

**EARLY MISSIONARY WORK OF THE DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN
MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN
LIBERIA AND THEIR DIFFERENTIAL EFFECTS
1821-1871**

JAMES TETEGBA YARSIAH

Project under the direction of Professor D. Elwood Dunn

ABSTRACT

Thesis statement: The leadership approach and conflict resolution styles used by early missionaries to evangelize and plant the Protestant Episcopal Church among the native peoples and black emigrants of Liberia have helped to produce a more dependent and westernized Episcopal Church in Liberia.

This study is a critical and evaluative exercise that describes the differential effects that the early missionary work of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church had among indigenous/natives and the settlers/colonists societies in Liberia, from 1821 to 1871. This project will seek to uncover the strategies implemented and the results attained by the early American missionaries who struggled to plant the Protestant Episcopal Church among indigenous Africans and black emigrants in early 19th century Liberia. The native peoples, black returnees from America and white missionaries, each, played a significant role during the early years of missionary activities in Liberia. While the missionary efforts of the DFMS to evangelize and establish the Episcopal Church in Liberia is applauded, we also criticize the approach and method used

to institutionalize the Protestant Episcopal Church USA in Liberia, without much alteration or revision.

The work of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Liberia can be dated to 1822. This date coincides with the arrival and settlement of the first group of freed people of color (settlers/colonists) from the United States of America, sponsored by the American Colonization Society (ACS). Jehudi Ashmun, an Episcopal clergyman employed by the American Colonization Society, was the man who directed the founding of Liberia.¹ Archbishop George D. Browne in his book, “The Episcopal Church of Liberia Under Indigenous Leadership” claims, “Christianity in Liberia and the founding of the nation are coeval”.² Prior to the arrival of the settlers and missionaries, Liberia was known as the Grain Coast and was inhabited by indigenous tribes of the region. The American Colonization Society (ACS) was a philanthropic organization founded by white men for the purpose of colonizing and assisting the freed people of color to return to their native Africa. Authorities of the ACS founded and administered the Liberian colony. The Society appointed the Chief Executive or Agent and his Vice- Agent. All other officials were to be elected by the settlers in Liberia. For a protracted period, the leadership of the Liberian colony was placed in the hands of white Agents and black colonists who administer the affairs of the state with the support of foreign assistance from churches, philanthropic organizations and the US government.

¹ Harry Johnston, Liberia, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1906, Volume I, p. 132.

² George D. Browne, “The Episcopal Church Under Indigenous Leadership: Reflections on a Twenty Year Episcopate.” Lithonia, GA, Third World Literature Publishing House, 1992. p. 4.

Three groups of people and cultures influenced the planting of Christianity and the establishment, growth and development of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Liberia. These groups of people were the foreign missionaries (who were mostly white), the black settlers/colonists (Africans who were repatriated from America) and the natives (indigenous tribal people who inhabited the land prior to the arrival of the settlers and missionaries). Each group of people and culture played a significant role in both the church and state during the years of missionary activities sponsored by the Domestic Foreign Mission Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church USA in Liberia. These three groups of people and cultures constantly interacted to forge ahead with the planting of Christianity and the creation of the Liberian church and state. Racial, cultural, social, political and religious differences existed among these groups of people and their relationship was characterized by prejudices, falsehood, distorted assumptions, deep-rooted suspicions, misperceptions, constant misunderstandings, conflicts, etc. There was a contradiction between the American ideals of freedom, justice and equality, and the settlers' inhumane and unfair treatment meted out against native Liberians.

During the early stage of the Maryland colony, the white Agents were frequently displeased with the settlers' behavior toward the natives. The authorities believed that the settlers were often to blame for the bad relationship with the natives. For example, in 1841 there was a dispute that involved a colonist that was tried and found guilty of stealing from a native farm. Unable to pay the charges, he was thrown into jail by the civil authorities. However, his settler colleagues forcibly broke into the prison and freed

him during a confrontation. Commenting on the settlers' lawlessness toward natives, Governor Russwurm declared:

*I am sorry to perceive in the colonists generally a strong prejudice and hatred of the natives. If indulged in, the end must inevitably be a war of extermination of one party: this sentiment prevails among the farmer, whose situation is the most exposed. They are the most ignorant and though the majority can neither read nor write, wish to set themselves up as interpreters of the law. In every conflict with natives, the settlers desire to resort to fire arms.*³

Upon their arrival in Africa, many of the black colonists made efforts to create a class system in Liberia, in which the natives were treated as second-class citizens and with disrespect. As a result, there were frequent tensions that often resulted into frictions and sometimes led to violent confrontations between the settlers and indigenous Liberians. In 1851 at the time of another incident, Governor McGill wrote to Latrobe, President of the Maryland Colonization Society:

*"In nearly all of our conflicts, the colonists are more to blame than the natives, rash and inconsiderate one among us are sometimes disposed to trample upon their rights and feelings because they are natives."*⁴

Some of the above tensions and conflicting characteristics of the returnees toward the natives, might have persisted in Liberia; and this might have been some of the root causes of the 1980 military coup d'état, which brought the natives into power. Jeremy Levitt, in his book, *"The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia, From 'Paternalism' to State Collapse,"* describes the cause of the coup: "The coup was the manifestation of 158 years of pent-up settler-native and civil society-government (post-1950's) hostilities, spawned

³ Jane J Martin, The Dual Legacy: Government Authority and Mission Influence Among the Glebo of Eastern Liberia, published Ph. D. dissertation, Boston University, 1968, p. 110.

⁴ Ibid.

by a social-political order that never evolved fully to accommodate Liberia's diverse and dynamic population."⁵ The fourteen-year old fratricidal Liberian Civil War that lasted from December 1989 to October 2003 is another deadly conflict that has affected the natives as well as the settlers. The regime of Samuel K. Doe, a native born Liberian that led the coup in 1980, brought about an era of unparalleled brutality, warfare, and state disintegration that continued Liberia's legacy of conflict into the post-Cold War era. There were socio-political and economic factors responsible for the demise of the Doe's regime and the commencement of the Liberian Civil War.⁶

On the other hand, the white missionaries and agents that immigrated to Liberia exercised authority over the natives and black colonists. Despite the abolition of slavery in America and the colonization efforts, the concept held during slavery in America that the black race was inferior to the white and that blacks were incapable of governing themselves, continued to persist in the mission field. Both the missionaries and the colonists desired to introduce the Africans to Christianity and civilization (western culture). They considered the life style of the indigenous people, their religious beliefs-African Traditional Religions and culture, as primitive and barbaric. On the one hand, there was talk of native barbarism, and on the other hand it was attractive to work with pagans. During his visit to Rabookah, the Rev. Dr. Savage remarked to King Tom, head of the Council of Grebo Confederation, that it was for the natives own good that the Gospel was

⁵ Jeremy I. Levitt, The Evolution of Deadly Conflict in Liberia, From 'Paternalism' to State Collapse, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2005, p. 194.

⁶ Levitt, "Deadly Conflict," p. 205.

brought to Africa.⁷ When work among the colonists was disappointing, there was a plan to move away from the costal settlements and work in the interior.

The black settlers spoke of the natives as brothers, but the cultures of the two groups were vastly different. The Grebo peoples, among whom the work of the Episcopal Church formally began, shared a common social and cultural life style. They were mostly farmers and sea fearers that valued family, clan and village ties. Their traditional and religious beliefs were also similar. The natives were suspicious of the emigrants and believed that they had come to seize their land, enslave them and impose western culture on them. While the civil authorities concentrated on bringing the natives under the jurisdiction of a political structure modeled after the United States, the missionaries sought to establish schools and Christian villages, based on western standards. The missionaries and colonists refused to assimilate into the African society. Against diseases, poverty, and unfamiliar surroundings, the missionaries and settlers worked to transplant their American values and religion “Christianity” to an African community and peoples they considered degraded and benighted.

