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CHAPTER 2

The General Background of Liberia

Historical

Liberia is a country of settlers. Prior to the 6th century of the Common Era (C.E.), there is little evidence to suggest there were inhabitants in the Grain Coast, as Liberia was previously called. The name, “Grain Coast” is rooted in the Portuguese word, “Malagueta,” which is “a spice related to pepper” (Lipski, 2005, p. 39). This spice was just one of numerous others found in this part of West Africa that became Liberia, revealing the luxuriant nature of the vegetation. Liberia’s climate, which includes a rainy season and a dry season, produces a verdant plant life that keeps the area naturally flourishing. When the liberated Africans from the United States arrived in Liberia in 1822, they encountered the challenging conditions of West Africa’s tropical region and interacted with the vibrant culture of the indigenous population that had already settled there.

Mongrue (2011) described the indigenous tribes of Liberia as original residents of the “great kingdoms” of sub-Saharan Africa that included, but were not limited to, “Songhai, Mali… and Ghana” in West and Central Africa (p. 21). The decline of these kingdoms prompted mass migration of the ethnic groups that now dwell in the region. These groups have been categorized linguistically as “Mende, Mel, and Kru,” with smaller tribal and language subgroups that migrated en masse when their kingdoms declined (p. 21). The Kru-speaking group arrived in the “Grain Coast” around 850 C.E. due to invasions of their homeland by “Islamic mercenaries,”
according to Mongrue (p. 22). He dated 965 C.E, as the period when the Grebos arrived in the area.

In a timeline of Liberian history, Doak (2011) confirmed Mongrue’s historical narrative by identifying the 1100s C.E. as the period when “the first people, the ancestors of the Bassa, Dey, and other tribes, settled in what is now Liberia” (p. 40). To give further credence to Mongrue’s account that Liberia’s indigenous groups were themselves settlers to the area, Lea and Rowe (2001) suggested the 12th to 17th centuries C.E. as the period when the ethnic groups “known to have occupied what is now Liberia arrived from the Western Sahel” (p. 228). Given this historical reality, the motto on Liberia’s official seal, “The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here,” is equally applicable and relevant to Liberia’s three main groups of settlers who are the indigenous tribes, the Americo-Liberians, and the Congos; the Congos were rescued from slave ships and taken to Liberia, where they settled permanently.

**Geographical**

Geographically, Liberia is a coastal country. However, as one moves into the interior, there is a continuous rise in the land as it becomes plateaus, hills, and then mountainous highlands. Liberia’s coast extends from Grand Cape Mount in the northwest to Cape Palmas in the southeast. The miles of coastal areas boast beautiful beaches that welcome gentle tides rolling in and out. The hills and mountains have contained supplies of natural resources that were sources of Liberia’s economy. Levy and Spilling (2010) noted how these topographical features are part of a dense “tropical rain forest” that “remains the largest in West Africa,” constituting “40 percent of West African rain forest” (pp. 7–9).

The diversity of Liberia’s topography is largely responsible for the disparity of temperatures, where warmth and humidity dominate the coastal areas but the hinterland tends to
be cooler at night and during the morning hours. Located near the equator, Liberia has two seasons, as mentioned earlier. The rainy season produces from 70 to over 200 inches of rain lasting from around May to October, while the dry season is from November to April. During the rainy season when downpours are almost endless and range from sprinkles to torrential, land travel into the interior is difficult because of the long stretches of unpaved roads. When rains wash away the surface of these roads, potholes make traveling to some areas of the country almost impossible. Since the election of President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2005 following the end of the civil war, the Liberian government has made road improvement a priority. Despite the difficult road conditions in some parts of Liberia, those living on the coast enjoy warm breezes that blow through ubiquitous trees; the shade from these trees offers respite from the heat. Residents of the interior also enjoy such advantages but have additional benefits in the form of a variety of vegetables and fruits that the land produces and are sources of nourishment. Perhaps the most arduous weather condition is around December and January when “Liberia experiences the Harmattan winds,” which, according to Rozario (2003), “originate in the Sahara Desert in North Africa” and make their way to Liberia with “a haze of fine dust particles that cover everything in their path” (pp. 6–8).

