

Negotiating Modernity: Colonialism, Christianity, Western Education in the Making of Modern Liberia

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Abstract

The founding of Liberia in 1822 marked a significant historical turning point in West Africa, shaped largely by the settlement of free African Americans under the auspices of the American Colonization Society (ACS). Central to the ACS vision was the transformation of Liberia into a “civilized” Christian Republic, where Western education would function as a primary vehicle for social, cultural, and political change. existing scholarship has extensively examined the role of Western education in constructing Americo-Liberian dominance and redefining indigenous identities, the specific contribution of Christianity to the diffusion of education and the restructuring of traditional Liberian society remains underexplored. This paper seeks to explore the role of Christian Churches and various missionary denominations in promoting Western education in Liberia from, and by analysing the resulting impact on indigenous educational systems, cultural practices, and social institutions. It argues that Christian missionary education, supported by colonial and post-colonial state policies, functioned not only as a tool of literacy and religious conversion but also as a mechanism for cultural transformation and suppression of indigenous traditions. By situating Liberia within the broader African missionary experience, the study highlights how Christianity and Western education collectively reshaped Liberian society over two centuries.

Keywords: Christianity, culture, Liberia, tradition, Western education

Introduction

The early 19th century holds profound historical significance for Liberia. It witnessed the establishment of the first modern republic on the West African coast in 1822. Liberia emerged as a settlement for formerly enslaved African Americans—later known as Americo-Liberians—under the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society (ACS). This experiment in Black repatriation fundamentally altered the political, social, cultural, and educational landscape of the region. The formation of the ACS itself was partly a reaction to a series of slave rebellions in the United States, including the Stono (Cato) Rebellion of 1739–1740 in South Carolina, the Denmark Vesey conspiracy of 1822, and Nat Turner’s rebellion of 1831 in Virginia. These uprisings intensified White American anxieties about slavery and racial coexistence, leading influential elites to advocate for the relocation of free Blacks to Africa. Consequently, the ACS was founded on December 28, 1816, in

Washington, D.C., with figures such as Bushrod Washington, Elijah Caldwell, and Robert Finley playing leading roles. Beyond resettlement, the ACS envisioned Liberia as a beacon of Christianity and Western “civilization” for indigenous Liberians and, by extension, the African continent. Western education—largely delivered through Christian missionary institutions—became the primary means through which this civilizing mission was pursued. Over time, missionary schools replaced indigenous systems of education, reshaping local knowledge transmission, belief systems, and cultural practices.¹

Today, Western-style education remains Liberia’s official educational framework. According to the 2022 National Population Census, approximately 85% of Liberians identify as Christian, 12% as Muslim, less than 1% adheres to other religions, and 2.6% report no religious affiliation. These statistics underscore the enduring influence of Christianity in Liberian society and highlight the long-term consequences of missionary engagement.²

Scholars have explored concepts of civilization, assimilation, and Americo-Liberian hegemony, however, the specific role of Christian institutions in disseminating Western education and transforming indigenous traditions has received limited scholarly attention. This paper seeks to address this gap. The aim of the paper is twofold. They are—to examine the role of Christian Churches and missionary denominations in the promotion and expansion of Western education in Liberia and to analyze the impact of missionary education on indigenous educational systems, cultural practices, and traditional institutions.

Existing scholarship has emphasized how Western education functioned as a marker of “civilization” in 19th century Liberia. Allen identifies Christianity, commerce, and Western domestic architecture as defining features of civilized status, also demonstrating how social interactions—particularly sexual unions—blurred rigid political and cultural boundaries between Americo-Liberians and indigenous populations.³ In a separate study, Allen further highlights assimilation as a prerequisite for citizenship, requiring indigenous peoples to adopt “Merica People” cultural norms.⁴ Similarly, Dillon argues that Americo-Liberians transplanted elements of Southern American culture—dress, manners, education, and governance—into Liberia, constructing a hierarchical society in which education was initially reserved for the settler elite. Over time, access to education expanded to indigenous Liberians, eventually contributing to the political empowerment that culminated in the 1980 military coup led by the People’s Redemption Council (PRC).⁵ these studies illuminate the social and political dimensions of Western education, they do not sufficiently foreground the central role of Christianity as both an ideological and institutional driver of educational expansion. This paper argues that Christian denominations—including the Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Seventh-day Adventist Churches—were instrumental in establishing schools that transmitted Western values, religious norms, and cultural practices.

1Guannu, J.S., 1985. A short history of the first Liberian Republic. Behrman House Publishing

2LiberiaCensus2022Report (1) (1).pdf ,60

3Allen, W.E., 2009. Making History in the Bedroom: Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians Sexual Unions, 1880s-c. 1950s. *Liberian Studies Journal*, 34(2), p.16.

4file:///C:/Users/ADMIN/Downloads/William-E.-Allen%20(1).pdf

5Dillon, E.C., 2007. *The role of education in the rise and fall of Americo-Liberians in Liberia, West Africa (1980)*. Georgia State University

The Liberian state reinforced this process through laws and policies that marginalized indigenous traditions and legitimized Western norms.

