

The Perpetual Paradox: A Look into Liberian Colonization

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Liberia is often perceived as the oldest independent black republic on the continent. This paper will challenge this common perception by taking a deeper look into Liberia's unique colonial history. By analyzing the experiences of both the 'coloured' settlers and the pre-existing indigenous population, it is evident that the 'coloured' colonization of Liberia was not a nationalistic return to their home soil, but rather an opportunity for 'coloured' settlers to establish a system imitating the one by which they were previously oppressed. Although Liberia's settlers had similar skin tones to the indigenous population, Liberia has followed a path remarkably similar to the process of European colonization experienced by the rest of the continent.

Liberia is often regarded as the oldest independent black republic in Africa, and as a “black nation founded and perpetuated for black people.”² In spite of this common perception, Liberia's foundations began distinctly in America through the construction of the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Colour of the United States or the American

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² Charles Morrow Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), vii

Colonization Society (ACS) in Washington in 1816.³ The Colonization Society provided the means and encouraged the approximately 185,000 liberated black slaves living in the United States to participate in the romantic homecoming to their place of origin on African soil and to partake in the opportunity of black colonization.⁴ While allegedly attempting to connect with their African cultural roots, the Afro-American colonizers of Liberia “establish[ed] a social, political system based on the Western model of society.”⁵ This paper will address both the supporting and opposing perceptions of the resettlement of the free black population. Furthermore, the consequences of black colonization as experienced by the ‘coloured’ settlers, the pre-existing indigenous population, followed by the creation of the puzzling identity of the Americo-Liberian settlers, will disentangle the obscure phenomenon of Liberia. Therefore, despite being idealized as the land of the free, the black settlers introduced to Liberia an experience of colonialism which mirrored conventional features of European colonization, with only the distinction of the somewhat darker complexion of the colonizers’ skin tone.

Throughout the United States there were many within both white communities and the communities of peoples of colour who voiced support and opposition to the resettlement of the free black population. Though it is significant to mention the members of American society who supported the American Colonization Society (ACS) due to their genuine desire for philanthropy, the supporters of the ACS and their goal of

³ Tom Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth Century Liberia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ Yekutiel Gershoni, *Black Colonialism: The Americo-Liberian Scramble for the Hinterland* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1943), 20.

resettlement are identified within two dominant views: the white Americans who embraced racial prejudices, and the freed people of colour who believed that resettlement provided opportunities that would never be presented to them in America.

The white supporters of resettlement often began their claim with stating that the number of free blacks in the United States had increased from 59,466 in 1790 to 186,466 in 1810.⁶ Americans saw the rapidly increasing numbers as a threat to the “survival of the American nation . . .and [the] maintenance of a white identity.”⁷ There was a growing fear that “America would lose its racial and cultural identity if the Negroes were allowed to mix with the whites.”⁸ The inter-racial contact would “become uncontrollable as former Negro slaves were set free,”⁹ and therefore, would rapidly “produce a race of mulattoes not worthy of America.”¹⁰ For the supporters of the ACS, resettlement would not only remedy the issue of identity, but would also ensure American security. Supporters described how the increasing free black population would subsequently display an “increase in crime, murder, and robberies.”¹¹ The ‘unowned black people’ created not only the potential for mass criminals, but also for revolutionists.¹² Throughout the creation of the ACS, the “question of emancipation or abolition of slavery was purposely avoided,”¹³ considering “more than half of the organization’s vice presidents (12 in all) came from southern

⁶ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 13.

⁷ G. Boley, 1983. *Liberia: The Rise and Fall of the First Republic* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 7.

¹⁰ Boley, *Liberia: The Rise and Fall of the First Republic*, 8.

¹¹ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 6.

¹² Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 6.

