solely on matters that concerned their people, and could not vote, their ability to influence Government policy towards securing economic and social improvement for their people like the establishment of schools was slight.[69]

Yet the settlers' begrudging the Africans political rights in spite of their avowed policy of political assimilation should surprise no one. They greatly feared that any substantial extension of the franchise to the African peoples, who greatly out-numbered them, would cause the Africans to swamp them politically, and in consequence to take control of the Government.[70] Dissatisfied with this situation, both the educated Africans and the illiterate African masses found common cause to resent the settler oligarchy [71] which wielded political power out of all proportion to its numbers, or to its material contributions by way of revenue to sustain the state.

Like political assimilation, the policy of cultural assimilation was not fully implemented by the Liberian settlers for the indigenous Africans of Liberia. Admittedly, a substantial number of African youths were over the years brought up in settler homes, some of whom, particularly the illegitimate children of settler men and African women, were given some education in Liberian schools, sometimes up to college level, or were taught some trade. After their apprenticeship, most of them returned to their parents in the "bush," while the rest made their homes in the settler communities, where some of them adopted settler names and "passed" as Americo-Liberians.[72] Admittedly too, three "interior settlements" were established in the hinterland behind Monrovia as the nucleus of the proposed chain of "civilized" settlements in the interior. These were Arthington and Brewerville, which were founded in 1869, and to which most of the immigrants to Liberia were thenceforth sent to settle,[73] and Fendall which was founded in 1888.

Yet the Liberian Government lacked the funds and personnel to establish more interior settlements or to undertake any all pervading programme of education for

68. Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association..." *loc. cit.*

69. Ibid.

70. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

71. *Liberian Letters*, 23, September 1885, "Memorandum of educated Grebos to President Johnson"; *Liberian Letters* (uncatalogued), Chief Yula Gyude to Wilson, Cape Palmas, 15 February 1910.

72. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

73. *Liberian Letters*, 21, Blyden to Coppinger, Freetown, 1 October 1884.

Liberia's African peoples that would facilitate cultural assimilation to any tangible extent. Thus the brunt of providing education, most of which was elementary both for the settlers and the Africans, was borne by American missionary bodies and as from the last decades of the nineteenth century, it became obvious from the decline of Afro-American immigration to Liberia that more "interior settlements" would not be established even if the Liberian Government or the American Colonization Society were to have the funds for such projects. Moreover, up to the late 1870s, the settler community was absorbed in a bitter struggle for political power between the mulattoes and the blacks and until this struggle subsided, the issues relating to the African peoples received only perfunctory attention.[74] Within the African community itself, certain influence like the *poro* and *sande* societies, and Islam posed resistance to assimilation.[75]

The consequence of all this was that whereas cultural assimilation might be said to have succeeded somewhat with the Recaptives, with the indigenous Africans of Liberia, its success, whether as regards the proportion of Africans "assimilated" or the degree to which African values had actually been transformed was much less remarkable. In view of what foreign explorers and Liberian administrators observed was Liberia's cultural influence in the hinterland in the first decade of the twentieth century, it might be concluded that by the turn of the nineteenth century, only the coastal peoples: the Vai, Dey, Bassa, Kru, and Grebo – who made up about one tenth of Liberia's African population – had really been in contact with the settler civilization and had their traditional values influenced by it to any extent.[76]

However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, when it became increasingly necessary for the hinterland of Liberia to be effectively occupied in view of the Scramble and Partition, Government policy shifted from plans for assimilation of the Africans, which nevertheless remained for many years the goal of Government's "native policy," to ending intertribal wars and imposing Government authority throughout the territories of Liberia. The system of control adopted as from 1904 was indirect rule, by which the hinterland was divided into districts administered by district commissioners, most of whom were Americo-Liberians, in co-operation with African chiefs.

### *B. Indirect Rule*

Liberia's adoption of the system of indirect rule was dictated primarily by lack of funds and competent Americo-Liberian personnel to administer the hinterland "directly." Similar considerations had largely decided the British to adopt this system in 1900, with considerable success, for administering their territories in Northern Nigeria.

In Liberia, however, indirect rule proved largely a scourge to the African peoples. Soldiers of the Liberian Frontier Force, organized in 1908, and recruited mostly from the Mende and Loma peoples of Liberia, were used to garrison the district headquarters, and generally "to maintain law and order" in the districts. Admittedly, a few

74. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

75. K. Little, "The Poro Society as an Arbiter of Culture" in *African Studies*, VII, no. 1 (March 1948), p. 14.

76. *Bulletin*, no. 8, February 1896, p. 35.