Liberia's experience was not unique. Across Africa, Christian missionaries—beginning with Portuguese Catholic missions in the fifteenth century—used education as a tool for evangelization and cultural transformation. Countries such as Cape Verde, Mozambique, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and the Congo witnessed similar patterns, where missionary schools reshaped indigenous societies by privileging Western epistemologies over traditional knowledge systems.⁶

By situating Liberia within this broader African context, the paper demonstrates that missionary education was a continent-wide phenomenon that produced comparable cultural disruptions and transformations. The paper concludes that Christianity played a decisive role in the proliferation of Western education in Liberia, serving as both a spiritual and cultural force that reshaped indigenous society. Missionary schools functioned not merely as centers of learning but as instruments of social engineering, contributing to the erosion of traditional educational systems and cultural practices. Supported by state policies, Christian education helped redefine notions of citizenship, civilization, and progress in Liberia.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, drawing on primary and secondary sources including scholarly books, journal articles, dissertations, government documents, and national policy statements. These materials were analyzed to examine the role of Christianity in the dissemination of Western education in Liberia and to assess its impact on indigenous cultural and traditional practices. As Kassirjian notes, content analysis is a systematic, objective, and replicable method for analyzing communication content.⁷

Population

The population of the study comprises documentary sources. Primary sources include the 1986 Liberian Constitution, the Education Reform Act of 2011, statutory and customary marriage laws, and the Executive Law of 1972 establishing ministries such as Education and Internal Affairs. Secondary sources consist of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous research relevant to Christianity, education, and cultural transformation in Liberia.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed. Only documents that were accessible, relevant, and directly related to the research objectives were selected for analysis.

Method of Data Acquisition

Primary and secondary sources were obtained through online academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar, as well as reputable institutional websites. Additional

⁶Ijoma, J. O. (1982). Portuguese Activities in West Africa Before 1600 The Consequences. *Transafrican Journal of History*, 11, 136-146.

⁷Kassirjian, H.H., 1977. Content analysis in consumer research. *Journal of consumer research*, 4(1), pp.8-18

primary materials were accessed through individuals engaged in historical research who consulted the National Archives Center in Sinkor and the National Museum of Liberia in Monrovia. Retrieved documents were digitized and transmitted electronically for analysis.

Discussion

Early Christian Missions in Africa

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to engage in systematic Christian missionary activities in Africa. Their contact with West Africa began in the early 15th century and was driven by three interrelated motives: commercial expansion, religious evangelization, and scientific inquiry. Under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, Portugal—a relatively small European kingdom—sought to expand Christianity simultaneously countering Muslim political and religious influence along the African coast.

Between 1418 and 1482, Portuguese explorers undertook extensive voyages along the West African coastline. Madeira Island was reached in 1418, followed by Cape Bojador in 1434, Cape Blanco in 1442, and Arguin in 1443. Subsequent expeditions extended Portuguese contact to the Senegal region in 1445, Guinea-Bissau in 1446, the Cape Verde Islands in 1457, and the Sierra Leone coastline in 1460. Exploration continued with Portuguese arrival in São Tomé and Príncipe in 1470, the Gold Coast (modern Ghana) in 1471, the Bight of Benin in 1475, and the Kingdom of Kongo by 1482. Among the three primary motivations for Portuguese exploration, the religious motive is central to this study, which examines the introduction and spread of Christianity in Africa. Early missionary efforts recorded notable successes, including the establishment of a Christian Church on Santiago Island in Cape Verde between 1460 and 1470. By 1503, several African rulers and elites had converted to Christianity, including the King of Fetu and a number of his chiefs.⁸ African responses to Christianity, however, were far from uniform. Some communities accepted the new faith, others strongly resisted it. In the Kingdom of Benin, Portuguese missionaries initially received a favourable reception. The Oba welcomed missionaries in 1445 and later sent his son and several chiefs to Portugal for baptism in 1514. Despite this early openness, Christianity was eventually rejected. The growing influence of Western culture, coupled with the erosion of indigenous traditions, generated resentment among the Benin people. By the seventeenth century, Christian churches had been converted into traditional shrines, and indigenous religious leaders reverted to ancestral practices.⁹ Roman Catholicism was the form of Christianity introduced into Africa by the Portuguese, reflecting Portugal's long-standing affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church following its incorporation into the Roman Empire prior to independence. Consequently, Catholicism became the dominant Christian denomination disseminated through Portuguese missionary activities.

Crossing Oceans, Reshaping Worlds: Vasco da Gama and Early Modern Global Connections

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

In addition to earlier missionary efforts, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama undertook two major expeditions to Africa and Asia between 1497 and 1507.¹⁰ These voyages significantly strengthened Portuguese commercial, political, and religious influence. The first expedition departed from the Tagus River on July 8, 1497, with a crew of 148 men aboard three square-rigged ships: *São Gabriel*, *São Raphael*, and *Berrio*. After nearly five months at sea, the fleet reached St. Helena Bay in Southern Africa, named *Baía de Santa Helena* in honor of Saint Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine the Great. On November 22, 1497, the expedition rounded the Cape of Good Hope and reached the region later known as Natal by December 25.¹¹ From Natal, the Portuguese sailed northward and anchored along the coast of Mozambique, where tensions arose upon the realization that the newcomers were Christians operating in predominantly Muslim territories. The expedition continued to Mombasa before crossing the Indian Ocean and arriving on the Malabar Coast of India on May 20, 1498. Da Gama returned to Lisbon in 1499 to a hero's welcome and was awarded the title *Lord of the Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce of Ethiopia, Persia, and India*, as well as Admiral of the Indian Sea.

A second expedition, launched in 1502, was primarily driven by Portugal's commercial ambitions, particularly the desire to monopolize the spice trade. Portuguese forces secured trading rights in Mozambique and Sofala, extracting large quantities of gold and compelling the Sultan of Mozambique to pay annual tribute to the Portuguese Crown. In India, Portuguese forces violently confronted Calicut, capturing opponents and transporting seized wealth back to Europe. Mossel Bay and Mombasa later emerged as trading posts facilitating the exchange of Asian silks, spices, and African ivory and gold, thereby enhancing Portugal's economic power. In 1524, King João III appointed Vasco da Gama as Viceroy of India. He arrived in Goa later that year but died three months afterward in Cochin. His remains were returned to Portugal and interred at the Monastery of St. Jerónimos.

