

Ethnicity, Politics and Social Conflict: The Quest for Peace in Liberia

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Abstract

This article investigates the fundamental causes of the Liberian Civil War, which has been going on since 1989. It examines the social, economic, political, historical, and ethnic concerns that have contributed to the crisis. It argues that the current Liberian Civil War is the consequence of the socio-economic policies and political structures implemented by the freed slaves from America, who settled in the country in 1822. These policies discriminated against the indigenous Liberians, causing discontent among them, and resulting in their determination to win political and economic control of the country. The article suggests that lasting peace can only be achieved in Liberia, when these fundamental issues – including ethnicity – have been carefully studied and effectively addressed.

Introduction

Since 1989, Liberia has been engulfed in a bloody civil war, which has claimed more than 300,000 lives, including women and children. The war has led to increased social and economic decay, ethnic tensions, and political instability. More importantly, it has dislodged thousands of Liberians from their homes, turning them into destitute refugees both in Africa, Europe, and in North America. According to Dolo (1996), Liberian refugees are living in distressing conditions in neighboring Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana and in other refugee camps where they are plagued by "high unemployment, increasing malnourishment and other conditions with terrible emotional consequences" (p.3). Attempts initiated by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to resolve the conflict have all failed. And, despite the recent negotiations between the ECOWAS and the former President, Charles Taylor, which sent the latter into exile in Nigeria, the fact remains that the conflict continues to rage beneath the seeming calm surface of "temporary peace" in the country. Ethnic politics and the determination by the indigenous groups to prevent the government from falling into the hands of the Americo-Liberians, once again, could easily disrupt the temporary fragile peace in the country.

Ethnicity and Politics in Africa

Ethnicity constitutes the foundations of the African society, for it shapes communities, cultures, economies and the political structures of the peoples. More

importantly, it shapes the perceptions of the African, defines his universe, and provides him with meaning, understanding and the power to interpret the world around him. It is therefore an integral part of every African, despite the deepening influences of westernization and increasing cultural adulteration, since colonial times.

Ethnicity is important to Africans in many ways. First, it provides security both to the group, as a whole, as well as to the individuals constituting the group. The sense of belonging to an ethnic group means the members are safe together as one people, and ready to defend themselves against any external attacks on their existence and sovereignty. This notion of security also provides the groups with a sense of direction in their lives.

Second, ethnicity provides each group with a common ancestry and history, which is an important aspect of the African peoples: they desire to know who or what gave birth to their ancestors and where they are destined, following their departure from this earth. This knowledge of a common ancestry creates a strong bond within members of the group, for they realize that without the ability to support each other the entire group is doomed to die off or conquered by other groups around them. They are therefore ready to support their representatives in government at any cost- including a civil war.

Third, ethnicity also identifies each group by providing its members with a common language. Language defines a people giving them the power to think and reason logically based on their created world. Through language communication is possible among members, making it easier to share ideas and make any necessary changes required to benefit the people. It is through the distinct ethnic language that the knowledge, skills, values, taboos and other cultural beliefs and customs are passed onto the succeeding generations, in attempts to keep the group from dying off. Language also assists the groups in keeping their secrets from each other, for it is through language that they derive their power to rule and to exist.

Finally, ethnicity serves as an organizing force, which assists in bringing the people together to fight or seek a common goal (Okwudiba, 1998). This creates a sense of communalism, family, and togetherness, which also deepens the sense of belonging. Thus an entire community could belong to one major ethnic group, providing them with the opportunity to do things together as one family. In short, without ethnicity life is meaningless to the African.

It is important to note that members of the same ethnic group not only have a lot in common and share things that are unique to them, but they also live together in a specific region of the country involved. Thus it is common to find that the Ashantis of Ghana, the Yoruba of Nigeria, the Kpelle of Liberia are congregated in a specific region of those countries. They claim to own that region hence fight to keep “intruders” from taking over their land. Thus ethnicity has created the notion of regionalism, which is also counter to nation building in the modern world. Regional boundaries also dictate ethnic cultural practices, shape their belief systems and customs, and their perceptions of the world around them. For example, the Kpelle ethnic group of Liberia occupies the coastal area of the country and, therefore, holds sacred the ocean since it provides them with their sustenance. They also believe that the ocean is the abode of supernatural entities, such as witchcraft and other harmful beings. Based on this belief, it is therefore taboo for any member of the group to swim or bathe in the rivers and the ocean at night, as it

portends bad luck or may cause the death of a family member. They also believe that the person swimming or taking a bath may be captured and enslaved forever by one of the spirits.