American officers were employed along with Liberian officers to train and command the Force. Nevertheless, it remained largely poorly trained and indisciplined, with insufficient and irregular pay. As a result the soldiers indulged in wanton pillage, rape, and harrassment of the Africans in their districts, and commandeered food, labourers, and carriers without payment.[77] Very often the villages bordering the regular pathways traversed by the soldiers, or adjacent to the military posts and district headquarters were deserted by the African population whose farms, poultry, and cattle had so often been pillaged by the soldiers that the villagers no longer bothered to rear these commodities. So that far from "maintaining law and order," the Force created and fostered pandemonium and unrest in the Liberian hinterland.[78]

Besides, as from 1916 the Liberian Government levied an annual hut-tax [79] of one dollar on each tenanted hut, payable by adult, African men. Meant to be collected by each village chief, it was however, often abused by the district commissioners and their aides and by station-masters and messengers, for personal ends. Sometimes it was collected twice over in the year, or in excess of the stipulated rate of one dollar;[80] and Liberian soldiers were used to coerce and intimidate those who hesitated to pay.[81] Some parents were therefore obliged to pawn their children in order to obtain funds with which to pay.[82]

As its collection intensified, the hut-tax came as from the early 1920s to constitute an indispensable source of Government revenue: in 1922, $151 213.70 was received by the Government from this source which represented about one-third of the gross Government revenue for that year. In this way, the African masses contributed both to enrich the private pockets of certain Americo-Liberians, and to the upkeep of much of the Liberian Government machinery; in return the Government bestowed hardly any benefits on them such as schools or hospitals.[83] The Americo-Liberians, who largely controlled, and profitted from, this machinery, seldom paid their own taxes,[84] and nearly all of the few who did pay handed in paper money at face value, which they had secured at from thirty-three to seventy-five percent discount.[85]

Moreover, the African peoples bore almost all the brunt of maintaining the

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77. Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association...," U.S.N.A., *Records of the Department of State relating to the internal Affairs of Liberia 1909–1929*, 882.00/580. Bundy to Secretary of State, Monrovia, 20 February 1918. Hereafter, the State Department Records will be denoted by *R.D.S.L.* and the Secretary of State by "Secretary."

78. D. Mills, *Through Liberia* (London, 1926), p. 63; Liberian National Archives, Monrovia: *Report of the Secretary of the Treasury to the Senate and House of Representatives of the Republic of Liberia, December, 1921*, pp. 13-14. Hereafter, the Liberian Archives will be denoted by L.N.A.

79. Prior to 1916 it was the poll-tax, levied haphazardly only from Africans living in, or visiting the Liberian settlements on the coast.

80. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

81. L.N.A., *Report of the Secretary of the Treasury for the Fiscal Year ended October 1, 1919 to September 30, 1920*, pp. 16-17; Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association..."

82. *R.D.S.L.*, 882/5048, Bundy to Secretary, Monrovia, 20 October 1920, enclosure Sawyer to Mitchell, Monrovia, 6 September 1920.

83. L.N.A., *Report of the Secretary of the Treasury for the Fiscal Year ended October 1, 1919 to September 30, 1920*, p. 10.

84. The Americo-Liberians, and educated Africans possessing the franchise were liable ot a real-estate tax, licence fees, school tax, and judicial fees. *Acts of the Liberian Legislature*, 1914.

85. *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/591, enclosure: *Report of the Secretary of War and Interior on his Trip to the Hinterland, February sixteenth to May thirty-first, 1918*, Monrovia, 18 June 1918; C. D. B. King, *Annual Message*, 22 December 1927.

hinterland administration for which they likewise received scarcely any compensation: as Liberia lacked roads (excepting bush trails), and horse carriage, they provided unpaid, hammock and carrier service to Liberian civil and military officials in the hinterland.[86] Moreover they performed free at various time when called upon such Government service as the construction of rest houses, soldiers' barracks, and quarters for district commissioners; and the cultivation of rice farms at district head-quarters for use by the district commissioners and their aides, and the Liberian soldiers.[87] And, as from 1921, when the Government embarked on a road-building programme in the hinterland, they contributed sometimes as much as nine months' compulsory and unpaid labour on the roads each year, furnishing their own tools and equipment. Admittedly, unpaid labour for porterage and public works was also requisitioned by the British and the French in their colonies in West Africa. What made it particularly onerous in Liberia was its excessiveness.[88]