Christianity and colonial legacies reflected in African educational system

The significance of Portuguese expeditions cannot be overstated. Beyond commercial expansion, they promoted Christianity and intensified contact between Europe, Africa, and Asia, laying foundations for colonial domination. Following independence, African states confronted the enduring legacy of colonial institutions, particularly Western education. As Urch argues in his influential study on education and colonialism in Kenya, newly independent African states were compelled to reassess colonial educational structures imposed upon them. Western education, introduced by colonial powers such as Britain, Portugal, and France, often undermined African cultural traditions. In Kenya, missionary influence expanded significantly after the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, which opened East Africa's interior to European intervention. Missionaries were soon followed by the Imperial British East Africa Company, which in 1888 requested the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to establish mission stations. By 1894, Kenya had been declared a British protectorate.¹²

¹⁰<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/vasco-da-gamas-voyage-discovery-1497>

¹¹Ibid

¹²Urch, G. E. (1971). Education and colonialism in Kenya. *History of Education Quarterly*, 11(3), 249-264.

Western education in Kenya served two primary purposes: enabling Africans to read the Bible and facilitating conversion to Christianity. Over time, it also became a tool for training Africans to serve in the colonial administration. Colonial education was structured into three categories: general education for religious conversion, industrial education for vocational skills, and elite education for sons of chiefs and local administrators.¹³

Resistance, Adaptation, and Africanization of Christianity

In Southern Africa, missionary activity similarly disrupted indigenous societies. Among the Tswana of Bechuanaland, missionaries challenged local customs and traditions. Dachs, in *Missionary Imperialism: The Case of Bechuanaland*, documents missionary efforts—particularly those of John Mackenzie—to reform Tswana society by condemning practices such as polygamy and initiation ceremonies.¹⁴ Resistance emerged early. In 1813, the Tlthaping rejected Christianity, perceiving it as a threat to their traditions. Tensions culminated in an uprising in 1878 between traditional authorities and missionary-backed reformers. Some Africans supported missionary reforms due to economic benefits in agriculture and trade, the conflict revealed deep cultural divisions. Following the uprising, missionaries concluded that effective Christianization required colonial control. Consequently, Church leaders invited British intervention, and by the late 19th century Bechuanaland had become a British Protectorate. Another influential missionary figure was David Livingstone (1813–1873), who promoted the triad of Christianity, commerce, and civilization.¹⁵ Livingstone criticized Jesuit missionary methods in south-central Africa, attributing their failure to the destructive impact of the slave trade introduced by the Portuguese. He argued that slavery fostered African distrust toward Europeans, undermining genuine Christian conversion. He acknowledged the Jesuits' contribution to literacy, he viewed their missionary approach as ineffective.¹⁶

Despite resistance, Christianity underwent a process of adaptation in Africa. missionaries are often accused of undermining African traditions, some adopted flexible strategies to secure local cooperation. Kaplan observes that Christianity was sometimes reinterpreted within African cultural frameworks—a process known as the Africanization of Christianity. This occurred through adaptation, toleration, assimilation, acculturation, incorporation, and selective Christianization.¹⁷ Missionaries gradually accepted certain indigenous customs, translated the Bible into African vernaculars, and re-contextualized Christian teachings to resonate with African worldviews. Porter, quoting Max Warren, identifies three significant approaches to missionary history: the biblical, the theological, and

¹³Ibid

¹⁴Dachs, A. J. (1972). Missionary Imperialism—the case of Bechuanaland. *The Journal of African History*, 13(4), 647-658.

¹⁵Mkenda, F. (2017). A Protestant Verdict on the Jesuit Missionary Approach in Africa: David Livingstone and Memories of the Early Jesuit Presence in South Central Africa. In *Encounters between Jesuits and Protestants in Africa* (pp. 59-79). Brill.

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷Kaplan, S. (1986). The Africanization of missionary Christianity: History and typology. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 16(3), 166-186.

the environmental perspectives.¹⁸ The environmental perspective focuses on the social, intellectual, economic, and political contexts within which missionaries operated and carried out their activities. Scholars from diverse backgrounds—Roman Catholic, Protestant, and secular—have drawn differing conclusions about Christianity’s role in Africa, often shaped by their ideological and cultural positions. A central debate within this scholarship concerns whether Christianity was employed as a tool to exploit so-called “uncivilized” regions of the world and whether missionary enterprise functioned as an instrument of imperialism. Closely related is the question of why missionary work and imperial expansion so frequently operated in close proximity.

It is unsurprising that missions and imperial authorities often collaborated. Without the presence of imperial power in many parts of Africa, missionaries would have faced significant obstacles in spreading Christianity and Western-style education. Colonial conquest by the missionaries’ home countries frequently created conditions that enabled Christianity to expand with relative ease. Although tensions existed between missionaries and imperial authorities from the 1790s to the 1840s, a closer collaboration emerged between the 1850s and the 1890s as both groups pursued overlapping objectives. cultural imperialism undoubtedly affected colonized and Christianized societies, Porter argues that certain developments—such as the spread of the English language, which helped bridge communication barriers—should not be viewed solely as the imposition of foreign elements.