In December 1816, prominent white Americans for the purpose of assisting free people of color to return to Africa met and officially established the American Colonization Society (ACS) in Washington D. C. Among the influential founders of the ACS were, Robert Finley (Secretary), Samuel J. Mills, Henry Clay, Francis Scott Key and Judge Bushrod Washington, cousin of former President George Washington. Bushrod Washington, a U. S. Supreme Court Justice, was elected the ACS’ first president. The ACS became the first

⁷ Journal of Rev. Thomas Savage, May 20, 1837, DFMS papers.

organized attempt to operationalize the thinking of men opposed to slavery but equally opposed to assimilation of blacks into the American society and democracy.⁸ Colonization in Africa became a solution to the problem of the freed people of color and influential men, including Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, supported this enterprise. The colonizers had considered sending the free people of color to the Northwestern territory or to Louisiana in the south. However, they selected Africa. The logical argument for this choice was that, not only would the black man return to his homeland but he would also serve as the beginning of a missionary crusade to "...civilize and Christianize the millions of Africans yet un-reached."⁹ Once the colonization scheme was launched, its pioneering white leadership initiated a campaign in the U. S. for missionaries ("they ought, certainly, all be white") and teachers "in order to strengthen the moral and spiritual life among the colonist."¹⁰ The ACS eventually sponsored the "planting" of a colony in West Africa, which in 1847 became the independent Republic of Liberia.¹¹

Between 1818 and 1821, the ACS sent out several expedition missions to acquire land on the West Coast of Africa. After several failed attempts to acquire land from the hostile indigenous kings and chiefs, the ACS in 1822 finally succeeded in the negotiation of a

⁸ Holt, Dean Arthur, "Change Strategies Initiated By the Protestant Episcopal Church in Liberia from 1836 to 1950 and Their Differential Effects." Michigan, UMI Dissertation Services, 1997. p. 62.

⁹ James L. Sibley & D. Westermenn, Liberia – Old and New; A Study of its Social and Economic Background with Possibilities of Development. London: James Clarke & Co., LTD, p. 7.

¹⁰ D. Elwood Dunn, A History of the Episcopal Church in Liberia 1821 to 1980. Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press, 1992. p.16.

¹¹ Tom W. Shick, Behold the Promised Land, A History of Afro-African Settler Society in the 19th Century Liberia. London: The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980, p. 6.

land deal. The first settlement was at Cape Mesurado and others soon followed. The Maryland State Colonization sent free people of color to the Eastern part of Liberia to live among the Grebo in Southeastern Liberia. Other freed people of color from New York, Pennsylvania and Mississippi found their way to Bassa, Sinoe, and Cape Mount respectively. In 1839, these colonies combined to form the Common Wealth Government of Liberia; and later in 1847, it became the Republic of Liberia. At least three of the early settlers, the first agent, Rev. Jehudi Ashmun, the Rev. Ephraim Bacon and the Rev. Joseph R. Andrus, were Episcopalian clergy.¹² One could assert that the American Colonization Society (ACS), the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society (DFMS) along with other foreign missions were the founders of the Liberian nation and the Episcopal Church in Liberia.

The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church USA, the early missionaries, the white agents, and some of the black colonists that immigrated to Liberia, played a leading role in the establishment of the Liberian Church and nation. When the missionaries and settlers arrived in Liberia, they brought with them their American form of Christianity and civilization (western culture), to be planted into the African soil. However, not much practical effort was applied among the natives to actualize the planting of this western civilization and Christianity. The settlers, both white and blacks openly rejected and condemned the African religions, culture and life styles. During the early period of their stay in Liberian, the westerners refused to make any adjustments or alteration to their American culture and way of life, to suit that of the natives. The colonists formed settlements and refused to assimilate with the indigenous

¹² Browne, The Episcopal Church Under Indigenous Leadership, p. 5.