Ethnicity, therefore, has been extremely important in the African's life and affairs, as it provided the people with a way of life, until the arrival of the European colonialists in the late 19th century. Colonialism came to alter the African society by undermining the ethnic groups in their ability to live together as one people - as it occurred in Liberia - with the arrival of the freed slaves from America.

Colonial Rule, Politics, and Ethnicity in Africa

At the Berlin Conference of 1884, Europeans divided the continent of Africa among them, and adopted various methods of ruling to govern their new colonies. These methods included the Direct, and Indirect rule. Inevitably, at independence, the legacies of these policies would become impediments to nation building across the continent.

The Direct Rule was mostly practiced by France, Germany, Portugal and Belgium. Under this political philosophy, colonies were ruled directly, meaning the colonizers brought in their respective colonial administration, including the police, clerks, governors, and other staff personnel directly from their respective countries in Europe and transplanted them in their colonies. Africans were excluded from participating in the government and were required to report to their new rulers, something they had never done before. This method of ruling also introduced the one-state government in Africa, which destroyed the African traditional system of ethnic autonomy of government and sovereignty. For centuries, Africans lived and worked in communities ruled by their respective ethnic leaders and councils of elders. Thus the one-state government forced Africans into abandoning their indigenous political systems, by adopting the new European political systems.

Indirect rule, on the other hand, was practiced by the British. This policy allowed them to rule their territories through the local ethnic leaders who, in turn, reported to the British officials. Judging from the surface, one could argue that this method of government was, perhaps, better than the Direct Rule, since it left Africa's traditional systems of government and cultures intact. However, this was not case, for it compelled African rulers to assist the European colonizers in exploiting their own peoples. The duties of the African chiefs were to collect taxes on behalf of the British, as well as implementing other policies, which greatly helped the colonizer to achieve his economic goals. Chiefs forcefully collected taxes, such as the hut tax, from their people and those who could not afford to pay were prosecuted. This led to divisions among the ethnic groups, for some of the leaders were seen as collaborators of the colonizers, and would later be removed from office.

Colonialism was also based on ethnic favoritism, which caused askew development strategies in the various colonies. The ethnic regions settled by the colonialists became the "preferred" regions, which received European development projects such as hospitals, schools, infrastructure, housing, road networks, and the creation of a modern sector economy, which relegated the rural economy to the fringes of the new African state. The ethnic groups in the areas settled by the colonizers, therefore, had access to public sector jobs, while their children were given the opportunity of acquiring European education. These political and economic policies created

fragmentation and uneven development within the African society, for many parts of the continent were left undeveloped. More importantly, it created animosity between the ethnic groups, since the majority of the ethnic groups had no access to education and jobs, and lived in poverty. The politicizing of ethnicity, by the Europeans, has been one of the fundamental causes of many of the civil wars in post-independence Africa. The arrival of the freed slaves from America illustrates this point in the Liberian case.

Arrival of the Freed Slaves in Liberia

Following the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the United States, in 1808, many former slave owners and politicians, particularly those of the North, began to fear the growing population of the freed slaves in the American society. As noted by Omonijo (1990), “They feared the possibility that they might lose their distinctive cultural identity, if the Negro remained longer in the society” (p. 10). Out of this fear, the American Colonization Society (ACS), a Christian organization, in 1816, began to advocate the resettlement of Negroes in Africa. Although a Christian organization, many of its members and executives were slave owners, including Robert Harper and Charles Fenton Mercer of the Virginia Legislature, who became active fundraisers for the resettling of the freed slaves in Africa (Dolo, 1998).