Bersselaar notes that the missionary G. T. Basden served as a representative of the Igbo people in the Nigerian Legislative Council between 1931 and 1937, following his appointment by the colonial government.¹⁹ This appointment effectively brought churchmen into the colonial governance structure. The colonial authorities justified this decision by claiming that no African was sufficiently qualified to serve in such a role. Basden was regarded by Western-educated Africans as an expert on Igbo society, and his publications were frequently used as authoritative sources on Igbo customary laws and traditions.²⁰ Among his works was *Niger Igbo in* which he acknowledged that Igbo political and religious institutions had been severely disrupted by missionary activities and colonial rule.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS) established its first mission station in eastern Nigeria in 1857. As in south-central Africa, the CMS in Nigeria actively encouraged the imposition of British colonial administration. It was believed that the military defeat of African societies would open the interior not only to colonial trade but also to missionary activity. This convergence of military, commercial, and religious interests underscores the close relationship between missionary expansion and imperial conquest.

In an insightful article titled “*From Hampton into the Heart of Africa: How Faith in God and Folklore Turned Congo Missionary William Sheppard into a Pioneer Ethnologist*,” Canton provides a detailed account of the mistreatment of Congolese people by King

¹⁸Porter, A. (2002). Church history, history of Christianity, religious history: some reflections on British missionary enterprise since the late eighteenth century. *Church History*, 71(3), 555-584.

¹⁹Van den Bersselaar, D. (2006). Missionary knowledge and the state in colonial Nigeria: on how GT Basden became an expert. *History in Africa*, 33, 433-450.

²⁰Ibid. 1r

Leopold II's army.²¹ The Congo Free State, claimed and personally controlled by the Belgian monarch in the late nineteenth century, was ruthlessly exploited for its natural resources. During this period, the king's forces committed widespread atrocities that amounted to crimes against humanity. These abuses were strongly condemned by African American Presbyterian missionary William Henry Sheppard (1865–1927), who arrived in the Congo in 1890. Between 1890 and 1910, Sheppard played a leading role in a religious revival in the Congo and used his position within the Presbyterian Church to expose the brutality of King Leopold's regime, which he denounced as contrary to God's will. Initially motivated by a desire to convert what was then referred to as the "Dark Continent" to Christianity, Sheppard became increasingly disillusioned upon witnessing the racism and disrespect shown toward Black missionaries by their white counterparts. Many white missionaries and Presbyterians praised Belgian colonial activities, Sheppard publicly criticized the violence inflicted on Congolese communities, particularly through articles published in the Presbyterian Church newspaper, *Kasai Herald*. Available literature indicates that organized missionary activity in Africa began as early as the fifteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese. A recurring theme throughout missionary initiatives has been the systematic attempt to undermine African traditions and cultural practices and replace them with Western values. This pattern highlights the complex and often contradictory role of Christian missions in Africa, where evangelization was frequently intertwined with cultural domination and imperial expansion.

Emergence of Christianity in Liberia since 1822

Unlike several West African societies that experienced early and sustained missionary encounters, Liberia did not witness organized Christian missionary activity until the 19th century. Some historians note that the earliest recorded contact between Europeans and indigenous Liberians occurred in 1364, when Norman traders from France reportedly visited the region. This was followed by Portuguese exploration in 1462 under Pedro de Sintra. The Portuguese named the area the "Pepper Coast" or "Grain Coast" due to the abundance of malagueta pepper, a valuable commodity in European trade.²² Subsequent European involvement remained largely commercial rather than missionary. The Dutch established a trading post at Grand Cape Mount in 1602, followed by the English in 1663, which also set up trading stations along the Pepper Coast. No significant or sustained missionary presence is documented until 1822, when freed Black slaves from the United States arrived in the region.²³ These settlers—later known as Americo-Liberians—many of whom were practicing Christians, introduced Christianity and Western-style education to Liberia from 1822 onward.

Formation of Liberia

Liberia is located on the West Coast of Africa, covering an area of approximately 38,000 square miles with a coastline of about 350 miles.²⁴ It is bordered by Guinea to the

²¹Carton, B. (2009). From Hampton "[I]nto the Heart of Africa": How Faith in God and Folklore Turned Congo Missionary William Sheppard into a Pioneering Ethnologist. *History in Africa*, 36, 53-86.

²²Guannu, J., 2010b. *Liberian History up to 1847*. Star Books-Sedco Longman

²³ Ibid

²⁴Guannu, J., 2010b. *Liberian History up to 1847*. Star Books-Sedco Longman Liberia

north, Sierra Leone to the west, Côte d'Ivoire to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south.²⁵ Liberia is one of only two African countries—alongside Ethiopia—that theoretically and practically escaped direct European colonial rule during the “Scramble for Africa.” The modern Liberian state was established in the early 19th century by the American Colonization Society (ACS), whose primary objective was the resettlement of freed Black slaves from the United States.²⁶ On July 26, 1847, Liberia became Africa's first independent republic and the second Black republic in the world after Haiti, which gained independence in 1804. The initial group of settlers arrived in the 1820s aboard a vessel often referred to as the “Mayflower of Liberian history,” carrying 86 individuals: 33 men, 18 women, and the remainder children.²⁷ The ACS—composed largely of American politicians, clergymen, and philanthropists—was instrumental in organizing and sustaining this settlement. much of Africa fell under European colonial domination following the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, Liberia maintained its independence. In the 19th century, prevailing Euro-American thought held that trade, Christianity, civilization, and colonization were essential to Africa's development.²⁸ For the sponsors of the ACS, the resettlement project was explicitly framed as a civilizing mission aimed at introducing Western culture and Christianity to what they regarded as “barbaric” societies. Consequently, Liberia was conceived as a base for the diffusion of Western civilization and Christian religion across Africa. This close relationship between Church and State was symbolically reinforced when Liberia's Declaration of Independence was signed at Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia. As a result, religious institutions became deeply involved in governance and played a central role in promoting Western education and socio-political values

