## CHAPTER 33

# AFRICAN DIASPORA, SIERRA LEONE AND PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY, *CIRCA* 1780–1860

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## The African diaspora and Freetown, Sierra Leone

The British colony of Sierra Leone emerged as an important site in the global diaspora of Africans uprooted and displaced as a result of the Atlantic slave trade in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This small area of territory on the Sierra Leone peninsula became the focus for inward streams of coerced, semi-voluntary and voluntary migrations of people of African origin and descent from across West Africa and the Atlantic world (Lovejoy and Schwarz, 2015, pp. 4–9, p. 24). Abolitionist intervention on the peninsula from 1787 onwards set in motion overlapping phases of migration of peoples with differing experiences of slavery and freedom in North America, the Caribbean region, Europe and West Africa. The formation of the 'Province of Freedom' in 1787, through the combined initiative of the 'Black Poor' in Britain and the abolitionist Granville Sharp, was intended to establish a society free from slavery in which people of African descent would handle their own affairs. The Sierra Leone Company, a chartered trading company that assumed responsibility for the settlement in 1791 following the collapse of the 'Province of Freedom', rejected the idea of a self-governing black community and placed emphasis instead on attacking the slave trade through policies combining 'commerce, civilization and Christianity' (Braidwood, 1994, pp. 225–277; Fyfe, 1962, pp. 25–37; Peterson, 1969, pp. 17–32;

Fyle, 2011, pp. 45–46; Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz, 2017). Following the transfer of the settlement to British Crown control in 1808, the multi-ethnic composition of the settlement was increased markedly through the forced relocation to Sierra Leone of tens of thousands of Africans released from slave ships on the West African coast by British Royal Navy patrols (Schwarz, 2012; Da Silva et al., 2014; Schwarz, 2020). During this period, Sierra Leone developed as an early and important site of experimentation in Protestant missions and was associated with some of the earliest European interventions of the Evangelical revival. Although earlier historical writing has placed emphasis on European missionaries, an outstanding characteristic of the activity in Sierra Leone was the extensive and independent roles of people of African origin and descent. As Hair points out, the 'missions from Freetown […] were largely manned by Africans; the initiative in most cases came largely from African sources; and the direction of many of them was largely in African hands' (1964, pp. 13–14).

The influx of migrants to Sierra Leone between the late 1780s and early 1860s introduced new African and Afrodescendent peoples, languages, cultures and religious beliefs into an area that had hitherto demonstrated considerable continuity as regards the make-up of the population. As Fyfe points out,

> *1787 brought dramatic discontinuity. A totally different population was introduced. During the succeeding twenty years three successive settler communities of African descent arrived – the 1787 settlers (the so-called "Black Poor") from England, in 1792 the settlers from Nova Scotia, and in 1800 the Jamaica Maroons* (Fyfe, 1987, pp. 411–414; Fyfe, 1962, pp. 13–104).

The scale of migration increased at a rapid rate following British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, and the coerced inward movement of Africans released from slave ships led to far-reaching changes in the composition of the colonial population. Between 1808 and 1861, an estimated 100,000 men, women and children were released at Freetown from across different regions of West Africa stretching from Senegambia to western Central Africa (Liberated Africans digital humanities project). The individuals disembarked at Freetown also included some from East Africa (Fyfe, 1987, p. 412). By the early 1850s, the missionary linguist Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle had collected testimonies from 179 formerly enslaved people in Sierra Leone. As Hair points out, the origins of these individuals present 'a miniature of the slave trade within Western tropical Africa in the early nineteenth century' (1965, p. 201; Da Silva et al., 2014, pp. 365–366). In the colony village of Waterloo in the 1840s, this diversity is reflected in how the main national groups were formed into an organization called the 'Seventeen Nations' to resolve disputes. From the 1830s, the complexity of migration was increased still further by an outward diaspora of Africans from Sierra Leone returning to their homelands, and these Saros,[1] or returnees, contributed directly to the transmission of Christianity from the colony (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 227–228, pp. 233–234; Ayandele, 1966, pp. 7–16).