Some scholars, including Dolo (1998), argue that Southerners supported the deportation of freed blacks back to Africa as a method of preserving slavery in America, for they feared that the growing number of freed blacks in the North would influence the slaves of the South to rebel against their owners, by demanding their freedom. It was believed that by resettling the freed blacks in Africa, would limit the support for the liberation of enslaved blacks in the South. It is also argued that American missionaries, both from the North and the South, supported the resettlement program because they saw it as a means of spreading Christianity to the Africans whom they considered heathen and barbaric (Dolo, 1998). These hidden agenda, therefore, led one to question the original claim of Americans, concerned about the problem of losing their “distinct cultural identity”, since their real motives were mainly economic and religious.

After raising enough money, and with the support of the American government, the American Colonization Society began looking for a place in Africa, which was going to become the new home for the freed blacks. Liberia, then known as the Malaquette Coast, in present-day West Africa, due to the abundance of the Malaquette Pepper in the region, was chosen as a suitable place for the resettlement of the freed slaves. In mid 1821, the first group of freed slaves from the United States, boarded the Ship, the Elizabeth for the journey and arrived on the Malaquette Coast, which they named Liberia, on January 1, 1822. The word Liberia, which comes from the Latin word, Libel means free. Between 1822 and 1867, more than 13,000 freed slaves were sent to Liberia (<http://www.loc.gov>). Although some discrepancy exists concerning the total number of freed slaves who settled in Liberia, Liebenow (1969), puts the total number at 18, 958. More importantly, the arrival of the freed slaves marked the beginning of a new era in Liberia’s history, particularly for the ethnic groups that inhabited the region.

Foundations of the Conflict

Long before the arrival of the freed slaves from America, and who later became known as the Americo-Liberians, sixteen indigenous ethnic groups inhabited the Malaquett region of modern day West Africa. They included the Kpelle, Lorma, Kru, Gissi, Bozzi, Vai, Gola, Grebo, Mano, Bassa, Bandi, Sapo, Krahn, Geo, Mandi, and the Dei. These ethnic groups were governed by their ethnic leaders under their indigenous political systems and lived in communities based on their ethnicity. However, it was also possible for more than one ethnic group to inhabit one region. For example, the Lorma and the Bandi ethnic groups have occupied the northern part of the country (Lofa) for generations and long before the arrival of the freed slaves. Although two distinct groups, and with different languages, cultures, and traditions, they managed to live in peace and harmony, often referring to each other as cousins. This example could also be applied to the other ethnic groups, and despite the occasional ethnic conflicts, which occurred between the groups, everyone was considered equal. It is important to mention that politically, the region was not under any central government; hence each ethnic group governed itself based on its cultural traditions, religious, economic and social practices. However, the arrival of the Americo-Liberians would change the existing social structures, replacing them with western socio-political and economic institutions.

Upon their arrival, the Americo-Liberians segregated themselves from the indigenous Liberians and colonized them. They believed that they were more civilized than the indigenous Liberians, since they had experienced western civilization and acquired western cultural values, skills and attitudes. According to Nass (2000), the freed slaves that settled in the colony saw themselves as a distinctly enlightened group in comparison with the Africans they met on the land, whom they often referred to as “heathens and savages” (p.9). This attitude, which generated the notions of the “superior and the civilized” freed slaves, and the “inferior and backward” native Liberians soured the socio-political, and economic relations of the two groups from the beginning. Similarly, Omonijo (1990) notes:

Right from the beginning therefore, the seeds of discontent were sown. The newly freed Negro slaves, rather than see themselves as Africans who were lucky to have been brought back to their roots, merely transferred the oppression they suffered in the United States of America to the Native population; they became the new lords of the settlement (p.11).

The Americo-Liberians, believing in the racist notions of the west at the time, which labeled Africans as inferior peoples, took full advantage of the indigenous Liberians, viewing them as “unfit” human beings to live with; hence they segregated themselves from them by establishing their own communities. This action laid the foundation for the policy of political and economic exclusion of native Liberians from the affairs of the country, a policy that would later result in civil conflict.