2.2 Arrival of Churches

Christian Churches played a decisive role in reshaping the intellectual and cultural outlook of indigenous Liberians through the establishment of schools and training institutions. Protestant missions, in particular, provided early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Different denominations arrived in Liberia at various periods. According to Guannue, the Baptist Church arrived in the 1820s, followed by the Presbyterian Church in 1834, the Methodist Church in 1839, the Lutheran Church in 1860, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church also in 1860. The Episcopal Church established its presence in the 19th century, the Seventh-day Adventist Church arrived in 1927. The Roman Catholic Church established permanent mission stations in 1906, and the Liberia Inland Mission began operations in the 1930s.²⁹ Collectively, these denominations accelerated the process of cultural transformation by promoting Western religious beliefs, moral values, and educational systems. Successive Liberian governments acknowledged the significant contributions of missionary institutions to national development, particularly in advancing literacy. President

²⁵Captan, M.R., 2016. *Introduction to Liberian government and political system*. Lulu Press, Inc.

²⁶Corwell, R. D., 1985. *World History in the Twentieth Century* (New Edition), Hong Kong, LongmanGroup Limited.

²⁷Wulah, T., 2005. *The forgotten Liberian: History of indigenous tribes*. AuthorHouse.

²⁸Chuku, G., 2014. African Intellectuals as Cultural Nationalists: A Comparative Analysis of Edward Wilmot Blyden and Mbonu Ojike. *The Journal of African American History*, 99(4), pp.350-378.

²⁹Guannu, J.S., 1985. *A short history of the first Liberian Republic*. Behrman House Publishing.

Edwin James Barclay recognized this role in his 1936 inaugural address, stating: The several missionary bodies that have been established in Liberia during the course of the past century are entitled to the highest appreciation of the Government and the profoundest gratitude of the people of the country... some of them may unwittingly have sown seeds which have not produced the fruit that was to be expected, still, on the whole, their influence has been both uplifting and inspiring.³⁰

2.3 History of the Catholic Church in Liberia

Catholic missionary activity in Liberia was marked by early challenges followed by gradual consolidation and growth. With the approval of the Holy See and the support of Catholic communities in the United States, the first Catholic mission was launched in 1841 under the leadership of Edward Barron. This initial effort ended unsuccessfully, culminating in Barron's resignation and death in 1854 due to prolonged illness.³¹ Catholic missionary activity resumed in the 1880s following appeals from the Liberian government, which sought assistance in revitalizing the country's struggling educational system and promoting scientific knowledge. In response to renewed requests—particularly from the Minister of the Interior, Mr. Blindem—Catholic missionaries from neighbouring Sierra Leone, led by Father Blanchet, arrived in Monrovia in February 1884. Their presence proved transformative, as Catholic missions established churches and schools that significantly expanded access to Western education. By the early 20th century, Catholic educational initiatives had begun to yield measurable results. A 1920 report by the African Mission Society of Cork noted that Catholic membership had grown from approximately 40 in 1906 to 2,400 by 1920, within a population of about 1.7 million. The report also recorded 10 elementary schools, 15 teachers, and approximately 1,200 pupils—figures that pointed to promising growth.³² Beyond education, the Catholic Church became known for its firm stance on social justice and human rights. During the regimes of Presidents Samuel K. Doe and Charles G. Taylor, Catholic leaders openly criticized human rights abuses and political repression. Archbishop Michael Francis of Monrovia emerged as a leading moral voice against state-sponsored violence, consistently calling for respect for the rule of law and human dignity.³³ Institutionally, the Prefecture of Cape Palmas was established in 1950 and elevated to a Vicariate in 1962. In 1946, Patrick Kla Juwle became the first Liberian Catholic priest, and in 1972 he was consecrated as the first Liberian bishop. Catholic educational institutions—including Fatima College (established in 1952), St. Teresa's Convent, St. Patrick High School, and numerous others across the country—played a central role in advancing Western education. Despite disruptions caused by the Liberian civil war, Catholic institutions remained influential,

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ The Catholic Church In Liberia Author(S): Henry P. Fisher Source: Records OfThe American Catholic Historical Society OfPhiladelphia , September, 1929, Vol. 40, No. 3 (September, 1929), Pp. 249-310 Published By: American Catholic Historical Society Stable Url: <https://Www.Jstor.Org/Stable/4420905>

³² The Catholic Church In Liberia Author(S): Henry P. Fisher Source: Records of the American Catholic Historical Society OfPhiladelphia , September, 1929, Vol. 40, No. 3 (September, 1929), Pp. 249-310 Published By: American Catholic Historical Society Stable Url: <https://Www.Jstor.Org/Stable/4420905>

³³ Review Reviewed Work(s): Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia by Paul Gifford Review by: Felix K. Ekechi Source: African Studies Review, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Apr., 1995), pp. 151-154 Published by: Cambridge University Press Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/525494> Accessed: 29-04-2024 15:07 +00.00

operating dozens of parishes and schools by the year 2000.³⁴ Among the leading catholic schools in Liberia is the St. Teresa Convent. It is purposely dedicated to the education of girls and young women, established by catholic missionary sisters in the 1930s. Mean, the St. Patrick Elementary School was intended for boys. Saint Patrick High school was established in 1934 and closed in 1996.³⁵

Other catholic run schools are St. Martin Catholic school in Gbarnga, Bong County; St. Pius in Harbel and St. Christopher High School at Kakata, both in Margibi County. Our Lady of Fatima in Maryland County; St. Kizito Catholic School in Paynesville City, St. Mary Catholic school in Duala, St. Michael High School along the Japanese Freeway, etc all in Montserrado county, etc. These institutions including universities and colleges continue to fast track the spread of western education. As their mission was to plant civilization across Liberia and Africa generally, it was believed that this could be achieved through educational medium. What they taught essentially were moral values based on Biblical teachings and western concepts of how life should be lived. Messages of salvation echoed loudly as thousands of natives converted to Christianity.