**Cultural**

There are 16 major ethnic groups that formed three linguistic groups. Rubin (1997) listed them as “Kwa (Krahn, Kru, Grebo, Bassa, Belle), Mande (Lorma, Gbanda, Kissi, Kpelle, Mahn, Dan, Mandingo, Vai, Mende) and Mel (Dey, Gola)” (p. 16). While these ethnic groups are different, they have common cultural expressions such as the political system, the traditional religion, and social customs. The political system the ethnic groups of Liberia have in common is thechieftaincy. The traditional chief in Liberia has similar roles as those chiefs in other parts of
Africa. Chiefs were not absolute monarchs but were “at the head of a ranked hierarchy of people.” Haviland et al. (2011) described the position of chief as being “usually for life and often hereditary,” passing the office “from a man to his son or his sister’s son, depending on whether descent is traced patrilineally or matrilineally” (p. 289). Dunn (1992) affirmed that the chief did not govern alone but worked with a council of elders, which administered the tribe (p. 24).

Among the Kpelle in Liberia, there were categories of chiefs such as “paramount chiefs” who presided “over one of the Kpelle chiefdoms” with the role of “hearing disputes, preserving order, seeing to the upkeep of trails, and performing various other supervisory functions.” Other ranks in the order of chiefs included district, town, and quarter chiefs as a part of the chiefdom (p. 289). When Christianity arrived in Liberia, these chiefs played significant roles in the establishment and spread of the faith. The United Methodist Church was no exception in relying on chiefs to grant permissions for missionaries to work in their areas of control. As we shall see in the case of the Harleys in Ganta (chapter 5), one chief can be responsible for the mass conversion of an entire village.

While the chieftaincy was the major political system, Dunn (1992) described the indigenous Liberian social system as a “stateless…structure” where “complex organizations of kinship group or age set and secret societies [perform] the functions of central authority” (p. 24). These groups managed the social institutions that directed the educational, social, filial, and other civic functions of the tribe with the primary responsibility of transmitting knowledge and ensuring law and order. The social, political, and religious worldview of the indigenous tribes has always been an overlying reality. This means the relationship between religion and politics was different from that of the separation of church and state found within the United States. There was a clear interconnectedness of religion and politics among the ethnic groups. The
governing social reality among the indigenous tribes of Liberia manifested in the traditional religion “was founded on the premise that political authority did not come to men but from God and the spirits.” The traditional religion “provided the social power by which people of the community made laws, customs and ensured they were respected” (Somah, 1995, p. 30).

More than a century after the second group of settlers arrived in Liberia, the traditional religion still maintains a powerful presence. Levy and Spilling (2010) quoted statistics from 2007 which “suggested that 40% of Liberians classified themselves as Christians, 20% as Muslims, and 40% as holding indigenous, animist beliefs” (p. 81). However, the authors added that there are those who would put “official figures” of “animism as the religion of 90 percent of Liberia’s population” (p. 81). This is a reflection of how powerful religion is among Liberians and the extent of traditional religious beliefs. If Christianity, especially United Methodism, is to become rooted within Liberia, particularly among the indigenous groups, it is imperative to take this statistical figure seriously. There is a discussion in the third section of this book about appropriating this understanding of reality. To appreciate how the traditional religion has been able to maintain an equal, if not greater influence in Liberia, it is necessary to provide a survey of the basic traits of this religion.

The common components of all traditional religions in Liberia include the mysterious presence of an all pervasive power in the universe. There is a hierarchy of beings starting at the top with God, who is the Supreme Being, called by different names by each tribe. For example, the most popular name for God among the Grebos is “Nyeswa” while among the Bassas it is “Glaypoh.” God is followed by lesser spiritual beings that Mbiti (1999) described as “intermediary spirits.” Next on the descending ladder are the living-dead, ancestors who have died but live near the community as spirits and provide guidance to families and communities.
The remaining order of the hierarchy is made of “religious leaders, the ordinary person, animals, plants and inanimate objects.” This is a universe in which some people “have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate…some for the good and others for the ill of their communities” (p. 16). The traditional religion offers a worldview in which the relationship between the spiritual and the physical is not clearly distinguishable and the lines of demarcation are not as obvious as they are in the West. In summarizing traditional religion in Liberia, Levy and Spilling (2010) called attention to the reality that with the traditional religion, “spiritual power is usually experienced through everyday things or beings that are seen to be endowed with a supernatural element. Witchcraft is accepted by most people and is practiced regardless of religious conviction” (p. 81).