In terms of settlement, it should be pointed out that much of the land they settled on was forcefully taken away from the indigenous Liberians. Representatives from the settler communities often met with the local chiefs and demanded the sale of certain portions of their land for little or nothing, or should be given for free. Those indigenous Liberians who refused to give up the land that they had inherited for centuries faced severe consequences, including death. The dispossession of the native Liberians of their lands formed the prelude to the many injustices they suffered at the hands of their new colonizers. The Americo-Liberians later ensured that their new constitution gave them

the legal control over the affairs of the country, while denying even basic rights to the indigenous populations- the same rights, which had been denied them as slaves in America. The constitutional policies led to frustration, anger and animosity towards the settlers, thus laying the foundations for a future civil war.

The Americo-Liberian Constitution and the New Oppressive Rule

As the freed slaves began to settle in Liberia, the American Colonization Society took over the governing of the colony. In 1825, the ACS drafted a constitution that gave the Society the full responsibility for governing the colony and elected Elijah Johnson as its first agent (Lowenkopf, 1976; Omonijo, 1990). This action on the part of the Society contradicted their purpose for the resettlement of the freed slaves: to give the freed blacks the right and the freedom of self-government. The new constitution also affirmed the application of American law for the governing of the new territory. Interestingly, all the appointed administrators of the colony were white and many of them ruled with an iron fist. It was not until 1841, after the death of Thomas Buchanan, brother of the United States president that freed slaves became governors of the settlement (Lowenkopf, 1976).

The Americo-Liberians, who had earlier been denied all social, political, and economic freedom and other civil rights in the United States, became unhappy with the new political arrangements and wanted to ensure that their new freedom remained secure and unchallenged by any internal and external forces. Thus they pressured the ACS to give up control of the settlement and on July 26, 1847, they declared Liberia an independent nation and drafted a new constitution for the country. John Doe an Americo-Liberian drafted the new constitution, a replica of the American Constitution.

However, the new constitution excluded the indigenous groups from participating in the economic and political affairs of the country, giving all rights to the Americo-Liberians. The country's natural resources including gold, diamonds, rubber and timber now belonged to the Americo-Liberians and their families. The profits gained from these resources were used for the development of the Americo-Liberian communities, in the building of schools, churches, hospitals and other socio-economic facilities. Above all, the hinterland of the country, where a vast majority of the indigenous population lived was underrepresented in the National Legislature until 1964. In fact, prior to 1964, indigenous Liberians had to pay money to the government of the Americo-Liberians, if they wanted to observe the proceedings of the legislature (Alao et al, 1999). To the indigenous Liberians, therefore, the new constitution was illegal and so lacked legitimacy. Seyon (1995), points out that the Americo-Liberians "were forced to rely on coercion, not consent of the governed, to rule" (p.22).

Indigenous Liberians, both men and women, were also denied the right to vote under the new constitution and could not be citizens of the new republic. They were viewed by the Americo-Liberians as "unimportant" and faced constant discrimination.

According to Nass (2000):

Citizenship was restricted to the settlers and their descendants. The Africans were required to pay taxes such as the obnoxious hut tax. It took quite a long time before the Africans had the right to send representatives to the government in Monrovia, initially only as non-voting observes. For several decades, only those Africans who were "civilized" with western cultural values were granted citizenship. The Aboriginal people were powerless. As second-class people, they were required by law and custom to adopt the western way of life before becoming full citizens (p.9).

Furthermore, in addition to acquiring western cultural values and practices, indigenous Liberians were also required to convert to Christianity and had to denounce their traditional religious beliefs and practices for three years, before they could become citizens. However, the fulfillment of these criteria did not guarantee them social equality with the Americo-Liberians; the racial segregation policies implemented by the settlers remained. For instance, converted indigenous Christian Liberians had to enter the home of an Americo-Liberian through the back door (Alao et al, 1999).