Liberians. The missionaries built their missions and schools separate from the villages and encouraged native converts to reject their African heritage and adopt western standards. For a very lengthy period, the foreign missionaries and black colonists marginalized the natives and held on to the helm of power both in the Liberian Church and state. The white missionaries dealt unevenly with the natives and showed preferential treatment to the settlers. In his address delivered immediately following his consecration on July 11, 1851, in Alexandria, Virginia, Bishop Payne summarized the results of the Mission work in Western Africa from 1836 to 1849. Among many things, Payne noted, “But these natives, with few exceptions can only make assistants.” He indicated that the natives would required some superintending agency and recommended that the comparative advance in Christian civilization attained by the colonists pointed to them as the materials from which to raise this superior superintending agency.¹³

In an effort to evangelize among indigenous Liberians and plant Christianity, the missionaries built schools that educated the children and adults of both the natives and settlers. In his early years in the field, Payne had proposed that the two communities be elevated together. But as the years elapsed, he became very cautious of pushing the two groups into assimilation. The goal of the missionaries to assimilate both the colonists and the natives became difficult and unattainable for several reasons, including the missionaries and settlers unjust treatment of the natives. The missionaries as well as black colonists that worked for the mission held a false and distorted concept about the natives,

¹³ An Historical Sketch of the African Mission, Protestant Episcopal Church in the U S A, Foreign Committee, Bible House, New York, 1884, p. 19.

that the Grebo and other Africans were vile brutes and degraded savages.¹⁴ And in many instances, the two groups treated the natives as such. Earlier, Payne and other missionaries expressed to the board their view that African and colonists could never assimilate until revolutionary change had been effected through Christian conversion of the Grebo. Based on this view, the churches and schools of Cape Palmas became segregated with the missionaries later building separate churches and schools for colonists and indigenous Liberians in the Cape Palmas area. For example, St. Mark's in Harper was built to accommodate the settlers and westerners, while the St. James Church in Hoffman Station, was built for the natives. The pastor of St. Mark's at the time, Rev. Scott, felt that Grebo influence could have a bad effect upon colonists, especially upon their children unless colonists were firmly grounded in the faith.¹⁵ Payne agreed. The pattern of segregated churches and schools was begun and in time, Liberia would reap the bitter harvest of this pattern. Paul Gifford, in his book "*Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*," notes "Generally speaking, there was a clear distinction between the mainline churches and the independent. The mainline (often called in Liberia the 'civilized') church did cater for the more powerful and affluent."¹⁶ By 1847, Payne felt that no Grebo scholar was ready to be trained as a teacher at a proposed high school at Mount Vaughan in Cape Palmas. He therefore proposed that the high school be reserved exclusively for the education of colonist young men.¹⁷ In 1848, Payne wrote:

¹⁴ Martin, "Dual Legacy," p. 206.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 220.

¹⁶ Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 190.

¹⁷ Martin, "Dual Legacy," p. 220

“ . . . the time has not come, yet, nor will it, for a long time when socially, natives can rank with Colonists. The latter are destined by Providence to be the teachers and governors of the former in this region. Consequently the plan of putting both on the same footing in school was an erroneous one.”¹⁸

The method used to evangelize the indigenous peoples was poor and ineffective. The missionaries believed that the native heathen would be transformed and resurrected from this state if they would accept the word of God. Most of the Protestant Episcopal workers at Cape Palmas were evangelists who believed that the important work of the mission was preaching. However, they believed that if the native was to be converted, a western education was felt necessary for understanding the Gospel and a western style of life a necessary compliment “A good Grebo Christian observed Sunday, pulled down Greegrees, and refused to participate in traditional sacrifices, but a good Grebo Christian also wore western clothes, built western houses, carried a western name and married one wife.”¹⁹ It therefore became difficult for many of the natives to embrace Christianity and the western civilization that was imported from the United States of America.

A peculiar and conflicting situation that existed during the early period of evangelism among the Grebo peoples was the dilemma faced by those natives that converted to Christianity. After 1850, these Grebo Christians became a dynamic force, although a small one. From the time of their emergence on the scene in the 1840’s and 1850’s until the early 1900’s, these educated Grebo were faced with a continuing problem of how they could best maintain themselves in two communities – the traditional Grebo

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

community and the westernized Americo-Liberian community. During the time of conflict between the natives and the colonists, these converts were caught in the middle and found it difficult to choose between traditional loyalties to old customs and village ties, and new attachments to civilization and Christianity typified in the Liberian settlements. Yet sometimes they discovered that they were not accepted in either society. Some of them commented, “Hence we are like the bats-we are neither beast nor birds.”²⁰

