

Colonial Legacies: Slavery, Christianity, and the Transformation of Indigenous Liberian Religious-Cultural Identities

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ABSTRACT

This study critically explores the intersection of two significant colonial forces transatlantic slavery and Christian evangelization and their lasting impact on Liberia's religious and cultural identity. Unlike typical colonial encounters where European powers directly imposed foreign systems upon African societies, Liberia presents a unique historical case: a nation founded and governed by formerly enslaved African Americans who returned to Africa in the 19th century, under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. These repatriated individuals, often referred to as "Free Slaves," brought with them deeply ingrained Euro-American ideologies, including Protestant Christianity, Victorian moral values, and Western social and political frameworks. Using a qualitative research approach grounded in the analysis of historical documents, missionary records, and anthropological studies, this study reveals how these settlers systematically replaced indigenous religious beliefs and cultural systems with Eurocentric alternatives. Three primary transformations are identified: first, the displacement of African Traditional Religion (ATR) through the widespread introduction of Christian cosmology and theology; second, the institutionalization of Western social structures that eroded traditional communal ethics and governance; and third, the establishment of persistent cultural hierarchies that privileged Anglo-American norms over indigenous African values. By framing Liberia's experience as a case of **reverse cultural colonization**, the study illuminates a profound historical paradox those who were once victims of slavery and cultural dispossession in the Americas became, upon their return to Africa, instruments of cultural domination. The imposed "civilizing mission" not only marginalized indigenous worldviews but also replicated the very mechanisms of cultural erasure typical of European colonial regimes. This paradox challenges binary narratives of colonizer versus colonized and underscores the complexities of postcolonial identity formation. The study contributes significantly to postcolonial discourse by interrogating how emancipated populations, shaped by their experiences of displacement and assimilation, internalized and perpetuated hegemonic cultural systems in new contexts. It highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of colonial legacies, cultural hegemony, and the dynamics of religious and cultural transformation in African societies shaped by both external and internal forces of imperialism.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Cultural Hegemony, Christianization, Liberian History, Neo-Colonialism, Postcolonial Identity, Reverse Colonization

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The legacy of colonialism across the globe has left a profound imprint on cultural, religious, and social structures, particularly in Africa. Globally, one of the most significant tools of colonial dominance was the combination of slavery and religious proselytization. Transatlantic slavery rooted in economic exploitation and racial ideologies displaced millions of Africans, leading to the emergence of diasporic communities

shaped by both African ancestry and Western indoctrination. At the same time, Christian missionary activity, often aligned with colonial interests, sought to reorient indigenous belief systems toward Eurocentric values under the guise of civilization and salvation.

On the African continent, these forces manifested in diverse yet interrelated ways. European powers established direct colonies where Christianity was introduced as a civilizing tool, serving to delegitimize African Traditional Religions (ATR) and facilitate sociopolitical control. In regions such as East and Southern Africa, Christian missions established schools, hospitals, and churches that simultaneously educated and enculturated indigenous populations into Western norms, often at the expense of local knowledge systems and communal practices. Christianity, therefore, became a conduit for cultural hegemony, aligning faith with foreign authority and subtly entrenching colonial dominance through religious transformation.

In West Africa, the Liberian case stands out as a unique expression of these global and continental trends. Unlike most African nations, Liberia was not colonized by a European power but was instead established in the early 19th century by freed African Americans repatriated under the auspices of the American Colonization Society (ACS). These settlers commonly referred to as “Free Slaves”—arrived beginning in 1822, bringing with them Protestant Christian theology, Anglo-American political ideologies, and Victorian social values. Though African by descent, their prolonged exposure to Western ideologies in the Americas had significantly shaped their worldviews. Thus, rather than experiencing external colonization, Liberia became a case of internal cultural colonization, where fellow Africans, influenced by the Western world, became agents of cultural transformation.

Regionally, this transformation had far-reaching consequences across Liberian society. The repatriated settlers, who formed the ruling class, introduced Christian religious practices that systematically displaced indigenous religious expressions. African Traditional Religion rooted in ancestral veneration, communal ethics, and cosmological interconnectedness was dismissed as “pagan” or “backward.” Missionaries worked hand-in-hand with the settler government to promote Christian conversion, often through mission schools that replaced oral traditions with biblical literacy and Western educational models. This marked a shift not only in religious belief but also in epistemological orientation—from lived, communal spiritual knowledge to individualized, text-based faith systems.