The exclusion from participating in the new government, the right to vote, and the denial of citizenship were not the only forms of discrimination suffered by the indigenous Liberians: they were also subjected to forced labor under inhuman conditions. In some cases, they were recruited to work on governmental projects as well as those of foreign companies with whom the government had business agreements. On September 16, 1925, the government of the Americo-Liberians signed a contract with the American Rubber Company, Firestone. Under the contract, the government supplied 50,000 laborers annually, to work on the Firestone plantation (Nass, 2000). To come up with the required amount of workers, the government created a Labor Bureau, which was responsible for recruitment. Often, the task of finding workers rested on the shoulders of indigenous chiefs and kings, and those leaders who refused to comply with the government's request were dealt with ruthlessly, by the new Liberian military - the Liberian Frontier Force.

Indigenous laborers worked long hours without pay and yet those who benefited from their hard work included the government. Nass (2000) remarks:

Thus, the advantages of the contract labor generally benefited only a minute percentage of the population in government positions and their proxies. From the point of view of the contract laborers, the contract was only in favor of those who sent them and those who employed them, with total disregard for the laborers. The terms of these contracts made one wonder if they were not worse than the slave trade (p.12).

The environment, in which the workers lived and worked were unfit for animals let alone humans. Nass, (2000) describes the living conditions of workers on the Firestone rubber plantation:

Conditions of the laborers in the farm could best be described as very appalling and at worst as inhuman and satanic. The workers were quartered in dingy shanties with little or no regard for the provision of most basic social amenities. The Corporation was only concerned with their labor output and had no commitment to their welfare and survival. The Corporation only dealt with the Liberian government. Their only concern was to ensure that any short fall in the stock of fit laborers resulting from sickness and death was replaced by the Liberian government. The contract laborer was never paid nor given medical care (p.13).

The forms of oppressive conditions under which, the indigenous Liberians worked were not that different from those experienced by the slaves in America. It appears as though, the indigenous Liberians paid for the transgressions committed by white Americans, who had previously enslaved the Black Americans. However, it was also obvious that the once oppressed slaves had indeed, become the new oppressors in Liberia.

Prior to 1925, many European countries had also taken advantage of the "abundance of labor" in Liberia and treated the indigenous laborers with the same

inhuman conditions. For example, in 1890, the French recruited Liberians to work on the Panama Canal and to serve in their colonial army. Again, in 1897, the Legislature of Liberia granted a German firm a labor recruiting concession. By 1925, Liberia had become the breeding ground for modern day slavery. The situation of forced labor- and even slavery- began to gain international attention, with constant reports coming into America about the working conditions of indigenous Liberians. In 1930, the League of Nations decided to investigate these reports. After the investigation, it was uncovered that the government had, indeed, been engaging in forced labor and slavery. Unfortunately, this discovery failed to end the practice. In fact, many indigenous Liberians were murdered by the government for complying with the League of Nations during their investigation.

Indigenous Resistance Against the Americo-Liberian Oppression

For over one hundred years the Americo-Liberian political party, the True Whig Party, ruled Liberia with an iron fist and kept the indigenous populations isolated from political participation, and socio- economic growth. The True Whig Party was the only legalized political party in the country and as such, faced no opposition. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the indigenous Liberians fiercely resisted their oppressors in the same way as the freed slaves had resisted slavery in America. As noted by Omonijo (1990), “History has been largely silent on the heroic resistance by the local population to the new system of overlordism. At various times, the indigenous Liberians fought their new rulers who had succeeded largely, in robbing them of their political rights” (p.12). Much of the indigenous resistance came from the Kru, the Gola, and the Grebo ethnic groups, which fought vigorously against the expansion of the Americo- Liberian territory in the country. As the Americo-Liberians began to expand their communities, many indigenous Liberians lost their homes and properties. To add insult to injury, the government passed the Hut Tax law, which required the indigenous people to pay tax on whatever properties they owned, a law, which only led to, increased resistance against the government.

In 1943, William V.S. Tubman, an Americo- Liberian, became president of the Republic and was considered a friend of the indigenous Liberians. While in power, he built schools, clinics and other facilities in the tribal hinterland of the country. In 1948, the right to vote was extended to indigenous Liberians. However, many of them could not vote due to the Constitutional Land Clause, which required that in order to vote an individual had to own a certain amount of land. Tubman also introduced the Open Door Policy, which allowed the free movement of trade between the tribal hinterland and the developed part of the country.