2.4 The United Methodist Church in Liberia

The United Methodist Church (UMC) has been one of the most influential Christian denominations in Liberia. Its roots date back to 1822, coinciding with the arrival of Americo-Liberian settlers. The first Methodist missionary to Liberia was Rev. Melvin B. Cox (World Methodist Council, 2017.). The denomination shares with the Baptist Church the distinction of having members among the earliest settlers.³⁶ Walls and Ross identify five defining marks of Methodist mission: proclaiming the Kingdom of God, nurturing new believers, responding to human needs, challenging unjust social structures, and safeguarding creation.³⁷ In Liberia, Methodist missionary activities reflected these principles simultaneously promoting Western cultural and educational ideals.

The Methodist Church established numerous schools across the country, including the College of West Africa in Monrovia in 1839, which became a major training ground for professionals in both church and government service. The United Methodist University (UMU), founded in 1998 and operational from 2000, further extended the church's educational mission. With a student population exceeding 9,000 as of 2023, UMU offers diploma, undergraduate, and graduate programs across six colleges.³⁸ Leadership localization was achieved in 1965 with the election of Stephen Trowen Nagbe Sr. as the first Liberian Methodist bishop. Since then, several Liberian-born bishops have led the church. Through church planting, education, healthcare services, and theological training, the United

³⁴<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/liberia-catholic-church>

³⁵Wreh, M.A, *Historical Highlights Of St. Teresa's Convent*

³⁶Reeves, Daniel, "Biblical Based Servant Leadership and the Liberian Methodist Church: Lessons from the Christological Hymn in Phil. 2:7-11" (2022). Doctor of Ministry Projects and Theses. 21.

https://scholar.smu.edu/theology_ministry_etds/21

³⁷Walls Andrew and Ross Cathy, *Mission In The 21ST Century, Exploring The Five Marks Of Global Mission*; Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1 Spencer Court 140-142 Wands worth High Street London SW184JJ; 2008

³⁸<https://umu.edu.lr/>

Methodist Church has remained an institution in shaping Liberia's religious, educational, and cultural landscape.

2.5 The Baptist Denomination and Educational Development in Liberia

According to Ekpenyong and Okoi, the Baptist Board of Overseas Missions played a significant role in the establishment and operation of schools in Liberia.³⁹ The symbolic importance of the Baptist Church in Liberian state formation is underscored by the fact that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1847 at Providence Baptist Church in Monrovia. This historical association has led some Liberians to speculate that Liberia is a Christian state. However, this perception is constitutionally unfounded. The Constitution of the Second Republic explicitly defines Liberia as a secular state. Chapter IV, Article 14 affirms that no religious denomination shall be given preferential treatment. This provision was intended to curtail the extensive influence previously exercised by religious institutions in state governance, particularly before the 1980 military coup. By the 1980s, Baptist-operated institutions included Ricks Junior College in Virginia, Montserrado County; the Bible Industrial Academy in Grand Bassa County; and Suehn Industrial Mission in Bomi County. Through these institutions, the Baptist Church contributed significantly to the dissemination of Western education and Christian moral instruction. Another prominent denomination in Liberia's educational landscape is the Episcopal Church, which established several notable institutions, including Bishop Ferguson High School in Harper, Maryland County, and B. W. Harris High School in Monrovia. Similarly, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, founded in Liberia in 1860 by Revs. Clement Irons, J. S. Campbell, and S. F. Flegler, made substantial educational contributions. Its leading institution, Monrovia College, was founded in 1922 by Bishop W. Sampson Brooks. Although the school closed temporarily between 1928 and 1952, it reopened in 1953 and resumed its educational mission.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church arrived in Liberia in the early twentieth century, initially establishing missions and elementary schools in Grand Bassa County before expanding into Bong County (notably Lewaii) and Margibi County (Konola). The Lutheran Church, established in 1860 by American missionary Morris Officer in Harrisburg, Montserrado County, also operated several schools, including St. Peter Lutheran School in Sinkor and St. Matthew Lutheran School. In 1945, the Lutheran Training Institute was established in Salayea, Lofa County, further strengthening the church's educational impact.

2.6 Rationale for the Church's Presence in Liberia

Christian philanthropic engagement in Liberia took two principal forms: the promotion of legitimate trade and manufacturing as alternatives to the transatlantic slave trade, and the evangelization of indigenous populations.⁴⁰ Missionaries, often described as agents of "civilization," coordinated with governmental and commercial interests to extend

³⁹. Ekpenyong O. & Okoi, I Ibiang O, 2021. Missionaries as Agents of Civilization in Africa. *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol.1(3).pp.1-9 [DOC-20240328-WA0008..pdf](#)

⁴⁰ Aliyu, S. A. (2000). Christian missionaries and Hausa literature in Nigeria, 1840-1890: a critical evaluation. *Kano Studies*, 1(1), 93-118.

Western influence into the interior of West Africa. This convergence highlights the central role Christian institutions played in the spread of Western cultural, moral, and educational values. Christianity exerted a profound influence on indigenous Liberian societies by reshaping belief systems, moral frameworks, and social practices. Mission sponsors generally shared a common objective: the Christianization of Africa. As one mission directive articulated, missionaries were encouraged not only to preach the gospel but also to study indigenous political structures, trade networks, and religious attitudes in order to inform the broader Church about the realities of African societies. This approach positioned missionaries as both evangelists and observers, reinforcing the interconnection between religious conversion and cultural transformation.