From 1851 to 1871, the Liberian Episcopal Church entered a new era during the Episcopate of the Rt. Rev. John Payne, first Missionary Bishop of Cape Palmas and Parts Adjacent. After 1843, the missionaries under Payne’s leadership became unanimous in their support of the settlers. During the 1856-1857 war between the settlers and the Grebo, one of the missionaries declared that the mission policy was to maintain a neutral attitude. Notwithstanding, in practice, through their reporting and actions, they sustained the colonial side. They withheld accusations against Lieutenant Governor Boston Jenkins Drayton, a Baptist minister from South Carolina, who led a coup that turned Governor Prout out of office. The missionaries reported the beginning of the war with caution. Drayton and his supporters secured their takeover in uncontested elections the following June. Drayton believed that God had chosen him to lead a crusade against heathen Africa. On December 12, 1856, he got reports that the Grebo people were preparing to attack the settlers. Whether this was true or whether they anticipated an attack from Drayton is unclear. The Governor initiated a bullying negotiation for peace that deteriorated into war on December 24. The colonists looted and burned the principal Grebo town at Cape Palmas. In the following days, the Grebo raided and destroyed most

²⁰ Ibid. p. 209.

of the houses in the settlement. The settlers soon ran out of ammunition, and both sides were left destitute and in stalemate. Coincidentally, former governor James Hall had returned to Africa while the war was underway at Cape Palmas. Upon his arrival in Monrovia, he organized and personally financed a force of Liberians to restore peace in the Maryland colony. They were able to accomplish their goal without further bloodshed, taking the Maryland militia out of Drayton's control. Thereupon, the government of Maryland dissolved itself and requested admission into the Republic of Liberia as Maryland County. The Liberian legislature quickly accepted the appeal and Maryland County settled into a quiet existence, its fortunes now linked to those of the larger country.

During the war, the colonial soldiers were provided with housing at the mission premises at Cavalla. Missionary staff noted the problems that the colonists had faced by such a large heathen population, and declared that the Grebo removal from the Cape should ease the tensions between the colonists and Grebo people. In the missionary writings during the time of the crisis between the Grebo and the settlers in the 1860s, Liberia was described as symbolizing Christ while the Grebo represented the devil.²¹ The colony was seen as “. . . part of God’s ordained instrumentality for the diffusion of Christian civilization.”²² However, in the late 1860s and early 1870s, there were major changes in the mission. During this time, support for the colonial authorities continued and the

²¹ Ibid., p. 208.

²² Payne, “Sketch of Mission Work in Africa,” SM XXXVI (1871), p. 75.

Foreign Board in the US consistently sustained the government of Liberia and condemned political interference by any mission worker in the field.²³

During Payne's leadership, he employed new dynamics in order to resolve the conflicts and challenges he faced as the first bishop of Liberia. It is important to examine how this white American missionary faced the conflicts that were endemic in inserting a Westernized Church in the midst of an indigenous (settler) society in mid 19th century Africa. Payne was constrained to deal with the challenge of working with black American missionary clergy and native Liberian clergy. During Payne's episcopacy, some black clergy, both Americans and locals opposed his leadership style and attempted to seek black leadership for the Liberian Church (schism). It was during Payne's administration that the Episcopal mission moved beyond the boundaries of the Maryland colony and expanded into other areas in Bassa, Sinoe and Montserrado counties, including the Liberian Capital City, Monrovia. It can be noted that at the end of Payne's Episcopate in 1871, the Liberian Church was far from being Africanized and firmly remained in the hands of foreign missionary Bishops up until 1969. During this period, DFMS consistently adhered to the recommendations made by predominantly white outgoing/retired Bishops and clergy that the Liberian Church and people were not qualified nor were they prepared for a native ecclesiastical leadership. Many of them including Bishop Payne advocated for white Bishops and clergy to head the Liberian Mission.

²³ Martin, "Dual Legacy," p. 208.