What was more, most of the district commissioners and their aides, being inadequately trained, with insufficient and irregularly paid salaries, and almost without supervision from Monrovia, turned their districts into arenas for extortion and oppression: they levied besides the official hut-tax, illegal fees and exhorbitant fines, sometimes using the crude aid of the Frontier Force soldiers to collect them.[89] Such fortune they would have to share with some highly placed government functionaries at Montovia in case their conduct caused unrest among the African peoples, or the chiefs complained, and they needed some backing to escape punishment.[90]

Between 1916 and 1918, for instance, the whole region between the Sierra Leone boundary and River Cess – almost two-thirds of the Liberian hinterland – was placed in charge of district commissioner James B. Howard with head-quarters at Zinta, assisted by sub-commissioner S. N. Smith. What with so much territory to administer, with hardly any supervision from Monrovia, and inadequate resources at his disposal, Howard, who possessed little education or administrative experience, not only appointed stationmasters, clerks, and messengers to several important villages in the region like Zorzor, Vonjama, Kolahum, and Belle Yellah as his aides – quite independently of Monrovia and in excess of his powers – but he also indulged in untold corruption and gross exploitation of the Africans in his district using his aides to this end. Besides levying excessive fines in cases brought to him by the Africans for adjudication, and illegal fees, he ran a private, trading business, the "H and Co.,"[91] at Kolahun and other important villages. He smuggled goods, including gin, guns, and gunpower from Pendembu, Sierra Leone, into his district, where he sold them at high prices to the Africans, and also used unpaid, carrier service to transport vast quantities of rice, which he bought from the Africans at nominal prices, or which had been supplied free by them for the upkeep of the interior officials, to Pendembu, where his agents

86. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 217–219.

87. League of Nations: *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labour in the Republic of Liberia* (Monrovia, 1930), pp. 147–152.

88. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 50; Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association..."

89. *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/656, Kimberley, 18 June 1920, "Excerpts of Statements of Commissioner Mitchell with regards to the Republic of Liberia."

90. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...," p. 367.

91. Meaning "Howard and Company." The 'H' stood for "Howard".

sold them to his own, and his aides' benefit.[92] When eventually his excesses caused a major revolt among the Golahs in 1918, and a government commission found him guilty of maladministration and embezzlement of public funds, his punishment consisted merely of the seizure by the government of $5 000 which he had transmitted to the Bank of British West Africa at Monrovia. Only two of his aides were fined; and Howard himself, although removed from the interior service, was appointed to his former position of lieutenant in the Frontier Force.[93]

It might be noted too that African chiefs who resisted the extortions, or refused to collaborate with the district commissioners to defraud the people were invariably punished and disgraced, and replaced with "chiefs" who did not scruple. Often these "chiefs" were mere upstarts who had no traditional claim to rule the people. They were accordingly despised and resented by the people, whom they further embittered by oppressive and extortionate practices; so that a vicious circle of unrest was perpetuated in the hinterland. About January 1912, for instance, two Liberian commissioners, Major T. C. Lomax and James W. Cooper, stationed in the north-west region of Liberia, deposed eight Gbande chiefs in the region for alleged "treasonable practices." These chiefs had opposed the commissioners' extortions and high-handedness, including the burning of some Gbande villages,[94] for which in the end President Daniel E. Howard (1912–1919) recalled them. But before they did return to Monrovia, Lomax and Cooper hanged the eight chiefs at Kolahun, and appointed a certain chief, Mambu, "paramount chief" over the whole region which had formerly been ruled by a number of chiefs, among them the eight they had hanged. Subsequently, Chief Mambu became so unpopular with the people of the region that in March 1913, a rival chief, Bombokoli, a relative of one of the hanged chiefs, seized and murdered him. As further unrest then ensued in the region, the Liberian Government despatched a detachment of the Frontier Force there "to maintain law and order."[95] Subsequently, Lomax and Cooper were acquitted by a Monrovia court of a charge of murder of the Gbande chiefs, in face of overwhelming evidence of their high-handedness.[96] Indeed about the middle of 1914, the Government appointed Lomax as "Native Expert" to advise the Department of Interior on issues requiring expert knowledge of African law and custom, although it is not certain that he possessed such knowledge.[97] This wholesale harrassment of the African peoples by the Liberian Government and officials bore striking similarity to the often rough and shabby methods employed by the British and the French for example, in their dealings with the African masses in neighbouring colonies.

