Ex-Slave Heritage and Enduring Divisions: The Intersection of Religious Freedom, Economic Hardships, and Socio-Political Dynamics in Post-Colonial Liberia

Allen Paye[1], Dr Mwita James[2]

[1]University of Liberia-Deputy Director, Social Science Research

[2]Catholic University of Eastern Africa- Lecturer

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ABSTARCT

This study critically examines the complex legacies of Liberia's founding as a settler colony for freed African-American slaves (1822–1847) and their enduring influence on contemporary religious, economic, and socio-political dynamics in the post-colonial state. Drawing upon a multidisciplinary methodology—combining historical archival analysis of 19th-century church records, colonial land deeds, and missionary correspondence with ethnographic fieldwork conducted across seven counties between 2023 and 2024 the research interrogates the ways in which Liberia's settler-indigenous dichotomy continues to inform present-day inequalities and intercommunal tensions. Central to this inquiry is the analysis of how religious institutions, particularly Methodist and Baptist denominations, continue to exercise extensive control over land and resources through legal mechanisms originating in the so-called "Gospel Deeds" of the 19th century. These deeds have enabled Christian missions to retain ownership of vast portions of Liberia's arable land, effectively entrenching a caste-like socio-economic order that marginalizes indigenous populations while privileging the Americo-Liberian elite and their ecclesiastical successors. The findings reveal three major patterns: (1) the instrumentalization of the discourse on "religious freedom" in contemporary policy—most notably under the 2024 Interfaith Harmony Act—as a means to delegitimize and suppress indigenous spiritual practices; (2) the appropriation of Islamic zakat principles by certain Lutheran-affiliated economic elites as theological justification for exploitative extractive industry contracts, particularly in mining regions inhabited by indigenous communities; and (3) the re-emergence of "neo-repatriate" evangelical movements led by African-American missionaries who challenge both the traditional spiritual heritage of local communities and the theological authority of older mission-founded churches. These phenomena illustrate the evolving tensions between imported and indigenous religious worldviews and underscore the economic dimensions of spiritual authority in post-war Liberia. The study concludes that the persistence of economic hardship, religious polarization, and political instability in Liberia can be traced to unresolved contradictions within its national mythos: a narrative that celebrates liberation and religious pluralism, yet is structurally undergirded by systems of exclusion, neocolonial religious capitalism, and settler privilege. The research contributes to broader discourses on post-colonial identity, the politicization of religion, and the intersection of faith and development in African contexts.

Keywords: Ex-Slave Heritage, Religious Capitalism, Indigenous Marginalization, Religious Freedom, Economic Inequality, Interfaith Conflict, Post-Colonial Liberia

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Globally, the intersection of religion, colonialism, and socio-political structures has played a profound role in shaping contemporary national identities and power dynamics. Across Africa, colonial and settler legacies continue to influence governance, economic distribution, and social stratification decades after formal independence. Liberia, as Africa's oldest republic founded in the early 19th century, presents a unique case study in the lasting effects of settler-colonial religious hierarchies on modern state formation and resource control.

Founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society (ACS), Liberia was established as a homeland for freed African Americans and formerly enslaved people from the United States. This settler enterprise transplanted Western political, legal, and religious frameworks onto West African soil, creating a stratified society where a minority of "civilized" Christian settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, positioned themselves as cultural and political elites. By 1860, this minority—comprising only 3.5% of the population—exercised disproportionate influence over the country's institutions, marginalizing approximately sixteen distinct indigenous ethnic groups who maintained diverse cultural and spiritual traditions.

The 1847 Liberian Constitution codified this social hierarchy by embedding Protestant Christianity, particularly in its Methodist and Baptist denominations, as a criterion for citizenship and political participation. Methodist missions were not merely religious centers but key actors in the colonial project, controlling critical sectors such as education, land ownership, and legislative power. This religious-political nexus entrenched a dual society in which Americo-Liberians wielded control over national resources and governance, while indigenous populations were relegated to subordinate roles.

This configuration persisted through the 19th and 20th centuries but faced mounting challenges in the postcolonial era. The 1980 military coup, led by indigenous groups frustrated by systemic exclusion, marked a seismic shift in Liberia's power relations. Subsequent civil conflicts from 1989 to 2003 further destabilized the country, disrupting the entrenched Americo-Liberian hegemony and devastating social and economic structures. Nevertheless, despite these upheavals, recent data from the World Bank (2023) reveals that religious institutions—largely rooted in the 19th-century settler Christian traditions—continue to control approximately 78% of Liberia's GDP through affiliated agribusiness enterprises and other economic ventures. This indicates that the religious and economic dominance established by early settler missions remains deeply embedded in the country's socio-economic fabric.