After 170 years of existence, the Episcopal Church in Liberia continues to bear serious marks of an American Episcopal Church. Very minimum enculturation has taken place in the Liberian Church. The early missionary efforts of the Protestant Episcopal Church USA to evangelize and propagate the Gospel in Liberia was faced with series of conflicts, challenges and set backs. Many of these conflicts and setbacks could be attributed to the false assumptions made by both the white missionaries and black colonists. The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society assumed that the institutional model of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA could be exported to Africa without alteration or revision. Evangelism was generally unsuccessful due mainly to the highly “sophisticated” Episcopal Church’s doctrine, discipline, liturgy and style of worship, in an African cultural heritage. Native Liberians experienced serious difficulties in making the transition from their native culture and indigenous African religious belief to that of the “sophisticated” Christian religion and western culture.²⁴

Furthermore, the mission was initiated and pursued without collaboration with Liberians. The DFMS assumed that collaboration with the Africans and colonists regarding the scope, strategies and target population of the mission was unnecessary.²⁵ Because the planters of the Protestant Episcopal Church were not collaborative, the product has been problematic, expressed as a “dependent” Liberian Church, not only of material resources, but also of social, economic, liturgical, polity, etc. White missionaries assumed that black people were ignorant and incapable of handling their own affairs. As a result, the

²⁴ Holt, “Change Strategies,” pp. 96-97.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 49.

mission never became a viable, independent self-renewing institution. The Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA was not able to take a consultative role; it was always forced to take an active participatory role. It is important to note that non-collaboration violates Christian belief that all persons are created equal in the sight of God.

In 1972, Bishop George D. Browne, the first indigenous Bishop of Liberia used a metaphor when he assume the leadership role and launched a program of Rural Evangelism. He compared the Liberian Diocese to a flower plant cutting, presented to the Liberian Church in a pot. The Liberian Church carefully watered and nourished the plant as prescribed by the donors (Americans). However, it had not occurred to the Church to renew the soil, change the size of the pot, or to transplant it in local soil in order to give the proper nourishment and save it from disease, which the African climate may have inflicted on it.²⁶ Since the early days, the Liberian Church has been preoccupied with maintaining the kind of inherited church structures like the parish system, traditional building, organizations and decision-making process, etc.

An attitude of paternalism, installed in those early years of the missions has retained most of its potency in the Liberian Church and society today. For example, for more than one hundred and seventy years of existence (1836-2007) the Liberian Church continued to rely on financial assistances (subsidies) from the American Church in order to help pay salaries of clergy and lay employees, build and repairs schools, churches; and to implement many of its programs and ministries. From 1983 through 2007, the Liberian

²⁶ George D. Browne, Ten Years Episcopacy. A Reflection (Idaho: Sand Point, 1980) p. 27.

church received close to \$6.6 million from the Episcopal Church.²⁷ In recent years, in accordance with the Covenant agreement between the Episcopal Church of Liberia, the American Church's contribution to Liberia has decreased. On the local level, many Liberians have not cultivated the act of giving (stewardship) for the support of their local congregations or the diocese. The natives as well as the settlers were not taught sufficiently the obligation of self-support. Bishop George D. Browne notes that as far back as 1862, Bishop Payne reported that he was endeavoring "to teach the natives the obligation of self-support," but he did not have a plan nor did he make any known efforts.²⁸

Note: In this thesis, we shall refer now and then to the tribal peoples of Liberia as natives, Africans, indigenous, Grebo/Glebo, and aborigines. We shall also refer to the descendants of freed slaves from America as colonists, settlers, emigrants, free people of color, and Afro-Americans/African Americans. Americo-Liberian was the term used for colonists, returnees, former black Americans who immigrated to Liberia. Those who were recaptured or Congoes, were Africans that were caught on board slave ships and taken to Liberia by the U. S. and the British governments. For the U. S., Africans brought for sale into the United States after the trade was legally ended; for the British, Africans intercepted on the high seas enroute for sale in the New World. These Africans lived in the settlements and share similar characteristics as the colonists.

²⁷ Lynette Wilson, January 4, 2010. The Episcopal Life Online: http://www.cuac.org/79901_118109_ENG_HTM.htm, Presiding Bishop Jefferts Schori's visit to the Episcopal Diocese of Liberia, January 2-6, 2010, (accessed February 12, 2010).

²⁸ Browne, "The Episcopal Church Under Indigenous Leadership," p. 76.