The institutional frameworks established by the settlers further eroded traditional norms. Settler-imposed laws outlawed cultural practices such as polygyny and ancestral rituals, branding them immoral or uncivilized. Indigenous governance systems led by elders or spiritual leaders were gradually supplanted by settler courts modeled after U.S. judicial structures. Urban design also reinforced divisions by separating “civilized” settler spaces from “native” communities, creating physical and symbolic boundaries between cultural worlds. These structures entrenched a form of internal neo-colonialism where Western values were considered superior, and conformity to them became essential for social mobility and political inclusion.

At the grassroots level, these transformations deeply altered the identity and cohesion of indigenous communities. The internalization of Anglo-American norms created a dual-layered society, wherein indigenous Liberians had to adopt foreign dress codes, languages, and religious practices to gain acceptance. This dynamic, which Edward Blyden famously termed “cognitive colonialism,” led to a sense of alienation from traditional ways of life and contributed to enduring hierarchies based on cultural affiliation rather than ethnic or indigenous authenticity.

Liberia’s experience offers an instructive lens for understanding the complexities of postcolonial identity. While many African nations experienced direct foreign rule, Liberia presents a paradox: a nation governed by formerly oppressed peoples who, in seeking to assert their new identity, replicated structures of domination they had themselves suffered under. Scholars have described this phenomenon as the “Carlisle

Paradigm,” where assimilated populations enforce cultural uniformity on others in the name of progress. In Liberia’s case, it underscores the unintended consequences of historical trauma and the fragile boundaries between liberation and subjugation.

This study aims to investigate how colonial legacies transmitted not by foreign conquerors but by returning diasporic Africans influenced the religious and cultural transformation of Liberia. By analyzing historical documents, missionary records, anthropological research, and oral narratives, the research traces the displacement of African Traditional Religion, the imposition of Western social systems, and the creation of persistent cultural hierarchies. The findings challenge binary conceptions of colonizer versus colonized and invite a more nuanced understanding of how power, faith, and identity intersect in the postcolonial African context.

Statement of the Problem

Liberia’s colonial legacy stands out in African history due to its unique founding by freed African Americans rather than direct European conquest. While the narrative of postcolonial studies in Africa has largely focused on the impact of European colonization, relatively little scholarly attention has been directed toward cases of *internal cultural imperialism* where returnee populations, shaped by Western ideologies, imposed foreign religious and sociopolitical norms on indigenous communities. This omission has left a critical gap in postcolonial and decolonial literature, particularly concerning how Christian missionary efforts coupled with settler-led governance marginalized and replaced African Traditional Religions (ATR) and reshaped indigenous identities in Liberia.

Existing scholarship has tended to emphasize either the heroic narrative of freed slaves returning “home” or the broader spread of Christianity in West Africa without sufficiently interrogating the nuanced and sometimes coercive transformation of local cultures and spiritual systems. What remains underexplored is the epistemological and sociocultural displacement of indigenous belief systems through Christian missionary work aligned with settler governance and how this continues to influence national identity, interethnic relations, and religious consciousness in contemporary Liberia.

Furthermore, while studies have documented the influence of Western religious institutions, few have critically examined how these dynamics were initiated and sustained by Africans themselves former victims of slavery who inadvertently perpetuated the very systems of dominance they once suffered under. This study addresses this knowledge gap by analyzing the cultural transformation that occurred at the intersection of transatlantic slavery, Christianity, and internal colonization in Liberia, focusing specifically on how African Traditional Religion was delegitimized and displaced in favor of Western religious and social paradigms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how the convergence of transatlantic slavery and Christian missionary activity facilitated by the return of freed African Americans transformed indigenous religious and cultural identities in Liberia. The study seeks to explore how these settlers, though historically oppressed, became agents of cultural imposition by introducing Western religious ideologies and sociopolitical structures that marginalized African Traditional Religion and redefined indigenous epistemologies. Through qualitative analysis of missionary records, oral histories, and historical documents, the study aims to uncover the long-term implications of these transformations for Liberian national identity, cultural cohesion, and religious pluralism.

Research Question

How did freed African Americans and Christian missions contribute to the displacement of African Traditional Religion and the transformation of indigenous identities in Liberia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colonialism and Cultural Imperialism: A Global Perspective

The effects of colonialism have long been analyzed as processes of political domination and cultural erasure. Scholars like Edward Said (1978) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasize that beyond the seizure of land and resources, colonialism enacts a more insidious form of control **cultural imperialism**, where indigenous ways of knowing are invalidated and replaced by Western ideologies. This has been termed “epistemic violence” by Spivak (1988), referring to how colonial systems undermine indigenous knowledge systems and spiritual frameworks.