Christian influences shaped the identity of the colony's principal settlement at Freetown in a variety of ways. The London-based directors of the Sierra Leone Company considered that Protestant Christianity was vital to efforts to undermine the Atlantic slave trade and to reform African society, culture and economy. As Freetown was established in a wider region of slave supply in West Africa, the company directors argued that policies based on commerce, civilization and Christianity could be used to stem the outward flow of Africans to the Americas. In the period between the mid-sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slave trading based around the Sierra Leone River supplied an estimated 148,000 Africans for export; most of these individuals were transported between 1750 and 1807 (Lovejoy and Schwarz, 2015, p. 5, p. 13, p. 24). The company's plans to undermine the Atlantic slave trade by promoting alternative forms of trade in the natural resources of Africa were overly ambitious and based on a very limited understanding of African societies and economies. Lacking any significant military resources, the company attempted unsuccessfully to use methods of persuasion and example to encourage African merchants to turn away from the export of enslaved Africans. Moreover, the leading abolitionist Thomas Clarkson argued that reforming trading systems also provided a mechanism through which Christianity could be spread across West Africa. In a report to company directors in 1791, he expressed confidence that through trade 'a road would be opened to the Christian missionary to lay before unenlightened nations the gospel of reconciliation and peace' (Schwarz, 2007, pp. 265–266; Law, Schwarz and Strickrodt, 2013, pp. 1–6).

## Religious diversity in Freetown

A major source of influence on the development of Christianity in Freetown in this early phase was the resettlement of migrants of African origin and descent from British territory in Nova Scotia. By the time the British flag was raised at Freetown on 1 January 1808, the multi-ethnic population of the colony included a significant proportion of migrants who regarded themselves

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[1] An abbreviation of Sierra Leone.

as Christian. Evangelical forms of Protestantism were particularly strong among the more than 1,100 Black Loyalists who had migrated to Sierra Leone from Nova Scotia in 1792. These descendants of Africans transported to North America had secured their freedom by fighting for the British in the United States War of Independence but, after a period of resettlement in Nova Scotia, their representative Thomas Peters petitioned the directors of the Sierra Leone Company for permission to resettle in Sierra Leone. The 'Nova Scotians' came to West Africa organized in Baptist, Wesleyan Methodist and Huntingdonian Methodist congregations, which had been shaped in the context of the Great Awakening in North America. Their chapels provided a focus for political resistance to company decisions on religious and secular matters, which prevented them from making 'our Children free and happy after us' (Fyfe, 1991, pp. 1–19, pp. 36–40; Walls, 1996, pp. 86–87).

Freetown's identity as a Christian city in West Africa was deliberately constructed by the directors of the Sierra Leone Company during their seventeen-year period of administration (1791–1807), and the governance of the settlement was largely in the control of English and Scottish Protestants of an evangelical turn of mind. Freetown schools were based on Christian systems of education, and the scriptures were used to teach reading and writing to the children of settlers as well as to African children from neighbouring areas (Schwarz, 2007; Keefer, 2019). However, the settlement was not uniformly Christian despite the emphasis placed on commerce, civilization and Christianity by company administrators. While the spread of Protestant Christianity was an important factor in the cultural evolution of the colony, this has had the effect of obscuring considerable religious diversity within the make-up of Freetown's population. A significant Muslim presence in Freetown and its immediate hinterland can be traced in the earliest phases of the settlement's development. In 1794, the village of Dalamodiya was constructed adjacent to Freetown and was led by Alimaamy Dalu Mohammedu Dumbuya, a Muslim trader who provided a direct link between Freetown and inland Muslim supply routes (Mouser, 2013, pp. 334-341). The arrival in 1800 of 550 Jamaican Maroons, runaway enslaved people who had established independent communities in Jamaica, introduced a new migrant group retaining strong elements of African traditional practice in religion. While Maroon children attended schools run by Christian missionaries, potentially for the secular benefits offered, adults refused to acquiesce to the company's insistence that they accept Christian regulation of marriage (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 85–88).