In view of all this, one would hardly disagree with the conclusion reached in May 1918 by T. C. Mitchell, an American employed in the interior service since 1916 as "Commissioner-General to the Interior," after an extensive tour of the Liberian hinterland, that ninety percent of the unrest among the African peoples was caused by

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92. J. L. Morris, *Report of the Secretary of War and Interior...* Monrovia, 18 June 1918; *R.D.S.L.* 882.00/591, Bundy to Secretary Monrovia, 24 November 1918 enclosure; Green to Bundy, Monrovia, 24 May 1918.

93. *R.D.S.L.* 882.00/591, "Findings of the Council of Inquiry at Monrovia," 21 June, 1918.

94. F.O. 367, Le Mesurier to Liberian district commissioners, Furadu, 14 November 1911.

95. D. E. Howard, *Annual Message*, 17 December 1913, *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/60, Bundy to Secretary, Monrovia, 15 May 1913.

96. *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/60, Bundy to Secretary, Monrovia, 15 May 1913.

97. *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/95, Clarke to Secretary, Monrovia, 29 October 1914.

incompetent Liberian officials, by whom the Africans had been "grossly mistreated and in many instances have been subjected to most inhuman treatment." [98] These officials, he added, "devoted no time to the development of the country;" rather, they carried out so much extortion and graft that the hinterland was "practically [being] bled to death." Hence he suggested that "competent" officials be appointed "at the earliest opportunity" to replace them otherwise there would be "an open rebellion of the entire hinterland." [99]

Such rebellions did indeed break out. During the 1910s and early 1920s, they occurred among the Grebos (1910), the Krus (1915), the Golahs (1918, as mentioned earlier) and the Joquelle Kpelles (1920). Invariably, however, they were crushed, after bitter fighting and much bloodshed, by the Liberian Government using superior arms sold, and sometimes resources and men-of-war supplied by America, which on account of historical ties, was generally regarded as "Liberia's best friend." [100]

Since the American Government helped to crush them, these rebellions, and indeed African dissatisfaction with Liberian rule generally, led to increased intervention by the American Government in Liberia's internal affairs. Thus as from 1915, after it had helped to crush the Kru rebellion, it began to press the Liberian Government to effect reforms, particularly in the native administration.

However, for the next three years, the Liberian authorities refused to effect genuine reforms, knowing that they subsisted by exploitation of the Africans, and that to stop the exploitation would undermine the priviledged position of the settler ruling class. It was an admission of this refusal, and of the failure of the Liberian interior officials to rise above graft and extortion – which led the Liberian Government to embark upon the short-lived, and rather ill-advised experiment of employing white Americans, largely ignorant of conditions in Africa and of native administration, as district commissioners to supervise subordinate Liberian officers in the hinterland service. The American officers [101] themselves were to work under the general supervision of Commissioner-General T. C. Mitchell. However, soon after commencing duties, poor living conditions, high cost of living, and friction with the Liberian sub-commissioners and the Liberian Government who, jealous of Liberia's independence, were resentful that foreigners should hold superior positions in the interior service, all contributed to alienate the Americans. By July 1921, they had all resigned their posts and returned to the United States.[102] Significantly, Mitchell gave as a reason for his resignation that there was "no present prospect of an early adjustment of Liberian affairs such as would enable him to institute necessary reforms in the Interior Administration." [103] The departure of the Americans left the Liberian hinterland still the untramelled preserve of the Liberian officials and Government.

Not surprisingly, the condition of the African masses was to become aggravated under President C. D. B. King (January 1920–December 1930), whose "native policy"

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98. T.C. Mitchell, "Report on Work in the Hinterland during 1916-1917 and 1918," Monrovia, 30 May 1918, enclosed in *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/591, Bundy to Secretary, Monrovia, 24 November 1918.

99. Ibid.

100. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...," pp. 226-227, 298–300, 367-368, 389.

101. The American district commissioners were: J.D. Wanzer, A.W. Longaker, P.M. Jones, and H.A. Sawyer stationed respectively at Sanoyea, Binda, Zinta and Sangbwe.

102. *R.D.S.L.*, 882.00/700, Johnson to Secretary, Monrovia, 31 January 1921; Kimberley, "Excerpts of statements of Commissioner Mitchell."