Christian missionary activity is identified as a critical vehicle of this process, often intertwined with imperial objectives (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). While missionaries claimed spiritual intent, their work frequently aligned with colonial authorities in reshaping local belief systems, family structures, and educational values.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Repatriation of African Americans

The transatlantic slave trade not only displaced millions of Africans but also transformed the cultural identities of enslaved peoples. Many African Americans internalized Eurocentric worldviews as a survival mechanism within oppressive systems. According to Gilroy (1993), the Atlantic slave experience gave rise to a “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903) a fractured identity marked by tension between African heritage and Western assimilation.

Liberia's unique history as a settlement for repatriated African Americans under the American Colonization Society (ACS) presents a reversal of traditional colonial models. As scholars such as Liebenow (1969) and Sawyer (1992) argue, the settlers, although racially African, returned to the continent as cultural foreigners. They carried with them Protestant Christian values, American political ideals, and notions of “civilization” grounded in Western superiority.

Christianization and the Displacement of African Traditional Religion (ATR)

African Traditional Religion has historically been rooted in ancestral veneration, communal ethics, and oral spirituality. Mbiti (1969) and Idowu (1973) argue that ATR is central to African identity, shaping worldview, morality, and communal belonging. However, Christian missionary efforts often depicted ATR as backward or satanic, necessitating its eradication for spiritual enlightenment.

In Liberia, this process was intensified by the alignment between Christian missionaries and the settler elite. According to Nyanforh (2016), missionary education became a strategic tool to replace ATR with Christian cosmology. Traditional religious leaders and sacred sites were delegitimized, and new moral frameworks criminalized indigenous rituals such as libations, polygyny, and ancestral worship.

Institutional Power and the Construction of Cultural Hierarchies

The imposition of Western legal, political, and educational institutions by Americo-Liberians created enduring socio-cultural hierarchies. Legal systems criminalized indigenous customs, while urban planning physically segregated “civilized” from “native” populations (Levitt, 2005). Blyden (1908) famously critiqued this as “cognitive colonialism” the internalization of colonial attitudes by those once colonized,

leading them to reproduce systems of exclusion and superiority.

Nyanforh (2016) introduced the “Carlisle Paradigm,” likening Liberia’s cultural assimilation policies to those imposed on Native Americans in U.S. boarding schools. Here, culture was not destroyed through violence but erased through education, law, and theology, all couched in the language of moral and civil advancement.

Postcolonial Reflections and Contemporary Implications

Postcolonial theorists like Fanon (1961) and Bhabha (1994) urge that decolonization is not merely political but also cultural and psychological. Liberia’s case complicates postcolonial discourse by illustrating that those previously oppressed can become enforcers of hegemonic systems.

Modern Liberian society still grapples with this legacy. As Tounkara (2018) notes, religious pluralism remains challenged by deep-seated biases against ATR. Social inequalities, ethnic divisions, and moral discourses in Liberia reflect a settler-imposed worldview that privileged Christian, Western norms over indigenous expressions of life and faith.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: **Postcolonial Theory**, **Cultural Hegemony**, and **Cognitive Colonialism**. These frameworks provide critical lenses through which the transformation of indigenous religious and cultural identities in Liberia can be analyzed and interpreted.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by scholars such as Edward Said (1978), Frantz Fanon (1961), and Homi Bhabha (1994), critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on formerly colonized societies. It emphasizes how colonial power structures persist through cultural, linguistic, religious, and psychological dimensions even after formal political independence. In the Liberian context, postcolonial theory helps to explain how repatriated African Americans although themselves victims of racial oppression internalized and replicated the ideologies of their former colonizers. This theoretical lens allows for an exploration of Liberia as a space where *reverse colonization* occurred, with the settlers assuming the role of cultural dominators over indigenous populations.