Although, Tubman made some positive contributions to the welfare of the indigenous Liberians, his government consisted almost entirely of Americo- Liberians, many of whom were his relatives. It is argued that the attempts made by Tubman to “equalize” Liberians were a political strategy for maintaining power. With regards to his open door policy, Liebenow (1987) argues that this policy was, at base, “a calculated strategy of economic development, which was designed not only to enhance the foundation of privilege for the Americo-Liberian elites but also to give them the revenue for maintaining a more modern and efficient system of control over the tribal majority”

(p.59). It is impossible to know the main objective of Tubman; however, what is certain is that he made some positive contributions to the well being of the indigenous Liberians: something that previous leaders had failed to accomplish. After the death of Tubman in 1971, vice president William R. Tolbert became president. Tolbert's coming into office sparked a new wave of activism amongst students and others against the Americo-Liberian rule, which inevitably would lead to its overthrow in 1979.

The Tolbert era (1971-79), was marked by further exclusion of indigenous representation within the government and was stamped with nepotism, like his predecessors. For example, he made his brother, Stephen Tolbert, his Minister of Finance, while his daughter, Willie Mae Tolbert, became a Board member of the Bank of Liberia. Again, his son-in-law, Tonieh King, was appointed Commissioner for Immigration, and another son-in-law, Capt. Jehu Richardson, also became Captain of Air Liberia and Member of the Board (Liebenow, 1987). President Tolbert, in effect, ran the country as if it was his private property.

As the Liberian economy continued to decline, and with further isolation of the indigenous populations, various activist groups were formed to raise national and international awareness of the injustices many Liberians faced. In 1973, The Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA) was founded by students and professors at the University of Liberia, whose leaders included Togba-Nah Tipoteh, an indigenous Liberian, and Dr. Amos Sawyer an Americo-Liberian, and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Humanities. The movement included Labor Organizations, Marketers, and other Student Movements, with the aim of raising public awareness about the ills of the Americo-Liberian government, while calling for change. Its program called for the nationalization of major economic enterprises, the confiscation of the illegal land holdings of the Whig Party, and the punishment of government corruption (Adebajo, 2002). The Organization also had branches in Algeria, Ghana, Nigeria, Gambia, Zambia, Mauritius, and Kenya to also raise public awareness of other injustices that were happening in Africa, such as the Apartheid system of South Africa (Dolo, 1996).

Another organization that was created to combat the settler domination in Liberia was the Progressive Alliance of Liberians (PAL). Liberian students who were studying in America, and was headed by Gabriel Bacchus Matthews created the organization. Their goal was to challenge the Americo-Liberian government, through the legal process, and to appeal to young Liberians (Dolo, 1996). To create awareness and recruit new members, several demonstrations against the government were held, with the most notable being the "rice riot" of 1979.

In early April 1979, the government announced that the price of a bag of rice, Liberia's staple food was going to be increased from \$22.00 to \$30.00 dollars. This huge increase in the cost of rice upset many Liberians, since many of them lived in poverty hence could not afford the new price. Moreover, the sudden increase was to benefit Tolbert himself and some members of his cabinet financially (Adebajo, 2002; Dolo, 1996). To voice their grievances over the government's decision, The Progressive Alliance of Liberians organized a demonstration. On April 14, 1979, two thousand Liberians took to the streets of Monrovia, the nation's capital, in protest. The group consisted of students from the University of Liberia, market women, social workers and ordinary citizens. As the protestors demonstrated, the police shot into the crowd, turning the march into a riot. At the end of the riot, more than 40 students lay dead, with 400

others wounded. The police arrested thirty-three of the demonstration organizers upon the orders of the President, who alleged that the demonstration was an attempt to overthrow his government. He charged them with treason, but later granted them general amnesty (Adebajo, 2002). This incidence set the stage for the final show down between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous Liberians.