¹³ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 6.

slave states.”¹⁴ Bushrod Washington, Associate Justice for the American Supreme Court and a co-founder of The ACS, neatly summarized the supporting view, stating that “the so-called free slaves were in no legal sense citizens of the United States and should therefore seize the opportunity to ‘earn citizenship’ in Africa.”¹⁵ A fellow founder of the ACS, Robert Finley, continued this sentiment. He clarified that “everything connected with their condition, including their colour, wa[s] against them” and that there was not “much prospect that their state can ever be greatly meliorated while they shall continue among us.”¹⁶ As a whole, these arguments presented colonization through the ACS as one of the only “possible solution[s] to the problem of the rapidly increasing Negro population in America.”¹⁷

Alongside the white supporters of resettlement, there were also people of mixed race, who believed the ACS could offer opportunities for a better life. Black supporters of the ACS frequently believed that “slavery would never end until the capacity of the African race to manage its own affairs had been demonstrated to the world,”¹⁸ and the ACS presented their race with precisely that opportunity. Prominent leaders of large black communities, such as Rev. Daniel Coker, “viewed Negro colonization in Africa as a viable solution to the problems they faced in the United States.”¹⁹ In the year leading up to the creation of the ACS, black communities increasingly felt the “heavy burdens of poverty and discrimination as well as the terrors of kidnapping”²⁰ by Southern slavers. Through the

¹⁴ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 6-7.

¹⁵ Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 12.

¹⁶ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 6.

¹⁷ Boley, *Liberia: The Rise and Fall of the First Republic*, 7.

¹⁸ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 7.

¹⁹ William L. Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), iii.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, iv.

distribution of his ideologies, Reverend Coker recruited eighty-two willing emigrants to join him on the ACS's first voyage on the *Elizabeth* in 1820. Although he remained in Sierra Leone, never making the final voyage to Cape Mesurado, his support of black resettlement contributed to the success of the American Colonization Society.²¹

Alternatively, there were also many who vigorously opposed The American Colonization Society and their goal of black resettlement. These people generally believed that the "proposed colonization was a self-evident hoax designed to deny free black Americans just participation in public education and church life."²² James Forten, a free man of colour, wealthy businessmen, and prominent figure of the anti-colonial movement, also believed that leaving America would "keep whites from facing their responsibilities to all citizens regardless of race or colour."²³ Most prominent figures of the opposition toward the ACS were abolitionists who promoted the "immediate emancipation" of slaves in the United States.²⁴ Famously, William Lloyd Garrison, a founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and the editor of his newspaper, *The Liberator*, which was initially funded by James Forten, outpoured his opinions into the anti-colonial discourse. Within *The Liberator*, he published his belief that "the structure of the Colonization Society rests upon the pillars of... persecution, cowardice, infidelity, and falsehood" as the ACS "talks of sending [free people of colour] to their native land; when they are no more related to Africa than

²¹ Nathaniel Richardson, *Liberia's Past and Present* (London: Diplomatic Press and Publishing Co., 1959), 23.

²² Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 11.

²³ William Lloyd Garrison, introduction to *Thoughts of African Colonization*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1832), xi.

²⁴ Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization*, 3.

[Americans] are to Great Britain.”²⁵ The voice of the opposition continued to rage powerfully and uncompromisingly through Garrison’s publication of *Thoughts on African Colonization* which outlines “[his] warfar[e] against The American Colonization Society.”²⁶ He exposed the founders of the ACS stating “[colonization] is agreeable to slaveholders, because it is striving to remove a class of persons who they fear may stir up their slaves to rebellion.”²⁷ He continued to accuse the ACS of operating on the pretense of false philanthropy, perverted generosity, and selfish policy therefore, responsible for creating “two ignorant and depraved nations to be regenerated instead of one!”²⁸ David Walker, another opinionated African-American abolitionist petitioned that “American is more [their] country than it is the whites — [blacks] have enriched it with [their] blood and tears...”²⁹ Unfortunately, as the American slave population continued to multiply, free “people of color had yet been lawfully accorded citizens’ rights” and the “despair of unowned Negroes... proliferated”³⁰ Though black resettlement in Liberia was not desirable, the condition of free people of colour in America remained bleak.