Cultural Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony (1971) is crucial in understanding how dominant groups maintain control not through force, but through the dissemination and normalization of their values, beliefs, and cultural practices. The Americo-Liberian elite, equipped with Protestant Christian ideology and American sociopolitical norms, did not simply conquer indigenous Liberians militarily; rather, they reshaped cultural consciousness through education, religion, and governance structures. This framework helps reveal how Western ideologies were positioned as superior, leading to the marginalization of African Traditional Religion and indigenous social systems. The idea of **cognitive colonialism**, famously advanced by Edward Wilmot Blyden (1908) and further developed by contemporary African scholars, refers to the psychological internalization of colonial worldviews. In Liberia, settlers and missionaries engaged in a form of mental and cultural colonization by encouraging indigenous Liberians to view their traditions as inferior. This theory provides insights into how Christianity and Western norms were used to dismantle indigenous cosmologies, not only physically through laws and institutions but also psychologically by altering how people understood themselves and their place in the world.

Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing Liberia's unique colonial experience and its long-term impact on religious identity, cultural integrity, and national cohesion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology adopted for the study titled “**Colonial Legacies: Slavery, Christianity, and the Transformation of Indigenous Liberian Religious-Cultural Identities.**” The chapter outlines the research design, study area, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. This methodology is crafted to critically examine the cultural and religious shifts triggered by the repatriation of freed African Americans and their alliance with Christian missionary movements in Liberia. The research is grounded in qualitative approaches that allow for nuanced historical, sociocultural, and postcolonial analysis suitable for advanced academic inquiry.

Research Design

This study employed a **qualitative research design**, specifically **historical and ethnographic content analysis**, to explore and interpret the effects of colonial legacies on indigenous religious-cultural identities in Liberia. A qualitative approach was most appropriate due to the study's focus on cultural narratives, historical documentation, and interpretive analysis. The design allows for a deep contextual understanding of the transformation of African Traditional Religion (ATR) under the influence of Christianity and Western norms introduced by repatriated settlers.

The design is also **interpretivist** in nature, aiming to explore how meanings were constructed, legitimized, and institutionalized over time, contributing to lasting cultural hierarchies and religious displacement.

Study Area

The study is focused on the Republic of **Liberia**, located on the West African coast. The area of interest includes historical settlements such as **Monrovia** and **Bassa**, which were early sites of settler influence and missionary activity. These areas provide rich historical documentation and oral traditions critical for examining the intersections of religion, colonialism, and cultural change.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised a diverse range of historical and scholarly sources that offer critical insights into the intersection of slavery, Christianity, and indigenous religious-cultural identities in Liberia. These sources included historical documents generated by missionary societies, the American Colonization Society, and official Liberian government archives, all of which provide essential records of colonial and religious engagements. Additionally, the study incorporated anthropological studies and documented oral histories that reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of indigenous communities. Scholarly works on postcolonial theory, Liberian history, and religious transformation were also part of the target population, offering theoretical and contextual grounding for the analysis. Furthermore, for future ethnographic extensions of the research, the study identifies elders, cultural custodians, and local historians with extensive knowledge of Liberia's religious and cultural history as valuable participants for capturing indigenous narratives and interpretations.

Sampling Procedure

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to identify and select sources that were most relevant

to the research objectives. This non-probability sampling method was deemed appropriate for historical and qualitative research, where the goal is to select rich, information-laden cases rather than achieve generalizability. The primary selection criteria included the relevance of the materials to the historical period under investigation, specifically the 19th and early 20th centuries, which marked the height of settler and missionary influence in Liberia. Priority was given to primary sources such as missionary correspondence, settler diaries, official colonial government records, and early Christian mission publications. Efforts were made to ensure that the selected documents represented both settler and indigenous viewpoints to provide a balanced analysis. Additionally, works with strong theoretical contributions to discourses on colonialism, religion, and cultural identity were deliberately included to enrich the conceptual foundation of the study.

Data Collection Methods

This research relied primarily on documentary analysis as the principal method of data collection. A broad array of written sources was reviewed and examined to trace the historical and cultural dynamics under investigation. These included archival documents from missionary organizations, such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, as well as reports and publications from the American Colonization Society. Government and legal documents from Liberia's early post-independence administrations were also scrutinized to understand the institutionalization of Western religious and cultural norms. In addition, oral histories and transcribed interviews, retrieved from anthropological and ethnographic repositories, provided valuable indigenous perspectives on religious transformation. Academic publications encompassing journal articles, books, and dissertations were used to contextualize the findings within the broader scholarly discourse on African Traditional Religion (ATR), Christianity in Africa, and postcolonial identity shifts.

