

Name:

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Topic:

Adopting “Merica People” Ways: Re-examining Liberia’s Assimilation Policy

Abstract:

This paper re-examines an aspect of Liberia’s 19th century assimilation policy that is rarely considered. When the Black American emigrants founded the Republic of Liberia in 1847, they failed to recognize indigenes as citizens. Instead, they imposed the policy of assimilation as a prerequisite for citizenship. Assimilation required that indigenes adopt the culture of the “Merica people,” a local name for the newcomers. Conversion included becoming Christian and “knowing book.” The policy was evidently successful: English is Liberia’s official language, and Christians comprise upwards of 80% of those claiming a religious affiliation, according to the 2008 census. But assimilation was not entirely unidirectional, a point often overlooked in the literature. In Liberia, the Black American emigrants encountered new challenges including unfamiliar diseases and a new agricultural system. I will consider how they assimilated and the consequences of the dual enculturation.

Bio:

William E. Allen is a Liberian and a historian. He obtained his bachelor’s at the University of Liberia. Awarded the Fulbright Fellowship, Allen earned his master’s at Indiana University and joined UL’s Department of History in 1989. Months later the fifteenth-year Civil War erupted. In 2002 Allen completed his Ph.D. at Florida International University with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation African Dissertation Fellowship Award. Following an associate professorship at Kennesaw State University, USA, he returned home, rejoined UL, and eventually served as Vice President of Academic Affairs from 2017 to 2019. Allen is professor of history and Executive Director of UL’s Center for Diaspora and Migration Studies. His scholarly publications include “Liberia and the Atlantic World in the Nineteenth Century: Convergence and Effects,” *History in Africa* 37 (2010): 7-49; “Making History in the Bedroom: Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians Sexual Unions, 1880s-c.1950s,” *Liberian Studies Journal*, 34, 2 (2009): 16-34; “Historical Methodology and Writing the Liberian Past: The Case of Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century” *History in Africa*, 32 (2005): 21-39; “Rethinking the History of Settler Agriculture in Nineteenth-Century Liberia”; *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37, 3 (2004): 435-460.