Examining the patterns of black resettlement in Liberia illustrates parallels to European colonization during the ‘Scramble for Africa,’ nearly a century later. The experience of both American settlers and the indigenous population contributes to understanding the perplexing identity of Liberia’s settler society. The first journey to embark upon reconciliation with the

²⁵ Ibid., 11.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁸ Ibid., 14,19,33.

²⁹ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 7.

³⁰ Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 11.

African fatherland departed from New York City in 1820.³¹ The *Elizabeth*, frequently referred to as the ‘Black Mayflower’,³² carried eighty-eight emigrants, a majority being from the northern United States with forty from New York and thirty-three from Pennsylvania.³³ Records, notably ones with origins of Liberian publication, noted that all emigrants aboard the *Elizabeth*, “(with one exception) [were] free born,” making “clear that all the peoples of colour that landed or settled in Liberia were not slaves.”³⁴ In April of 1822, the first group of black settlers arrived on Liberian soil sparking the emigration of 18,858 free people of colour, between the years of 1822 and 1867, to the coast of West Africa by the American Colonization Society.³⁵

The implications, both immediate and long-term, of black colonization were unanticipated by the newly arrived black settlers. Shortly after their arrival, many died from various diseases. Within the first year of the settlers’ arrival, twenty-two percent of all immigrants died, a statistic that parallels the experience of white settlers.³⁶ They also became aware that their vision of complete independence and the amalgamation of their American and African identities was becoming more and more distant. Considering that the foundation of “Liberia was sponsored by...American statesmen and citizens,”³⁷ the settlers were still connected and subordinated through administrative associations with the American government. The Constitution of the ACS written in 1820 provided the settlements with “the

³¹ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 20.

³² Ciment, *Another America*, 4; Wilson, *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, 19.

³³ Richardon, *Liberia’s Past and Present*, 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁵ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 8.

³⁶ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 28.

³⁷ Richardon, *Liberia’s Past and Present*, 229.

establishment of an independent centralized state, with a government in which the supreme legislative, executive, and judicial powers [were] delegated to the American Colonization Society for a period of time to be determined by the Society.”³⁸ A stable, yet undeveloped, administrative framework was established in the settlement of Cape Mesurado creating the nucleus of a colony, and its capital, Monrovia, was named in honour of President James Monroe for his participation in the creation of The ACS and the establishment of the black colonies.³⁹

A decade after the establishment of the first colony of Cape Mesurado, the black colonial resettlement which, from the settlers’ perspective, was expected to provide reparation for their race had instead digressed, as American state companies purchased and established settlements for their own use. For example, the “Sinoe settlement was founded in 1838 by the Mississippi State Colonization Society in order to relocate slaves from Mississippi” and more notably, Monrovia (Cape Mesurado) and the crucial settlement of the “Cape Palmas settlement, [was] organized by the Maryland State Colonization Society in 1831.”⁴⁰ The disconnect between the colonies and the uncertain monopoly of the ACS created unrest as settlers protested that “supervision by Euro- Americans was never part of the Afro-American concept of emigration and colonization.”⁴¹ Though the American Colonization Society still believed leadership was necessary, in 1839, under the leadership of ‘coloured’ settler Thomas Buchanan, the society “agreed to give the settlers a role in formulating local policy”, therefore creating the

³⁸ Ibid., 24.

³⁹ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 11.

⁴⁰ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 33-34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 37-38.

Commonwealth of Liberia.⁴² Providing minor local authority kept the black settlers reliant on American authority until official freedom could be proclaimed a few years later. Once the Commonwealth was established, it was clear that black settlers “could not discard their American cultural baggage” resulting in an administrative institutionalization of American culture and the Western system of government, consequently creating an ‘Americo-Liberian’ identity.⁴³

The settlers’ affiliation with American ideologies, policies, and identity created significant colonial implications for the pre-existing indigenous population residing within the borders of Liberia. Though these black settlers were escaping the inequality of racial classifications, Americo-Liberians created an extremely class-divided society. When black settlers reached the African coast in the nineteenth century, there were “sixteen different African ethnic group[s] living in Liberia.”⁴⁴ Violent confrontation between Afro- American settlers and Africans occurred only months after settlement. Evidently, a “clear distinction between the ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ camps w[as] made, one similar to that developed by colonial governments.”⁴⁵ Historians suggest that the established Americo-Liberian minority rule is comparable to the “racist minority regime in South Africa,”⁴⁶ however, in Liberia, “its leaders shared the same race and skin color as those they wished to dominate.”⁴⁷ The “similarities between the conflicts involving indigenous Africans and Americo-Liberians and those prevalent between other

⁴² Ibid., 39.