103. Ibid., 882.00/698, Johnson to Secretary, Monrovia, 31 December 1920.

was an iron hand in a velvet glove. On the one hand, he made several journeys into the Liberian hinterland during which he held conferences with the African chiefs at places as remote as Kakata, Vonjama, and Sanoquelle. At these places he heard, and redressed some of the grievances against the Liberian Government and Liberian civil and military officers in the hinterland.[104] Moreover, in 1922, the Liberian Government commenced a programme of elementary education for African youths by which public schools were established for the first time in Liberia's history in remote places in the Liberian hinterland like Vonjama and Sanoquelle.[105] On the other hand, the reports of foreign visitors and personnel in Liberia, and investigations of a League of Nations Commission to the Republic in 1930 into allegations that slavery and forced labour existed in the Republic showed conclusively that during President King's administration, the African peoples of Liberia were subjected by the Liberian Government in general, and certain of the Americo-Liberians in particular, to the worst possible forms of exploitation. This included the use of forced and unpaid labour for private Americo-Liberian farms and plantations including those of President King himself and some members of his cabinet. More sensational was the disclosure of the forcible recruitement of Africans with the aid of the Liberian Frontier Force soldiers, some of the district commissioners and their aides, some county superintendents and customs officials, and African chiefs and agents willing to collaborate and their shipment to Fernando Po to labour in Spanish plantations there.[106] Whereas Liberians thus recruited were paid meagre salaries and subjected to harsh treatment by the Spanish planters, President King and his accomplices were paid ten pounds sterling by the planters for each labourer shipped to them.[107]

The shortcomings of his administration thus exposed by the League of Nations Commission of Inquiry, President King resigned in December, 1930, as the United States Government and the League pressed the Liberian Government to effect reforms in its fiscal matters, and the native administration in particular, and as European powers, particularly Britain, France, and Germany, voiced threats against Liberia's sovereignty.[108] Yet by exceptional diplomatic finesse, the ensuing administration of President Edwin J. Barclay (1931–1943) successfully preserved Liberia's sovereignty while reforming only the surface of abuses high-lighted by the League Commission.[109]

Not surprisingly therefore, Barclay's successor, President William V. S. Tubman, found on assuming office in January, 1944 that Liberia's African peoples were still labouring under much of their age-old oppression and exploitation by the Americo-Liberian oligarchy. They were excessively taxed and mainly unfranchised, humiliated, fined or imprisoned by Liberian district commissioners for the slightest offence, and generally obliged to provide unpaid labour for the Government and private persons for which they received hardly any compensation like schools and

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104. *Liberia Official Gazette*, August 1925; *Liberia Official Gazette*, September 1925.

105. C. D. B. King, *Annual Message*, December 1922; *Inaugural Address*, 7 January 1924; *Annual Message*, 18 October 1928.

106. Akpan, "Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association."

107. League of Nations: *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry*, pp. 147–152, 110–115, 168–170.

108. R. E. Anderson, *Liberia, America's African Friend* (Chapel Hill, 1952), pp. 110-111.

109. Akpan, "The African Policy of the Liberian Settlers...," pp. 487–490.

hospitals. Because of these harsh conditions, many of them were daily deserting Liberia for neighbouring Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast.[110]

To remedy this situation, President Tubman (1944–1971) promptly embarked on a "Unification Policy" which sought to remove the political, economic, and social barriers which separated the African masses from the Americo-Liberian population, and to foster tolerance and a sense of oneness between the two groups of peoples.

First, the Liberian Government made some effort to minimize the incidence of cultural arrogance among the settlers by urging them to view African customs and values with the respect they deserved. The establishment of the Bureau of Folkways in 1952 to promote the study of the customs and social organization of the African peoples was also evidence of a new appreciation of the indigenous culture of the African peoples. Thus was abandoned the policy of cultural assimilation which had sought to uproot the Africans from their tribal past and culture, and to impose on them the supposedly superior culture of the settlers.