There is a mutual overlap where the spiritual realm intersects and influences the material world, while the material world exists and participates in the realm of the spiritual; there is also an intersecting of the relationship of the individual to the community. Persons in Liberia, as in many parts of Africa, do not define themselves apart from their communities but actually find their identities within the history, customs, and values of the community to which they belong. Mbiti (1999) famously summarized this idea of traditional African identity, which can be applied to Liberia as, “I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am” (p. 102).

In addition to the political and religious structure among traditional Liberian ethnic groups, there are numerous social customs that characterize each group. Although there are distinct differences, some shared features are the traditional schools for boys, commonly known as the Poro, which initially lasted four years but presently can be four weeks long, and a school for girls called Sande, which used to be three years long but in some places can last three weeks. These educational institutions were also mediums of socialization that instilled in the young
people the beliefs, values, and customs of their tribe. Upon completion of the training, the community participated in the rites of passage that made these young people full members of their communities.

Other social customs were connected to birth and the naming ceremony, growing up within the family, the community, marriage, adult life, and death. All these traditional customs characterized the tribal groups in Liberia. With the coming of liberated Africans from America, who had developed their own unique culture, the two groups would interact to make Liberia an exceptional place. In his book *Impact of the African Tradition on African Christianity*, Taryor (1984) brilliantly discussed the ways in which the African, including Liberian culture, has influenced Christianity in Africa.

**The ACS and the Settlement of Liberated Africans**

Early in 19th-century America, it became more evident among Christians that slavery was immoral and therefore unacceptable. Sanneh (1983) credited the Quakers as being among the first Christians to advocate the abolition of slavery in the United States (p. 95). The Christian revival in England and America, through the unflattering preaching of Christians such as John Wesley that called attention to the plight of slaves and the abomination of this practice, bolstered the movement for the abolition of slavery. John Wesley himself, the founder of Methodism, rejected the practice of slavery, calling it murderous and an obstacle to the Gospel. He could not understand how Christians in America could “cry for liberty and at the same time espouse slavery.” From his perspective, Africa was “exceeding fruitful and pleasant, producing vast quantities of rice and other grain…and fish in great abundance, with much tame and wild cattle.” As for Africans themselves, Wesley viewed them as “very good-natured, sociable, and obliging”
with corresponding skills (Runyon, 1998, pp.175–178). Then there were ordinary Methodists like Dorothy Ripley, who lived around the early 1800s. After seeing the stark abuse of Africans, she came to the conviction that slavery was wrong because Jesus died to save all people, “which are equal in his sight.” Even when she had the opportunity to speak to the president of the United States, Ripley made it clear her “concern was…for the distressed Africans,” and she was dismayed to “hear of the souls and bodies of men being exposed like brute creation” (Chilcote, 2001, pp. 140–144).

Through the clarion calls and vocal activism of Christians against the barbaric nature of slavery, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was organized in 1816 by Christians and humanitarians to relieve blacks of the chains of slavery and gave them their freedom by returning them to Africa. Although Christians were influential in the ending of slavery, they had to address the perplexing question of the status of the slaves once their bondage ended. What would be the place of freed Africans in the United States? Those who wanted to end slavery faced the dilemma of having to accept blacks as fellow human beings coexisting in the same society. Even more bewildering was the response to those Africans who had become Christians but were not fully accepted in churches that were predominantly white. Many blacks gained their freedom but “they continued to be systematically denied the full rights and privileges of citizenship” (Yarema, 2006, p. 2). The ACS was seen as that organization to “provide the answer and mechanism to end slavery” (p. viii). The organization became a philanthropic one consisting of members who were active both in government and in the church, as indicated by the records of the ACS and the volumes of African Repository and Colonial Journal. The ACS arrived at a solution to the problem and decided the best resolution was to return the Africans to their homeland.
Under the leadership of its first president, Bushrod Washington, “a nephew, and to some extent the eleve of General Washington, and the son of John Augustine Washington, General Washington’s younger brother,” the ACS dispatched two men, Samuel Mills and Ebenezer Burgess, to West Africa in 1817 (Binney, 1858, p. 7). The ACS scouts arrived on the Grain Coast, negotiated with the traditional chiefs, and obtained a place where freed Africans from America could return and find a home. The first group of Africans from America arrived January 7, 1822 on board the ship “Elizabeth” accompanied by representatives of the ACS. After more than two decades as a commonwealth, Liberia declared its independence on July 26, 1847. By 1861, 12,000 of the settlers from America had made Liberia their home. As mentioned before, in addition to the two groups of settlers who arrived in Liberia from central Africa and America respectively, a third group of Africans settled in Liberia and made it their home. This group comprised rescued Africans from slave ships carrying human cargo from the Congo; after they were rescued, they were sent to Liberia (Gifford, 1993, p. 9). Liberia became Africa’s first independent republic on July 26, 1847.