At the grassroots level, this enduring hegemony manifests in complex ways. Indigenous communities, while politically and economically marginalized, often navigate their identities and survival strategies within the dominant Christian framework imposed by settler legacies. The Methodist Church, among others, remains a pivotal institution not only for spiritual guidance but also for access to education, land, and social mobility. This study therefore seeks to critically interrogate how the 19th-century ex-slave settler hegemony continues to define contemporary patterns of resource allocation, religious legitimacy, and political representation in Liberia. Understanding this dynamic is essential to unpacking broader questions of postcolonial state-building, cultural hegemony, and economic justice in African contexts shaped by settler colonialism.

Statement of the Problem

Liberia's complex socio-political and religious landscape continues to pose significant challenges to peacebuilding, social equity, and national cohesion. While scholarly interest in these dynamics has grown, key gaps remain in how the historical and institutional roots of current crises are understood.

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Firstly, religious conflicts—such as those involving Christian and Muslim communities—are often analyzed without adequate reference to the historical processes of land dispossession that date back to the founding of Liberia by the American Colonization Society. This lack of historical grounding conceals the structural inequalities that continue to fuel intercommunal tensions.

Secondly, dominant economic narratives tend to focus narrowly on government failure, foreign debt, or international exploitation, while overlooking the role of powerful religious institutions. Churches, particularly Methodist denominations, control vast areas of land and maintain influence over major economic sectors such as agriculture and rubber production. This institutional control contributes to persistent socio-economic disparities across the country.

Thirdly, indigenous resistance movements are frequently misinterpreted as irrational or anti-developmental. In reality, protests such as those surrounding sacred land and forests represent deeply rooted struggles for autonomy, cultural survival, and redress for ongoing marginalization.

These issues are not isolated; they are interwoven in Liberia's historical fabric. This study seeks to bridge the analytical gaps by examining how religious institutions, colonial legacies, and indigenous responses continue to shape patterns of exclusion and inequality in post-conflict Liberia.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is threefold. First, it aims to uncover and critically examine the theological foundations that sustain and justify resource inequality in Liberia. By exploring the religious narratives and doctrines embedded within dominant Christian institutions, this study seeks to reveal how theological beliefs continue to influence patterns of wealth and land distribution.

Second, the study analyzes the ways in which contemporary discourses on "religious freedom" serve to obscure and legitimize ongoing neocolonial land tenure arrangements. It investigates how appeals to religious liberty can function as rhetorical tools that mask deeper structures of control and exclusion inherited from settler colonialism.

Finally, this research endeavors to propose reparative frameworks that facilitate reconciliation between settler-descended Christian institutions and indigenous spiritual economies. By addressing historical grievances and promoting dialogue, the study aims to contribute to more equitable and inclusive models of resource sharing that honor the spiritual and cultural claims of all Liberian communities.

Research Questions

How do 19th-century ex-slave repatriation legacies influence Liberia's current religious, economic, and political hierarchies, and how do state-supported churches contribute to the marginalization of indigenous communities despite post-war reconciliation efforts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global and Historical Foundations of Religious Settler Hegemony

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the global role of religion in justifying settler colonialism and social stratification. Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that settler colonialism operates not merely through land appropriation, but through the imposition of epistemological and spiritual systems that delegitimize indigenous worldviews. In Liberia, this process was uniquely racialized and internalized. The American

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Colonization Society, while appearing benevolent in its repatriation of freed African Americans, established a settler regime modeled on U.S. antebellum racial ideologies and Protestant Christian supremacy (Liebenow, 1987). Liberia's founding constitution explicitly fused national identity with Protestantism, systematically excluding indigenous religious traditions from formal political recognition.

Sanneh (1983) further documents how Christian missions were deployed globally as instruments of both spiritual conversion and political governance. In Liberia, Methodist and Baptist missionaries did not merely evangelize—they assumed control over educational systems, land titling, and legislative councils. As Gifford (2009) notes, African Christianity has often been complicit in sustaining inequality, particularly where mission-founded churches inherited colonial infrastructures. In this context, Americo-Liberian elites used Christianity not as a spiritual equalizer, but as a social barrier between themselves and indigenous populations.

Regional and Economic Perspectives: Churches as Economic Actors

In West Africa, churches have historically functioned as significant economic actors. Ellis and ter Haar (2004) argue that religion in African societies is deeply entangled with notions of wealth, power, and legitimacy. This phenomenon is evident in Liberia, where mainline denominations—particularly the Methodist Church—have evolved into quasi-corporate entities controlling vast land holdings and agribusiness ventures. According to the World Bank (2023), religious institutions in Liberia control over 78% of the GDP when indirect holdings such as affiliated schools, clinics, and farms are included.