⁴³ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 28.

⁴⁶ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 135.

⁴⁷ Gershoni, *Black Colonialism*, 99.

indigenous Africans and white colonial officials”⁴⁸ are indisputable. Edward Wilmot Blyden, a Negro Nationalist born in the Caribbean who later moved to America to study, described his resentment towards how “Afro-American settlers maintained a distinction between themselves and indigenous Africans,”⁴⁹ and his overall hate for the levels and categories of non-white skin tones.⁵⁰ The American colonists, mainly of mixed race, saw themselves as superior because their skin tone was closer to white than other people of African descent.

The racism established and imposed by the Americo-Liberian minority, who only decades before, were subjected to similar racial inequality in America, is eloquently, but vigorously, described in a letter to the American Colonization Society in 1910 by King Gyude of the Cape Palmas Grebo tribe. In it, he states:

In the year 1834 a batch of black colonists...reached our shores in search of a home. Pitying their condition and... anticipat[ing] that by their settlement among us the benefits of Christian enlightenment and civilization would be disseminated... our fathers opened their arms [to them]. A treaty was signed...willing to accede to them the government of the country under the style of the State of Maryland in Liberia [however] our fathers reserved to themselves and their posterity the use of their farms and villages. When in 1856 the State of Maryland... was incorporated into the Republic of Liberia, our fathers were taken into the union without change in the status quo.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁹ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 9-10.

⁵⁰ James Ciment, *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves who Ruled It* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 99-101.

... Our fathers have always befriended the Liberian Republic as a struggling nation of our race [but the government] soon began to despise us, placing us in their room and they in their masters', just in the same fashion as in their slavery days in America... They, without notice and without reason, attacked us and burned our houses to ashes, thus expelling us from [Cape Palmas]... Several battles have been fought from time to time between ourselves and the Liberians for reasons which could have been otherwise accommodated, but for the Liberians desire to parade their power over us.⁵¹ ... The Liberians are at this moment engaging in war with the Grebo tribe at Cape Palmas... The Liberian colony... has operated as a source of oppression and demoralization to our people... Contrary to all the compacts entered into with our fathers, [Liberians] would not open schools amount us till after the year 1893... [additionally] in the National Legislature we have been kept by strategy from reaching the rank of senators, although some of our people possess the necessary advantages.

... In view of all these circumstances, we do not see how the Liberian domination can make for civilization, Christianity, or good government... If nothing is done in this direction and Liberian rule is permitted to go on, our country (Grebo) will be involved in conditions such as those which exist

⁵¹ Richardon, *Liberia's Past and Present*, 31.

in the Congo, and which are a disgrace to civilization and Christianity.⁵²

The Liberian Declaration of Independence in 1847 states: “We, the people of the Republic of Liberia ... were shut out from all civil office. We were excluded from all participation in the Government. We were taxed without our consent. We were compelled to contribute to the resources of the country which gave us no protection. We were made a separate and distinct class, and against us every avenue to improvement was effectually closed.”⁵³ The Americo-Liberian settlers, consisting of freed slaves and first generation descendants of slaves, who, while previously residing in the United States of America, suffered the hardships of inequality and racial injustices, developed a classification structure in the ‘land of the free’ equivalent to the structure they were able to escape as a result of their cooperation in the colonization of Liberia. While the Liberian Declaration describes the settlers’ own strife in their place of origin, it also described verbatim the colonial experiences of the indigenous people of Liberia. Thus, the irony of Americo-Liberian sentiment thrives.