Secondly, the Liberian Government made an attempt to raise the African masses to a level of political equality with the Americo-Liberian population: in 1945, the Liberian constitution was amended to extend the franchise to all adult, African males who paid the hut-tax, and to provide for one representative in the Liberian Legislature for each of the three hinterland provinces. This amendement brought to an end the "delegate" system whereby any ethnic group which paid a delegate fee of $100 had the privilege of being represented by one or two chiefs. In 1947, in accordance with the constitutional amendment, and for the first time in Liberia's history, three Africans were elected to the House by the mass of their own people. By January 1956, one-third of the Representatives in the House were from the provinces, which however, had no representative in the Liberian Senate.[111]

Third, the Government effected some improvement in health, education, and transportation facilities in the hinterland through aid particularly from the United States Government, the W.H.O. and U.N.E.S.C.O., and the Firestone Rubber Company,[112] which, with the gradual extension of political rights to the African masses, served somewhat to alleviate the previous burden of Americo-Liberian rule over the African population.

## *"INDEPENDENCE" FOR LIBERIA'S AFRICAN POPULATION: MAY 1964, AND AFTER*

Despite these changes, the African peoples of Liberia were, even by the end of 1960, when most colonies in Africa had achieved or were on their way towards independence, still subjected by the Liberian authorities to various political, economic, and social disabilities usually associated with colonial status. Perhaps borrowing a leaf from the European colonial powers, the Liberian Government sought to remove these

110. W. Tubman, "Address to the Special Delegation of the Tribal People" (Monrovia, June 1955) in E. R. Townsend (ed.), *President Tubman of Liberia Speaks* (London: Consolidated Publications Co.), p. 113.

111. Tubman, *Inaugural Address*, 2 January 1956; J. Gus Liebenow, "Liberia," in G. M. Carter (ed.), *African One-Party States* (New York, 1962), pp. 339–341.

112. *Liberia and Firestone: the Development of Rubber Industry* (Harbel, 1962), p. 16.

disabilities, and to grant independence in a manner of speaking to Liberia's African population. To this end, it decided in November 1960 to replace "indirect rule" in the provinces, which President Tubman acknowledged was "patterned after the colonial system and must be abolished,"[113] with the county system operating in the settler communities. Accordingly in April 1963, the Liberian legislature passed an Act which created the Grand Gedeh, Nimba, Bong, and Loffa counties out of the three former provinces. The district and provincial commissioners, and the African chiefs and their courts were thenceforth discarded as instruments of administration.[114] Instead, county superintendents, judges, sheriffs, county attorneys, and magistrates were appointed from among the African peoples, and circuit courts were instituted on the same level as in the five coastal counties. And in May 1964, at special elections ordered by President Tubman, the four new counties elected two Senators each and six Representatives to the legislature.[115]

The creation of the new counties marked the beginning of the "Policy of Integration" and was perhaps Tubman's greatest achievement in national unification. For although some of their disabilities still remained, the African masses were raised from an essentially colonial, to a citizen status[116] in that they themselves now managed their affairs, ran their courts, and appointed their representatives in the national legislature. Moreover, although it granted the Africans settler, political institutions, no attempt was made to interfere with the communal tenure of land in the hinterland, and no property or educational qualifications were required for African voters.

Having made these efforts to alleviate oppression and suffering from among her own population, Liberia has, as from the mid 1960s been able to play with increasing confidence the role of champion of African rights against Portuguese colonialism in Africa and white racism in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Yet the fact remains that she must be numbered along with ex-colonial powers in Africa like Great Britain, France and Belgium. Indeed, a Liberian author has already done this in a book published in Monrovia and dedicated to President Tubman himself in which it is asserted in a discussion of relations between the Africans and the Americo-Liberians that:

> ...before the Tubman Era, Liberia was like two separate countries. It was a peculiar situation. You might say that the coastal Liberians possessed a colony, as did the European powers, but that this colony was in their back yard.[117]

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113. Tubman, "Annual Message", November 1960 in *The Liberian Age*, 25 November 1960, p. 9.

114. *The Liberian Star*, 23 July 1964, pp. 4-5.

115. L.N.A., *Annual Report by J. Samuel Melton, Secretary of Internal Affairs for the Year ended September 30, 1964*, pp. i-ii.

116. Tubman, *Annual Message*, 9 January 1962.

117. R. A. Smith *The Emancipation of the Hinterland* (The Star Magazine and Advertising Services, Monrovia, 1964), p. 13.

## [Footnotes]

[8] **Liberia and the Universal Negro Improvement Association: The Background to the Abortion of Garvey's Scheme for African Colonization**

M. B. Akpan

*The Journal of African History*, Vol. 14, No. 1. (1973), pp. 105-127.

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[38] **A Tour in the Liberian Hinterland**

Braithwaite Wallis

*The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3. (Mar., 1910), pp. 285-295.

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