While on board the “Elizabeth” en route to Liberia, the Baptists and Methodists organized themselves. It is fair to deduce that Baptists and Methodists were active already active before the Elizabeth docked. By 1848, there were four Christian groups in Monrovia, namely, Baptist, the Methodist Episcopal, Protestant Episcopal, and Presbyterians, according to Isichei (1995). It was not until 1900 that they were “joined by Lutherans, and the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal (Zion) churches. After three unsuccessful attempts, a Catholic mission was founded in 1906” (p. 166). The 20th century saw the arrival in Liberia of other Christian groups denominations such as “Seventh-day Adventist Church, Fire-Baptized Holiness Church of God (An African-American Holiness Church), the Assemblies of God, and
the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World” as well as the Church of the Lord (Aladura) and other African Initiated Churches (Melton and Baumann, 2010, p. 1716).

As previously noted, Methodists were among the original Christian groups to which many of the settlers from America to Liberia belonged. According to Hartzell (1909), “Daniel Coker, a Methodist minister, [was] among the emigrants,” and Coker was the leader of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Liberia for thirteen years, maintaining “an efficient organization” before Cox arrived (p. 27). Although Hartzell identified Coker as a minister with the Methodist Episcopal Church, Smith and Payne (1922) described Coker as “the first bishop elect of the African Methodist Episcopal Church,” who first settled in Liberia but relocated to Sierra Leone (p. 174). In any case, it would take a little over a decade after Liberia was founded for the American Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church to send its first missionary to Africa.

Baptists and Methodists are generally considered the two oldest denominations in Liberia. Baptists acknowledge that Lott Carey dedicated their first sanctuary, Providence Baptist Church, in 1825 (PBC, 2014), while the First United Methodist Church on Ashmun Street, Monrovia, was constructed in 1923 (Gifford, 1993, p. 31). The significance of Providence Baptist Church is highlighted as the site where Liberia’s leaders signed the Declaration of Independence. Consequently, the Baptists describe that edifice as “The Cornerstone of the Nation.”

During the first ten years of Liberia’s founding and prior to the arrival of the first Methodist missionary, the settlers made sincere efforts to spread the Gospel in their new environment. As a result of their outreach ministry, several “Methodist societies had been formed in Liberia under the care of local ministers,” according to Lewis (1953, p. 28). There
were obvious limitations among the settlers that created difficulties for them. Being aware of the challenges of establishing and developing a Christian denomination in unfamiliar territory, the local leaders of the nascent Methodist community in Liberia appealed to the Methodist Episcopal Church in America “for ordained ministers, that members of the Church might not be deprived of the sacraments, and for missionaries that the native population might be given the Gospel” (Barclay, 1949, p. 28).

This appeal from local Methodist leaders in Liberia reflected the urgency they placed on the task of evangelization; it was also in line with the views of some founders of the American Colonization Society (ACS), which saw itself as “a principal agency ‘for the conversion of the Africans to Christianity’ by raising a supply of native teachers.” In addition, there were those within the organization who believed “Christian negroes from the United States could serve as the nucleus of a civilized Christian state whose influence might ultimately permeate the entire continent” (Barclay, 1949, p. 326).

It is obvious from the records that the settlers did have an interest in propagating the Christian faith but were aware of their own drawbacks. Despite these disadvantages, the settlers established places of worship among the first Americo-Liberian communities. Although their itinerancy was not on horseback, the local Methodist preachers in Liberia shared the zeal of the American “Circuit Riders.” These dedicated preachers proclaimed the Gospel but whether they reached beyond their own communities and worked to develop healthy relationships with the indigenous groups who lived in surrounding areas is difficult to ascertain. Interestingly, Taylor (1983) explained that when the local Liberian Methodist leaders requested leadership assistance, “the missionary or missionaries, to be named by the episcopacy, were to be sent to the colony in Africa, which was established by the American Colonization Society.” If the plan was for
missionaries to minister only to the Americo-Liberian population, it soon changed because Taylor was quick to add that the ministry of American missionaries “did not exclude the other inhabitants, but it did not have them in mind” (p. 101). Later mission history in Liberia showed the missionaries did not restrict their work to the Americo-Liberian communities but introduced ministries that benefited the entire nation.