Some of the earliest examples of missions to the Temne and Bullom communities can be traced to men and women among the Nova Scotians in the early 1790s. Boston King, a Methodist, hoped that by resettling in Africa he could preach the gospel to neighbouring Africans. Although King was unable to claim any African converts, his preaching and teaching on the Bullom shore appear to have had more of an impact than the feeble efforts of the Reverend Melville Horne, a missionary from England based in Freetown between 1792 and 1793 (Schwarz, 2003). Recognition of the role Africans could play in missions was central to attempts to educate 20 or more children of settlers and African leaders at a school in Clapham near London between 1799 and 1806. As Bruce Mouser's analysis of this school has demonstrated, the intention was that these children would return to Africa and use their newly acquired education to spread the gospel (King, 1798; Mouser, 2004).

The arrival of thousands of men, women and children released from slave ships led to a rapid expansion in the ethnic and cultural diversity of Freetown's population. A breakdown of the origins of 638 children in schools in Sierra Leone highlights the presence, by the early 1820s, of a significant number of people of Igbo and Efik origin with a smaller proportion of 'Accoo' or Yoruba. The number of Yoruba arriving as 'recaptives' or 'liberated Africans' in Sierra Leone increased rapidly from the 1820s as a result of jihad and the collapse of the state of Oyo (Jones, 1990, pp. 50–52; Lovejoy, 2016, pp. 83–85, p. 136, p. 147; Lovejoy, 2012, pp. 140–143; Fyle, 2011, pp. 48–54). The number of enslaved Muslims was significant among those who were forcibly relocated to Sierra Leone, including Ali Eisami Gazirmabe, who originated from Gazir in Borno, in what is now Northeastern Nigeria. In the narrative dictated to Koelle in Sierra Leone, Ali Eisami, who became a Christian and adopted the name of William Harding, indicated that his father was a *mallam,* or Islamic cleric. While the Christian identity of the colony has typically been given most emphasis in historical literature, the work of Gibril Cole and David Skinner emphasizes the importance of Muslim influence in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sierra Leone (Curtin, 1967, p. 7, p. 193, pp. 199–216; Cole, 2013, pp. 1–7; Skinner, 2009).

Fyfe has argued that men, women and children uprooted from their areas of origin were attracted to a Christian message which encouraged them 'to strive for heavenly and earthly prizes' (Fyfe, 1961, pp. 77–78). However, the type of Christian influences encountered by these Africans varied depending on a range of factors, including the date of their arrival and their age and gender. Individuals, classified as 'recaptives' and 'liberated Africans' in contemporary accounts, were not given their freedom on arrival but entered into lengthy periods of apprenticeship with settlers and colonial officials whilst others were enlisted involuntarily in the Royal Navy and the Royal African Corps. Many of those allocated as apprentices to Nova Scotian settlers would have developed a familiarity with Christian beliefs. However, this transition to Christianity can be overstated as not all of the Nova Scotian settlers were Christians, and many of those released were allocated to Jamaican Maroons in the early phases of suppression policy. Of the 14 men, boys and girls released from the *São Joaquim* and *São Domingos* in 1809, nine were apprenticed to Jamaican Maroons. For example, Macautaw, a four-foot-tall girl aged eight years and listed as number 74 in the register of liberated Africans held in the Sierra Leone Public Archives, was apprenticed to 'Catherine Jarrett, also a Maroon' (Schwarz, 2012, pp. 191–192; Schwarz, 2020).