3.0 Western Educational Policies and Laws Affecting Traditional and Cultural Practices

Since Liberia's declaration of independence on July 26, 1847, successive governments have enacted laws, policies, and programs designed to align the state with Western models of governance and social organization. Prior to the arrival of Americo-Liberian settlers, indigenous communities possessed well-established cultural systems, including education through institutions such as the Poro and Sande societies. The imposition of Western education profoundly altered these traditional structures. As state authority expanded into the hinterland, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, strategies were developed to encourage—or compel—indigenous populations to adopt new standards. Traditional educational models were marginalized, Western-style schools became the foundation for broader social transformation. New legal frameworks governing marriage, criminal justice, and administration were introduced, alongside a constitutional order and modern court system. Western education underpinned and legitimized these changes.

New Governance Structure of the State

The 1986 Constitution of Liberia, like earlier governance frameworks, establishes three branches of government with distinct powers. Article 3 defines Liberia as a unitary sovereign state divided into counties for administrative purposes.⁴¹ This structure contrasts sharply with pre-colonial governance systems, where kings and chiefs exercised near-absolute authority. Modern constitutional arrangements limit executive power by distributing authority among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. This shift reflects Western democratic ideals introduced through education and missionary influence, replacing indigenous systems of centralized traditional authority.

Educational Policies

In 2011, the Liberian government enacted the Education Reform Act, repealing the Education Law of 2001 and consolidating authority within the Ministry of Education.⁴²

⁴¹Liberia. 1986. Constitution of the Republic of Liberia. Available at: <https://crlc.gov.lr/doc/the%201986%20constitution%20of%20the%20republic%20of%20liberia.pdf> [accessed on: 30 march 2024]

⁴²Liberia. 2011. Education Reform Act of 2011. Available at: <https://liblaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Education-Reform-Act-of-2011.pdf> [Accessed on: 30 March 2024]

Although indigenous societies such as the Poro and Sande operated longstanding educational institutions, the Act did not formally recognize these systems. Instead, it reinforced the primacy of Western education as the principal pathway to national development. The Act emphasizes education as a means of promoting human dignity, appreciation for labour, self-sufficiency, and national cohesion. Chapter 1, Section 1.4 grants the Ministry of Education authority over the establishment, regulation, and administration of all academic and vocational institutions. Chapter 4 mandates early childhood education as a national priority, further institutionalizing Western pedagogical models. The Constitution also obligates the state to provide education without discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or gender. This framework promotes inclusivity, it simultaneously relegates indigenous knowledge systems to the margins, marking a significant departure from pre-1822 educational traditions.

Transformation of Marriage Practices

Marriage is another indigenous institution significantly altered by Western legal and Christian doctrines. The Domestic Relations Law of 1973 redefined marriage as a civil contract between a man and a woman, subject to statutory regulation. Legal age requirements, consent provisions, and judicial oversight replaced customary arrangements previously governed by families and elders.⁴³ Unlike traditional systems—where external legal intervention was minimal—the modern framework permits spouses to seek legal redress for abuse. Chapter 3, Section 3.5(2) of the law affirms the right of spouses to pursue legal action for personal or property-related harm. This provision has contributed to reducing domestic violence and redefining gender relations in Liberian society.

Marginalization of Liberian Culture and Traditions

The marginalization of indigenous Liberian culture did not occur immediately after the arrival of Americo-Liberians in 1822. Early legal instruments, including the Constitutions of 1820, 1839, and related governance documents, did not extend authority over the hinterland. However, between 1905 and 1915, the government expanded its reach through military conquest and the establishment of “native administration.”⁴⁴ Resistance to this expansion was widespread. Indigenous communities viewed subjugation as a threat to customary authority and cultural autonomy. Armed resistance occurred among groups such as the Kru (1915–1916), Grebo (1910), Kpelle and Bandi (1911–1914), Gio and Mano (1913–1919), and others. These conflicts were driven partly by the desire to secure territorial integrity following losses to British and French colonial powers after the Berlin Conference. The establishment of the Liberia Frontier Force in 1908 marked a turning point. Traditional leaders lost control over trade, taxation, and governance, as indirect rule placed hinterland administration under Monrovia’s authority. Following decisive military victories—such as the defeat of the Gola-Bandi in 1919—the government consolidated control over economic, political, and social life. Traditional practices associated with the Poro and Sande societies, including trial by ordeal and forced initiation rites, came under state scrutiny. The Hinterland

⁴³Liberia. 1973. Domestic Relations Law of 1973. Available at: <https://africa-laws.org/liberia/family%20law/domestic%20relations%20law.pdf> [accessed on: 30 march 2024]

⁴⁴Akpan, M.B., 1982. 'Native Administration and Gola-Bandi Resistance in North-Western Liberia,' 1905-1919. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 11(3/4), pp.142-164.

Regulations Act of 1949 abolished several practices deemed incompatible with modern legal and human rights standards. By 1972, responsibility for cultural affairs was formally assigned to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs, and Tourism, institutionalizing state oversight of tradition.⁴⁵

Ministry of Internal Affairs

- 1) In accordance with Chapter 25, Subsection 25.1 of the Executive Law of Liberia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is headed by a Minister appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. The President is also mandated to appoint a Deputy Minister, subject to Senate confirmation, who serves as the principal assistant to the Minister. For the effective functioning of the Ministry, the President may further appoint Assistant Ministers upon Senate approval. Chapter 25, Subsection 25.2 outlines the responsibilities of the Ministry, which include, among others: ensuring the effective administration and development of local government through supervision of political subdivisions;
- 2) Managing tribal affairs and matters arising from inter-tribal relationships;
- 3) Overseeing the orderly functioning of traditional governance systems and formulating regulations governing tribal domestic relations, trial procedures, cultural institutions and societies, and fee schedules for tribal courts;
- 4) Administering the system of tribal courts;
- 5) Exercising administrative oversight over the Poro, Sande, and other traditional societies through designated liaison officers; and
- 6) Overseeing the documentation and publication of the laws and customs of Liberia's indigenous communities.