On April 12, 1980, a group calling itself The People's Revolutionary Council (PRC), attacked the president's mansion, and killed him and the key members of his cabinet. The group, led by Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, went on the air and announced that a coup had taken place and that President Tolbert had been killed. Prior to the coup not much was known about its participants, except that they were all soldiers in the Armed Forces of Liberia. Interestingly, all 17 members on the Council were indigenous Liberians, mostly from the Krahn ethnic group. This ethnic composition of the PRC later engendered a new conflict for Liberia: an ethnic/ civil war. However, April 12, 1980, ended 132 years of settler oppression and began the era of indigenous rule" (Dolo, 1996). After the coup, many indigenous Liberians rejoiced, believing that years of oppression had finally, ended, and now they would be able to enjoy the freedom and liberty they had been denied for so long, by the Americo-Liberians.

The Doe Regime: 1980-1990

The new government, headed by Master Sergeant Doe, and who had declared himself president, promised to return the government of Liberia over to its citizens. Again, he pledged that he would "curb the alarming rate of corruption in the country, and halt the insensitivity of government to the plight of the poor". He also vowed to build a new society in which there was justice, human dignity, equal opportunities and fair treatment for all before the law. Unfortunately, Doe did not live up to his promises. Instead he became the epitome of what he claimed to be against: like the Americo-Liberians, he, too, became an oppressor. He began his oppressive rule by retaliating against the Americo-Liberians. Dolo (1996) remarks:

Hostility toward settlers was horrifying. Many members of the Tolbert cabinet were arrested, assaulted, jailed, tried, and 13 of them were executed. Settlers watched their properties get ransacked. And even more painfully, they watched powerlessly and in horror as their wives and children were treated with every level of discontent that the soldiers and their supporters could supply (p. 53).

Doe did not only murder members of the Americo-Liberian elite class: he also fired all of those members from the government whom he did not execute, replacing them with indigenous Liberians, many of whom had very little education. Interestingly, many of those he placed in high offices belonged to his ethnic group, the Krahn, thereby isolating the rest of the indigenous groups. Alao (1998) observes: "The new lease of life which many indigenous Liberians anticipated, did not materialize, as Doe, in whom they placed this expectation, was more interested in entrenching himself in power"(p.10). He took refuge in his Krahn constituency to seek support and ethnic solidarity: he wanted the Krahn to rule Liberia. This political strategy, based on ethnic loyalty, later caused divisions both in the government and within the Liberian society. However, his realization that the Krahn constituted merely 5 percent of the Liberian population, and the

reality that members of this ethnic group were not known to have occupied any positions of importance, caused him to embark on the rapid promotion of the Krahn people (Alao, 1998). On the other hand, it is also important to note that the Krahn ethnic group was not the only group isolated during the 132 years of the Americo-Liberian rule: all the indigenous groups were isolated from the economic and political sectors of the country during this period.

It seemed, at first, that the Doe administration would be free of corruption, and that the government was going to use its funds to improve the standard of living for Liberians, and invest in the development of human capital. However, Doe did not honor his promise of ending corruption; his government was infested with it. Within six weeks, following his inaugural speech, he collected a \$600,000 “loan” from the International Trust Company of Liberia (Nass, 2000), to build a private house in his village; the “loan” was never repaid. Other officials in his government also got money to build private mansions in their hometowns and owned several properties in the city, all bought with the stolen money of the Liberian people. Adebajo (2002) writes: “Doe and his officials illegally acquired wealth and land as blatantly as the True Whigs once did. Revenue from logging concessions and fuel went straight to Doe’s private funds; even U. S. food assistance was diverted into private pockets.” By the end of his rule, Doe and his cronies had stolen a reported \$300 million in public funds. Doe’s dishonesty and corruption led to the further decay of the Liberian society and its economy.

Doe’s promise of returning the Liberian government to its people was also never implemented. Instead, he became a dictator and banned all political parties from assembling, including The Progressive Alliance of Liberia, MOJA, and other student organizations, while strikes and demonstrations were also banned (Nnoli, 1998). Democracy was no longer a concern for him, thus from the beginning of his rule, to the end, his administration was accused of gross human rights violations. Those who did not support his ideologies were often beaten, jailed or killed; and many of his victims were students and lecturers from the University of Liberia.