## The Church Missionary Society

From 1804, European missionaries were sent to Sierra Leone by the Church Missionary Society (CMS); their efforts were focused initially on preaching outside the colony (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 94–95; Peterson, 1969, pp. 63–80; Keefer, 2019, pp. 45–70, pp. 97–129). Between 1816 and 1824, the CMS assumed formal responsibility for the secular and ecclesiastical management of colony villages where many of the Africans who had disembarked from slave ships were located. In Governor Charles MacCarthy's management plan for the "liberated Africans", the 'Colony was divided into parishes, each to be superintended by a clergyman provided by the CMS, paid by government. The CMS undertook to provide and pay teachers, government to build churches, schools and parsonages' (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 127–131). Unsurprisingly, Christian instruction underpinned every aspect of the curriculum. In needlework lessons, as Silke Strickrodt has demonstrated, African girls embroidered Christian messages into samplers. A sampler embroidered by Charlotte Turner in the village of Bathurst in 1831 included the verse:

> *Lord teach a little child to pray, / My heart with love inflame, / That ev'ry night and ev'ry day / I may adore thy name.*

As the design for the embroidery was under the direction of a CMS teacher and was intended as a form of missionary propaganda, it is unclear whether the content reflected Charlotte Turner's own views (Strickrodt, 2010, pp. 214–218).

The most well-known example of Christian conversion among the Africans released at Freetown was Samuel Ajayi Crowther. He was born in around 1806 in Oshogun, in the district of Ibarapa in Oyo. He was captured in 1821, shipped as a slave from Lagos and subsequently convoyed to Freetown following the ship's interception by an anti-slavery patrol in 1822. In his narrative written in 1837, Crowther recorded that after six months spent 'under the care of the Church Missionary Society' at Bathurst, he was 'able to read the New Testament with some degree of freedom; and was made a Monitor'. In this account, written almost 30 years before his consecration as the first African Anglican bishop, he explained how 'The Lord was pleased to open my heart, to hearken to those things which were spoken by His servants; and being convinced that I was a sinner, and desired to obtain pardon through Jesus Christ, I was baptized on the 11th of December, 1825, by the Rev. J. Raban'. He expressed the hope 'That the time may come when the Heathen shall be fully given to Christ for His inheritance [...]'. His subsequent preaching in Badagry and Abeokuta in 1845 and 1846, in addition to his formation in 1857 of the Niger Mission with 'an all-African staff' all highlight his commitment to spreading the gospel (Curtin, 1967, p. 8, pp. 289–316; Ajayi, 1969, pp. 25–27; Hair, 1966, pp. 217–219). Joseph Wright, who worked as a missionary for the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, recorded in *The Life of Joseph Wright, A Native of Ackoo* in 1839 that he was sent to York and 'placed at school' where he 'came to know that high and glorious name of Jesus Christ the Saviour'. His attendance at the Methodist chapel later led him to go out 'among my friends, telling them that the Lord is good; inviting them to come and taste for themselves [...]'. Wright, who was of Egba Alake origin and born in Oba, recorded how he 'was born a Heathen in a Heathen Land, and was trained up in my youth to the fashion and customs of that heathenish country [...]'. This reflected a standard narrative convention in which he traced his spiritual path from being a 'heathen' to his acceptance of a new life of Christianity (Curtin, 1967, p. 8, pp. 193–194, pp. 317–333).

Further evidence of the acceptance of Christianity by some Africans is reflected in memorials in the churches and graveyards of Freetown. The adoption of Christian commemorative practices by some high-status individuals is evidenced by the gravestones in the Circular Road cemetery. One memorial record that was set up

> *"In Memory of John Taylor (Native of Ilawo Abeokuta, in the Egba Territory) Trader of this Settlement" who "Departed this life on Monday the 2nd of October 1876, at the Good Old Age of About 107 Years, Blessed are the Dead which Die in the Lord. Rev[elations]. 14.13".*