The enactment of this law effectively placed traditional and cultural practices under state regulation, signalling a shift toward marginalization and institutional control. Whereas traditional leaders previously exercised broad judicial and administrative authority, their powers became circumscribed by statutory regulations. The government now determined which cultural practices were deemed acceptable and which were classified as barbaric, uncivilized, or incompatible with modern human rights norms.

Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism (MICAT)

The Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism (MICAT) was similarly established to supervise matters related to information dissemination, tourism, and cultural programming. Headed by a Minister appointed by the President, MICAT's mandate includes the promotion and preservation of Liberian culture. Chapter 31, Subsection 31.1(g) of the Executive Law authorizes the Ministry to organize, supervise, and encourage the production and popularization of indigenous arts and crafts; establish and maintain a National Cultural Center and ethnographic museum; and develop programs for preserving folklore, customs, and indigenous cultural heritage. MICAT promotes Liberian culture domestically and

⁴⁵Konvitz MR. *Liberian Code of Laws Revised*. Cornell University Press; 1973.
https://www.rightofassembly.info/assets/downloads/1978_Penal_Law_of_Liberia.pdf

internationally, it simultaneously situates cultural practices within the framework of state policy. Consequently, cultural traditions became subject to governmental oversight and regulation. Although many traditional practices persist, activities deemed inconsistent with contemporary human rights standards are legally restricted.

Results and Findings

The findings indicate that Christianity played a central role in extending Western education across Liberia, primarily through missionary-controlled schools. This educational system significantly influenced indigenous cultural practices. As Allen observes, nineteenth-century notions of “civilization” equated literacy, Christianity, commerce, and Western material culture with social advancement.⁴⁶ Consequently, adherence to indigenous traditions was often interpreted as evidence of primitiveness or backwardness. The literature further reveals that Americo-Liberians sought to dominate social, political, and economic narratives, thereby imposing their value systems on indigenous populations. Nevertheless, some indigenous practices were retained to foster peace and unity between the central government and hinterland communities. For instance, the Executive Law of 1973 acknowledged certain traditional norms and formally recognized the National Traditional Council of Liberia, composed of chiefs, elders, and traditional leaders. Evidence also shows that Christianity played a substantial role in governance from 1822 until the military coup of April 12, 1980, which ended more than 132 years of Americo-Liberian dominance. The coup led to the suspension of the 1847 Constitution and the establishment of military rule by decree. The adoption of the 1986 Constitution subsequently declared Liberia a secular state, significantly reducing the institutional power of the Church in governance.

Recommendations:

The researcher makes the following recommendations below:

1. Considering that both Americo-Liberians and indigenous lack proper understanding of their respective history, the researcher recommends that the Government of Liberia through the Ministry of Education ensure the teaching of Liberian history as a prerequisite course in every institution of higher learning like universities and colleges due to its essential role in identifying one identity; similar to the way it is taught at high school level;
2. Because culture and traditions play significant role in maintaining societal values, the Government of Liberia should consider revamping all cultural centres across Liberia. It will enable the young generation to learn and practice positive Liberian culture as enshrine in the 1986 Liberian Constitution.
3. That the National Committee comprising Liberian historians is found to review and write the history of Liberia from Liberian perspective since most the country's history is written by foreigners

⁴⁶Allen, W.E., 2009. Making History in the Bedroom: Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians Sexual Unions, 1880s-c. 1950s. *Liberian Studies Journal*, 34(2), p.16.

4. Based on the fact that language, tribe, dialect, etc constitute the basic form identity, there is a need for Liberians to speak their various dialect publicly when appropriate so to maintain their tribal connection;
5. That the Ministry of Internal Affairs review its many restrictions and regulations on some traditional and cultural practices so to restore the power of indigenous people to punish perpetrators in some cases;
6. That further research is done research in order to how some natives collaborated with the Government of Liberia (GOL) to suppress their own culture and traditions over the years and reveal other uncover facts on this topic, etc.

Conclusion

The interaction between Western education and indigenous cultural systems in Liberia represents one of the most significant transformations in the country's social and historical development. Introduced largely through Christian missionary activities during the nineteenth century, Western education reshaped Liberia's political, cultural, and intellectual landscape simultaneously contributing to the decline of indigenous educational institutions, traditional authority structures, and cultural practices. This study demonstrates that although Western education promoted literacy, modernization, and global integration, it also marginalized indigenous systems such as the Poro and Sande societies, which had historically functioned as important centers of governance, moral instruction, socialization, and cultural preservation. The findings further reveal that tensions between Americo-Liberians and indigenous communities were intensified by cultural exclusion, discrimination, and the devaluation of local traditions. In this context, the study argues that preserving Liberia's cultural identity requires an integrative educational framework that recognizes the importance of both indigenous knowledge systems and modern education. Consistent with Article 5 of the 1986 Constitution, deliberate efforts must be made to incorporate indigenous languages, traditions, values, and cultural knowledge into formal educational curricula so that future generations remain connected to Liberia's rich cultural heritage also participating effectively in an increasingly globalized world.

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