

POLICY BRIEF

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History Matters

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Abstract:

The earliest churches founded by Africans in sub-Saharan Africa started in Freetown, Sierra Leone. They were founded by African returnees in 1792, who brought their own clergy from Nova Scotia in Canada. The origins of this church in sub-Saharan Africa are tied to African dignity and the abolition of slavery. This policy brief outlines the early African church movement. It highlights the importance of taking into account historical continuities and discontinuities in the discourse on religion and development.



Coast of Guinea and Bay of Sierra Leone: Map from 1732
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sierra_Leone_Johannes_1732.jpg

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An African Province of Freedom

In 1792, nearly 1,200 African Americans from Nova Scotia, Canada, decided to move to the land of their ancestors. It was their aim to overcome the pain of slavery and to establish a class-less society of black and white according to Christian principles: an African Province of Freedom. They set sail from Halifax on 15 January 1792 and the first ships made landfall on 9 March. According to their ambitions, they named the settlement Freetown – as a city of free brethren. As early as 28 March 1792, the first chapel in Sierra Leone was erected by the Huntingdon Connexion Church. Today the building is known as Zion Methodist Church and located in Wilberforce Street in the busy downtown area of Freetown. It is a historic monument: the oldest Christian Church founded by Africans in sub-Saharan Africa that is still in use.

In Sierra Leone, the “returnees” formed three denominations: the Methodist Church, the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion (a Calvinist Methodist Church) and the Baptist Church. All three of them still exist and represent the nucleus of Christianity in Sierra Leone and West Africa at large. The foundation of Freetown was born out of the political context of the American Revolution. The contribution of the American diaspora to the formation of the Church in Africa deserves special recognition. The repatriated Africans started as pathfinders in sub-Saharan Africa with the attempt to make slavery history.

After the arrival in Sierra Leone, the returnees had to withstand external and internal opponents. Rains hampered the building and there was confusion and mismanagement. The settlers received for example only five acres of land, instead of twenty as promised by the Sierra Leone Company, and in 1794, the French attacked and destroyed the settlement, as they were at war with the British. Nevertheless, the settlers managed to defend themselves, also because many of them had combat experience from the American War of Independence. Moreover, the few white people living in Freetown, staff of the Sierra Leone Company and English traders, were as ignorant and racist towards the black population as the whites had behaved in Nova Scotia. The churches played a big role in countering this discrimination. They did not stand apart from the political dynamics, but proved to be a powerful factor. And although they spoke out against discrimination, a significant number of the returnees criticised their religious leaders for being too tolerant of the Sierra Leone Company, as they had roots in the self-governing churches of the Black community. In 1800, a group of former slaves from Jamaica came to Sierra Leone. Their arrival gave a boost to the settlement.

The Global Context: African Emancipation

The American Revolution started in 1765 and culminated in the War of Independence, which lasted until 1783. In the civil disturbance, many slaves left their masters. In order to prevent a slave rebellion the British promised freedom in 1775 for slaves who joined the British troops to fight the American insurgents. A lot responded and formed the Black Loyalist troops. With the defeat of the British most of them had moved to New York. In 1783 they were relocated to Nova Scotia, where they formed a number of Black communities.

Rapid Rise of the Liberated African Community

The second, even bigger boost of the settlement was caused by the decision of the British Parliament in 1807 to ban the slave trade in the British Empire. Coincidentally, Sierra Leone was declared British Crown Colony, ending the administration by the Sierra Leone Company. After banning the slave trade, the British navy chased slave-trading ships and freed the people on board. They brought them to Sierra Leone where they encountered a Black Christian society. By 1825, about 25,000 liberated Africans lived in Sierra Leone. Most of them were from Nigeria; others came from Cameroon, Congo, and Angola. Together with the returnee settlers, they formed an English creole speaking population which later became known as the Krio. As most of the newcomers were not Christians, the churches engaged with them through education and evangelisation programmes. The London-based Church Mission Society started the first Christian educational institution in Sierra Leone for this purpose, which was reconstituted as Fourah Bay College in 1827 and served for the next fifty years as the centre of higher learning for the whole of West Africa.

While the returnee settlers had dominated society and church of Freetown since 1792, the situation changed in the 1820s. The period of 1820 to 1850 was shaped by the liberated Africans. Some of them were economically very successful. The change of population led also to challenges in the churches. The Baptist Church was unattractive to the liberated Africans as it did not want to admit equal rights to them in church affairs. As a reaction to this lack of rights in the established Baptist Church in Freetown William Jenkins founded the Igbo Baptist Church Sierra Leone (African Baptist Church). The liberated Africans felt rejected in the Methodist Church as well. About 2,000 members and 43 preachers left the church and founded the West African Methodist Church in 1844. The appropriation of Christianity by the uprooted Africans was another significant step in the transculturation process of Christianity from a western-dominated interpretation to a contextualized African interpretation of the gospel. Sierra Leone is not a single case. Similar motives stimulated the foundation of Liberia and Libreville, Gabon.

Typologically, the three historic Sierra Leonean churches were transplantations from America. However, right from the beginning believers displayed contextual African forms of spirituality and worship. The early churches in Sierra Leone were self-sustaining and self-governing. Gradually, they sought the co-operation with missionaries from Europe. The three historic Sierra Leonean churches tried to reach out to the indigenous people upcountry to proselytise, but with little success unless they used African languages. In a period of about 60 years, the churches were transformed by Africans and their customs from all over West Africa with a huge contribution by Nigerians.

Development and Religion: History Matters

The presence of Islam and Christianity on the continent dates back much longer than the beginning of the returnees' church movement in 1792. Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia originates almost from apostolic times and Islam embraced North Africa in the 7th Century. It later reached out to the Sahel zone and the Mali Empire of the 14th Century was a Muslim one.

Considering historical continuity, 1792 is a turning point though. The example of Sierra Leone is very significant as it shows the important role of independent, self-governing religious actors. The start of the church has been embedded in the social and political context of its time. Since then, it has

undergone several transformations and prompted a dynamic growth. After independence, African scholars have reconstructed the history of the church in the continent. It implied a shift of perspective from a Western mission-centred historiography to an African church history perspective. Africans have dismantled the theological identification of conversion with acculturation to Western standards and understand African Christianity today as a non-Western religion, an African interpretation of Christianity.

Religion and culture are underlying dimensions of development. It is indispensable to address them, as religious communities have laid basic fundamentals of social and political institutions in Africa over the last 200 years. It is important to study and discuss these contributions to follow the road of sustainable and independent development. Protecting and preserving (religious) historic sites and monuments is a development task on its own, as it emphasises a history of independence and institutional development. This task requires attention, resources, and political priorities. Sierra Leone, down town Freetown and the surrounding sites are such places of reference for African dignity and self-determination.

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