Other inscriptions reflect memories of individuals' homelands. In St. George's Cathedral, an inscription to William Henry Pratt, who died on 21 February 1865 aged 62, records that he was 'A Native of the River Niger, Merchant and Marshall of the Vice Admiralty Court of this Colony' and 'President of the Eboe Association to Aid the Niger Mission'. The memorial also included an extract from Psalm 37 (verse 37) – 'Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace'. A memorial erected in the cathedral to commemorate Isaac Benjamin Pratt following his death in July 1880 describes how he was a 'native of the Ifeh section of the Aku tribe'. The inscription records how he had 'Arrived in the Colony in 1825, and in After Years Filled the Important Post of King or Headman among his Countrymen in the City'. The final line on Pratt's memorial inscription was taken from Proverbs, chapter 10, verse 7, of the Old Testament, and stated that the 'The memory of the just is blessed'.[2]

## Return migration and missions

The outward spread of Christianity from Sierra Leone to Yorubaland was linked to the return migration of Africans to their places of origin from the late 1830s. Prosperous Yoruba traders started to 'return' to Badagry and Abeokuta after 1838 to pursue economic opportunities along the coast, and these Saros made the first appeals to the CMS to establish missionary stations in their new locations. One of the early returnees to Badagry was James Ferguson, who had converted to Wesleyan Methodism in Freetown. Not all returnees were Christian; a group of 50 Muslim Aku under the leadership of Mohamadu Savage was among those who left the colony (Fyfe, 1962, pp. 227–228; Ajayi, 1969, pp. 25–34; Hair, 1964, pp. 14–17). Walls has emphasized how the spread of Christianity in nineteenth-century West Africa was often through informal contact with 'an itinerant or immigrant Sierra Leonean'. The form of Christianity that returnees exhibited was syncretic in nature and did not conform to the type of Protestantism that European CMS officials promoted in Sierra Leone. Ayandele has argued that returnees tended to 'conform to indigenous pattern in all essentials' (Walls, 1996, p. 105; Ayandele, 1966, p. 7, p. 15).

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[2] Remember Me: The Changing Face of Memorialisation digital project. Available online https://remembermeproject.wordpress.com/2016/01/07/surveying-memorialisation-in-freetown/. (Accessed 29 July 2022.)

Central to CMS efforts in Sierra Leone and further afield was the role of 'native clergy' educated at Fourah Bay College in Freetown. As Hair points out, the importance of clerical education in Freetown is reflected in how just under half of the 112 'native clergy' who served the CMS in West Africa between 1843 and 1899 were trained at Fourah Bay College (Hair, 1962, pp. 71–72; Hair, 1964, p. 15). The endeavours of missionaries educated at Fourah Bay College also had wider cultural and economic effects through the secular attractions of their educational work, which influenced the emergence of a 'class of Western educated elite' in Yorubaland. African languages were used in evangelization, and the translation of the Bible into Yoruba and other West African languages promoted new standards of linguistic work. Ajayi points out how Crowther, following his ordination in London in 1843, returned to Sierra Leone and began preparing 'for a mission to Abeokuta by beginning to conduct services in the Yoruba language' (Ajayi, 1969, pp. xiv-xv, p. 30, pp. 33–34, pp. 67–77, pp. 223–224; Ayandele, 1966, p. 12; Peel, 2003, pp. 1–8, pp. 10–11; Hair, 1966, pp. 127–129).

African initiative was central to the spread of Protestant Christianity in nineteenth-century West Africa. When Thomas Clarkson referred in 1791 to how trade would be the means by which 'a road would be opened to the Christian missionary', he was no doubt thinking in terms of European missionaries and traders spreading the gospel of Protestant Christianity to Africans unfamiliar with the Bible. In contrast, the pattern that emerged in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Sierra Leone was characterized by the extensive and influential roles played by Africans in transmitting Christianity outside the boundaries of the colony. As Lynn has emphasized, the entrepreneurial behaviour of 'liberated Africans' and their descendants in developing new trading opportunities outside the colony provided an important means through which Christian influences spread along coastal commercial routes in the mid-nineteenth century (Lynn, 1992, pp. 423–427; Ajayi, 1969, pp. 26–29).

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