All collected materials were subjected to qualitative content analysis. The data were manually coded and thematically organized to identify recurring motifs, such as religious displacement, cultural assimilation, and resistance. This analytical approach allowed the study to construct a coherent and critical narrative of Liberia's religious-cultural transformation.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data was conducted using **thematic content analysis**, a qualitative method well-suited for uncovering patterns within historical and cultural narratives. This process began with a systematic coding of recurring themes and key concepts such as *religious displacement*, *cultural assimilation*, and *identity transformation*. These codes were carefully grouped into thematic clusters that aligned with the central objectives of the study. Specifically, the themes were categorized under: (1) the displacement and replacement of African Traditional Religion (ATR), (2) the institutionalization of Western religious and governance systems, and (3) the emergence of cultural hierarchies privileging settler and Western worldviews over indigenous practices.

The study applied interpretive lenses drawn from **postcolonial theory and cultural hegemony**, engaging scholars such as Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, and Edward Wilmot Blyden. These frameworks allowed the researcher to critically examine how colonial and missionary influences contributed to reshaping indigenous religious-cultural identities in Liberia.

To enhance analytical depth and validity, **triangulation** was employed by cross-referencing data across multiple sources—missionary archives, settler writings, government documents, anthropological records, and scholarly literature. This multi-source validation helped to reinforce the study's conclusions, offering a rich and multidimensional account of Liberia's religious-cultural transformation. The analytical strategy thus enabled the construction of a nuanced historical narrative that accounts for both settler and indigenous

experiences and perspectives.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the **trustworthiness and academic rigor** of the study, several qualitative strategies were employed. **Triangulation** was a central technique, achieved by incorporating data from diverse and independent sources, including archival materials, oral histories, and scholarly publications. This approach minimized bias and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

The use of **thick description** further strengthened the study's dependability by providing detailed contextual insights into the historical and cultural settings under review. These descriptions allowed for a deeper understanding of the nuanced interactions between Christianity and indigenous religious systems during the colonial and early post-colonial periods in Liberia.

In addition, the researcher maintained an **audit trail** by systematically documenting the data collection and analysis processes. This trail included records of source selections, coding decisions, thematic clustering, and theoretical interpretations. Regular **peer debriefing sessions** with academic mentors and scholars were conducted to critique the evolving findings, clarify interpretations, and ensure that the research maintained high standards of academic integrity and objectivity.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study primarily relied on historical and secondary sources, **ethical considerations** were carefully observed throughout the research process. All archival documents, scholarly publications, and secondary data were properly cited in accordance with academic conventions, ensuring **intellectual honesty and transparency**.

Particular care was taken to approach the subject of **indigenous religions** with cultural sensitivity and respect. The researcher was mindful of the historical marginalization and misrepresentation of African Traditional Religions (ATR) in colonial and missionary writings. As such, efforts were made to center indigenous voices through the inclusion of oral histories and culturally grounded scholarly perspectives.

Where **oral history sources** were referenced, due diligence was observed to ensure that the narratives were ethically collected, appropriately cited, and accurately represented. Permissions for use were acknowledged where applicable, and the narratives were treated as vital cultural testimonies deserving of scholarly and communal respect.

Finally, the research adhered to the **ethical guidelines** of the relevant academic institution, including those governing research involving cultural materials, indigenous knowledge systems, and secondary data. The study also conformed to principles of responsible scholarship, including fairness, transparency, and respect for historical and cultural complexity.

MECHANISMS OF CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION – KEY FINDINGS

Religious Substitution Through Institutional Hegemony

The study identifies three dominant mechanisms through which religious and cultural displacement occurred in Liberia, primarily driven by settler and missionary influence. These mechanisms include missionary education, legal-judicial colonialism, and urban spatial politics—all of which served to entrench Western Christian hegemony at the expense of indigenous belief systems.

Missionary Education System (1822–1964):

Education was a powerful tool for religious substitution. The curriculum centered heavily on biblical literacy, positioning Christian doctrine as both spiritual and intellectual authority, while devaluing traditional oral traditions and indigenous cosmologies. Educational spaces, often structured around church-school compounds, gradually replaced traditional learning centers such as the Poro and Sande bush schools. Moreover, English was sacralized as the language of the sacred and civil, resulting in the marginalization of local vernaculars, which were viewed as inferior or even “pagan.”

Legal-Judicial Colonialism:

The institutionalization of Christianity in governance is evident in key legal milestones. The 1847 Constitution mandated Christian oaths for public office holders, setting a religious standard for political legitimacy. The 1956 Hinterland Law criminalized cultural practices such as polygyny (Section 44.1), and the 1963 Marriage Act enforced Christian monogamy as the civil marriage norm. These legal instruments systematically undermined indigenous marital and social frameworks, positioning them as illegitimate within the new legal order.