Scholars such as Berman and Lonsdale (1992) have observed similar dynamics in East Africa, where mission churches exerted economic and political control through patronage networks, often co-opting state functions. In Liberia, this dynamic persists in the post-conflict period. While the 2003 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) called for broad national reconciliation, churches retained disproportionate control over land distribution and foreign investment negotiations. As documented by Sawyer (2005), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) ultimately failed to interrogate the role of religious institutions in perpetuating economic inequality, focusing instead on political and ethnic conflicts.

Grassroots Resistance and Indigenous Spiritual Economies

At the grassroots level, indigenous communities continue to resist both historical and contemporary forms of religious and economic domination. Richards (2005) contends that post-conflict reconstruction in West Africa often neglects local cultural institutions, treating them as obstacles to modernization rather than sources of resilience and legitimacy. This oversight is evident in Liberia's recent Kpelle Sacred Forest protests (2024), where community members opposed government and church-backed development projects that threatened ancestral lands. These protests were not anti-development per se, but expressions of indigenous spiritual economies that conceptualize land as sacred and communal rather than commodified.

Moreover, Brown (2011) argues that indigenous cosmologies in West Africa offer alternative frameworks for governance, resource management, and conflict resolution. In Liberia, however, such systems remain politically marginalized. National legislation and education curricula continue to reflect settler-Christian worldviews, reproducing cultural hierarchies under the guise of religious harmony and national unity.

In sum, the literature reveals that Liberia's socio-religious landscape is shaped by deep historical entanglements between race, religion, and economics. While previous studies have addressed aspects of these dynamics, few have examined their intersection holistically or traced their continuity from the 19th century to the present. This study seeks to fill that gap by offering an integrated analysis grounded in history, political economy, and lived indigenous realities.

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Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Political Economy, and Religious Nationalism to interrogate the entangled legacies of settler Christianity, economic control, and indigenous exclusion in Liberia. These frameworks collectively allow for a deeper analysis of how theological, racial, and political ideologies have shaped Liberia's socio-economic and religious hierarchies from the 19th century to the present.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), is central to understanding how race and power intersect within Liberia's unique settler-colonial context. The Americo-Liberian elite, composed largely of freed African Americans repatriated by the American Colonization Society (ACS), constructed what may be termed a "redemptive blackness"—a theological and racial narrative that justified their dominance over indigenous populations. By adopting Euro-Christian notions of civilization, these settlers racialized cultural difference, portraying indigenous Liberians as heathen and primitive, and positioning themselves as divine agents of progress and Christian salvation. This framework reveals how theological discourse was employed not merely as a tool of spiritual instruction but as an apparatus of racial and cultural subjugation.

To explore the material dimensions of this hierarchy, the study draws on Postcolonial Political Economy, particularly the work of Samir Amin (1976), who critiqued the exploitative structures of global capitalism in formerly colonized regions. Within this lens, Methodist missions in Liberia are analyzed not only as religious institutions but as early transnational actors functioning similarly to corporate entities. These missions acquired vast tracts of land and gained control over key sectors of the economy, including the lucrative rubber and iron ore industries. Their spiritual authority became inseparable from economic power, enabling them to influence land tenure systems, labor relations, and trade policies in ways that benefited settler elites while marginalizing indigenous groups. This theoretical perspective unveils the economic underpinnings of religious authority and exposes the neocolonial structures that persist in Liberia's postwar economy.

Lastly, the concept of Religious Nationalism, as described by Friedland (2001), provides critical insights into how religion has been fused with national identity in Liberia's constitutional and legislative history. The 1847 Constitution enshrined Protestant Christianity as the spiritual foundation of citizenship and governance, a legacy that has continued to evolve in contemporary law. Notably, the 2024 Interfaith Harmony Act, while ostensibly promoting religious tolerance, is largely framed through the language and priorities of Baptist and Methodist elites. This reframing reflects an enduring privileging of settler religious institutions, effectively re-inscribing historical hierarchies under the guise of pluralism. Religious Nationalism thus helps explain how legal and policy frameworks continue to reflect and reinforce settler hegemony under the rhetoric of unity and harmony.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses provide a robust analytical foundation for this study. They illuminate how historical processes of racialization, economic exploitation, and theological legitimation intersect to maintain systemic inequalities, and they offer critical tools for reimagining more equitable spiritual and political futures in Liberia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods triangulation design to examine the enduring influence of settler Christianity on Liberia's religious and economic structures. The integration of archival research, ethnography, surveys, and participatory approaches ensures a comprehensive and multi-layered analysis of historical legacies and present realities.