The perplexing identity of the Americo-Liberian settlers is the final component in comprehending the foundation of Liberia. Though there is incontestable resentment, rage, and hatred toward the American ideologies and treatment toward free and enslaved people of colour, the settlers of Liberia continue to pride themselves on their American attributes. A year before Liberian independence, the first president of Liberia, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, stated in a speech that “the people of these colonies... left their native land to seek on these shores a

⁵² Ibid., 32.

⁵³ Ibid., 64.

residence for civil and political freedom... and established a government, with executive, legislative, and judicial powers, in the distant and inhospitable wilds of Africa.”⁵⁴ A colleague of Edward Blyden and graduate of Liberia College, Reverend David Agnew Wilson, firmly believed that “the territory of Liberia belongs to the citizens of Liberia, as ‘an inheritance from their forefathers.’”⁵⁵ The absurdity continues in the second paragraph of the Liberian Declaration of Independence which proclaims that “the people of the Republic...expatriate[d] themselves from the land of their nativity to form a settlement on this barbarous coast”.⁵⁶ George Boley, a Liberian government official continues to describe the irony as he emphasizes that “Africa, not America which denied the colonists every imaginable claim to human dignity, was regarded as barbarous.”⁵⁷ This distorted and abnormal perspective of identity “[was] passed down through the family structure and w[as] reinforced with each new arrival from overseas.”⁵⁸ Slavery has not only “stripped Africans of their cultural heritage,”⁵⁹ but also indoctrinated Liberia’s African-American colonial settlers to idolize America’s corrupt past of racial and social injustices.

In conclusion, the significance of this paper can be culminated into three key points. Firstly, the free African-Americans would have been satisfied colonizing any territory, whether it was on the African continent or not. Throughout the early stages of the resettlement debate, Martin Robinson Delany, a supporter of Negro Nationalism, “stressed the advantages of

⁵⁴ Richardson, *Liberia’s Past and Present*, 60.

⁵⁵ Ciment, *Another America*, 97.

⁵⁶ Boley, *Liberia: The Rise and Fall of the First Republic*, 28-29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁸ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 32.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

Central and South America for emigration.⁶⁰ Destinations such as Haiti, Canada, and other African states, such as Nigeria, “all had strong promoters.”⁶¹ The implications of Liberia’s colonization displayed the black colonists’ imaginary and absent historical connection with the soil of Africa. Secondly, Liberia’s foundation has engrained a strong American influence on the practices and people of the country. It is evident that the “emergence of Liberia as Black Africa’s first independent republic was the result of social and political events in American history.”⁶² In 1825, the relationship between the United States and independent Liberia was romanticized as President James Monroe described “Liberia as a little black America destined to shine gemlike in the darkness of vast Africa.”⁶³ Post-1825, Liberia’s history displays America’s willingness to ensure Liberia continued to shine, coinciding with American interest, of course. Finally, whether the territory of Liberia was colonized by white European colonizers during the ‘Scramble for Africa’ or by black colonists, the outcome of the country would display little dissimilarity. Some academics advocate for “Liberia’s uniqueness in escaping formal European colonialism.”⁶⁴ Although black colonizers were far from European, they followed an uncanny resemblance to how colonization unfolded on the rest of the continent. Despite belonging to the same race, Americo-Liberian settlers did not allow similar skin tones to prevent them from achieving even the racial aspects of true European colonization. Despite Liberia’s heartfelt motto, “the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

⁶² Boley, *Liberia: The Rise and Fall of the First Republic*, 25.

⁶³ Charles Morrow Wilson, introduction to *Liberia: Black Africa in Microcosm*, ed. J. William Fulbright (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), xvii.

⁶⁴ Shick, *Behold the Promised Land*, 135.

love of liberty brought us here,”⁶⁵ Americo-Liberian colonizers did not love the universal concept of liberty, but rather, it was the love of their own liberty brought them to the shores of Liberia. Hence, the Republic of Liberia, in its entirety, remains a paradox.

⁶⁵ Ciment, *Another America*, 98.

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