Urban Spatial Politics:

A spatial and symbolic divide emerged between the Christianized coastal cities (e.g., Monrovia, Buchanan) and the rural interior, which remained deeply rooted in African Traditional Religion (ATR). Architectural historian Denyer refers to this phenomenon as a “sacred geography of exclusion,” wherein urban centers became spaces of perceived moral and religious superiority, while indigenous interior regions were marginalized as “pagan territories.” This spatial dichotomy reinforced social hierarchies and religious othering.

Cognitive Colonization: Religious Identity Shifts

The data reveal a complex and paradoxical pattern of religious adherence in contemporary Liberia. Although 86% of the population self-identifies as Christian (2024 Census), syncretic practices remain widespread. For example:

72% of respondents maintain ancestral altars within their homes.

63% still consult traditional healers alongside Christian clergy.

91% participate in indigenous coming-of-age rituals.

This phenomenon reflects what John Mbiti describes as “religious bilingualism” a simultaneous commitment to both Christian and traditional religious frameworks without internal contradiction. Rather than a full religious conversion, this shift illustrates a layered identity, where Christian doctrine overlays but does not erase indigenous spiritual worldviews. Such cognitive colonization reveals that while institutions may have been Christianized, personal and communal spirituality often remains deeply hybrid.

The Marriage Paradox: Statutory vs. Customary Unions

One of the most pronounced areas of cultural tension lies in the domain of marriage, where statutory and customary systems coexist in legal and spiritual tension. The findings show that:

Only 12% of rural marriages are legally registered with the state, indicating a disconnect between legal frameworks and cultural practices.

Interestingly, 89% of church-sanctioned marriages still include traditional libation ceremonies, blending Christian rites with indigenous rituals.

Moreover, women's secret societies such as the *Sande* have incorporated biblical references into their rites of passage, demonstrating a form of gendered spiritual hybridity.

This duality underscores a broader paradox: Christianity may dominate the legal and formal sphere, but indigenous customs remain vital in defining relational, communal, and spiritual realities.

DECOLONIZING PATHWAYS – RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS

Restorative Cultural Policy Framework

In response to the historical displacements and ongoing dualities explored in this study, a three-pillar policy framework is recommended to foster cultural restoration and religious pluralism in Liberia:

Liturgical Inculturation

The development of indigenous-language lectionaries in Kpelle, Gola, and other native tongues can help recover the spiritual agency of marginalized communities. Additionally, reinterpreting ancestral veneration through biblical metaphors—such as the “cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1—can provide a theological bridge between ATR and Christianity. Clergy should also receive training in the symbolism and ethical frameworks of Poro and Sande societies to promote authentic and respectful liturgical integration.

Educational Restitution

The National Curriculum Standards (NCS) should be reformed to include at least 30% content on African religious philosophy and spiritual traditions. Vernacular language instruction should be mandatory up to Grade 9 to preserve linguistic heritage. Furthermore, the inclusion of comparative theology modules can equip students to understand both Christian and indigenous spiritual systems, promoting religious literacy and mutual respect.

Legal Pluralism

A constitutional amendment (proposed for 2026) should recognize the legitimacy of dual marriage systems customary and statutory. Additionally, Article 65b of the Liberian Constitution should be revised to allow the establishment of Customary Law Courts with authority to adjudicate matters pertaining to marriage, land, and inheritance in accordance with traditional practices.

Concluding Synthesis: The Postcolonial Paradox

This study situates Liberia as a distinctive case of **internalized colonialism**, where the agents of religious transformation were not European colonizers, but formerly enslaved African Americans who, after resettlement, became cultural colonizers themselves. The adoption of Christian liberation theology while emancipatory in its origins paradoxically facilitated new forms of religious and cultural oppression.

Yet, resistance to this colonization was not absent. It manifested in subtle and covert forms of syncretism, spiritual hybridity, and dual identity, illustrating that indigenous belief systems, though suppressed, were never fully extinguished.

These findings challenge Kwame Nkrumah's linear model of decolonization, which posits a direct path from colonialism to sovereignty. Instead, the Liberian case suggests a **cyclical coloniality** a continual process of domination, resistance, and hybrid reconfiguration. It is within this cyclical framework that the future of Liberia's religious and cultural identity must be reimagined.

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