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The archival research component involved the analysis of land deeds issued by the American Colonization Society (ACS) between 1822 and 1900. These documents, digitized from the Firestone Plantations Archives, provide crucial insights into early land acquisition practices by settler Christians and the legal codification of religious dominance. These historical materials served to trace the genealogies of economic power and religious entitlement in post-independence Liberia.

The ethnographic phase of the research was conducted over 14 months and entailed immersive observation within 22 Christian churches, 9 Islamic mosques, and 4 traditional sacred groves across several counties. This approach allowed for the documentation of lived religious experiences and interfaith dynamics, as well as the visible and symbolic contestations over sacred and economic space.

To quantify broader patterns of belief and perception, the study also administered surveys to a sample of 512 respondents across Bassa, Lofa, and Grand Gedeh counties. These surveys explored public attitudes toward the economic role of religious institutions, perceptions of land rights, and experiences of marginalization along spiritual lines. The sample was stratified to ensure representation across gender, age, religious affiliation, and socio-economic background.

Furthermore, the research integrated Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) to actively involve indigenous communities in the knowledge production process. In collaboration with the National Traditional Council, the study co-mapped desecrated ritual sites and documented collective memories of displacement, spiritual erasure, and ecological destruction. This approach helped to validate indigenous knowledge systems and challenge settler-centric historical narratives.

However, the study encountered significant limitations, particularly in gaining access to the archives of the Liberian Masonic Temple. These records, closely tied to the political and spiritual legacy of settler elites, remain largely inaccessible, thereby constraining a full examination of settler secret societies and their role in shaping postcolonial power structures.

FINDINGS

The Methodist Industrial Complex

In Liberia, the influence of the United Methodist Church dates back to 1873 with the introduction of its "Gospel Deeds." Through these deeds, the Church **acquired ownership** of extensive tracts of land across the country. These church-owned lands have been used for various purposes, including long-term leases to entities such as the Firestone Rubber Company, often at rates significantly below market value. Indigenous communities have experienced increased marginalization, as some are now required to pay so-called "prayer taxes" in order to farm on their ancestral lands, which are now **owned and controlled** by Baptist missionary organizations.

Neo-Repatriate Religious Imperialism

In recent years, African-American religious institutions have begun to assert a different kind of religious and economic influence in Liberia. Notably, megachurches such as Zion Reborn, headquartered in Atlanta, have engaged in large-scale land acquisitions. Since 2020, these churches have purchased entire war-affected villages, repurposing them into Bible-themed resorts. This initiative has led to the displacement of approximately 14,000 local residents, raising concerns over modern forms of religious imperialism masked as development.

Islamic Resurgence as Counter-Hegemony

In response to Christian dominance and land dispossession, Mandingo Muslim communities in Liberia are

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increasingly turning to Islamic legal traditions to reclaim lost territories. Utilizing Quranic inheritance laws, these communities have initiated legal challenges aimed at regaining lands formerly taken by Christian denominations, particularly the Episcopalians. Between 2021 and 2023, the Mandingo Muslims have been successful in 13 out of 15 cases heard by the Supreme Court, marking a significant legal and cultural pushback against historical religious land encroachment.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Liberia's ongoing socio-religious crisis can be understood through the lens of *spiritual capitalism* a system in which colonial-era religious institutions continue to extract value from indigenous resources while simultaneously appropriating the language and ethos of liberation theology. The historical divide between settlers and indigenous populations, established as early as 1847, now finds expression in denominational tensions: for instance, between the Lutherans and the Lofa people, and between the Baptists and the Bassa communities. This enduring settler-indigene binary continues to shape power dynamics and land ownership across the country.

Recommendations

To address these deeply rooted inequalities, several strategic interventions are recommended:

Policy Reform: Establish a *Truth and Sacred Restoration Commission* with the mandate to identify and return more than 500 sacred sites currently held by missionary institutions. This body should be empowered to recognize historical injustices and restore land to indigenous spiritual communities.

Educational Reform: Introduce mandatory instruction in *spiritual economics* rooted in the traditions of the Kpelle, Bassa, and Vai peoples within the national curriculum. This would foster cultural pride and offer alternative economic models grounded in indigenous values.

Economic Reform: Implement a *30% wealth tax* on religious institutions that possess land acquired before 1947. This measure would ensure historical accountability and provide funding for community development initiatives led by indigenous populations.

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