Although all forms of opposition to Doe’s government were banned, student activists and others were relentless in their pursuit for democracy and justice, many of whom would pay the ultimate price. On August 22, 1984, the Armed Forces of Liberia, upon orders from Doe, raided the University of Liberia, after the student union had questioned Doe’s government about a timetable for the return to democratic rule. As the soldiers raided the campus, hundreds of students and staff members were beaten, wounded, killed, and many female students were raped (Nass, 2000). After the incident, Doe dismissed the University Senate and administration, and replaced them with staff loyal to him.

Prior to the 1984 incident, five students from the University of Liberia were sentenced to death after being tried by a military tribunal for questioning a policy that had abolished competitive student politics on the campus. After the verdict, students and other citizens strongly expressed their disapproval with the decision and protested against it, and a day before the execution was to take place; Doe granted the students executive pardon (Nass, 2000). The press of Liberia also faced constant persecution from Doe. It is said that the press had suffered under Doe’s administration more than any past government in the history of Liberia. Journalists were often beaten, jailed and some killed

for writing the truth, and in some instances, newspaper houses were closed down: freedom of speech did not exist in Doe's Liberia.

To prevent further opposition to his government and to remain in power, Doe turned against those who had helped put him in power. Alao (1998), writes, "As a means to this end, he soon began to eliminate his former associates in the coup plot, so that within three years, all 16 colleagues who plotted the coup with him had either been killed or fled to neighboring countries" (p.10). One of such colleagues was Thomas Quiwonkpa, who belonged to the Gio and the Mano ethnic groups. Before overthrowing the Americo-Liberian government, he was a senior officer in the military of the Tolbert government and was well educated. However, as Doe continued to squander the resources of the country and oppressed the citizens, Quiwonkpa grew unhappy with his administration, arguing that the latter had failed to turn power over to the people of Liberia. Consequently, following the presidential elections, of November 1985, in which Doe declared himself the winner, Quiwonkpa, citing among other reasons, the "blatant rigging" of the elections, staged a coup against the Doe government. The coup, however, was unsuccessful and Quiwonkpa was brutally murdered (Alao, 1998). Following the failure of the coup, Doe deemed all members of the Gio and the Mano ethnic groups as his enemies, due to the fact that Quiwonkpa belonged to these groups. Severe punishment was inflicted on these groups by the government and it is believed that countless numbers of women and children were brutally beaten and murdered. This incident contributed to the immediate reasons for the current Liberian civil war.

The Beginning of the Liberian Civil War

On December 24, 1989, a group of 15,000 rebels calling themselves the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia from the neighboring Cote d'Ivoire. The rebel group, headed by Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian descendant who had served as the Director-General, of the General Services Agency (GSA) when Doe took over power in 1980. In 1984, as Doe's repressive rule continued, Taylor fled the country and came to the United States. Following his departure, he was accused by the government of embezzling \$1 million in public funds, thus Doe requested his arrest and extradition to Liberia to face charges. Taylor was arrested and imprisoned in Boston, while the Liberian government worked on his extradition. As the extradition time approached, in 1985, it was alleged that he had escaped from prison and his whereabouts remained unknown until his invasion of the country in 1989 (Aboagye, 1999). Over the years, many Liberians and some scholars have questioned how Taylor escaped from an American prison; it has since been believed that he might have been deliberately released from prison by the American government.

The stated objective of the NPFL was to remove Doe from office, arguing that Liberians had suffered too long under Doe's regime (Omonijo, 1990). After entering the country from the Ivory Coast, the rebels made their way to Nimba County, the home of Quiwonkpa, whom Doe had murdered, following his failed coup. They encountered no difficulties in recruiting members from the Gio and Mano ethnic groups to join their cause. The willingness of these two ethnic groups to join the rebels was the result of the atrocities they had suffered under the Doe regime. Thus they sought revenge on Doe and

his Krahn group. To help further trust and support for his cause, Charles Taylor, deceitfully, told the Gios and the Manos that his effort was a continuation of Quiwonkpa's failed coup in 1985. Rienner (2002), notes that "This manipulation of ethnic differences predictably led to the NPFL attacks on the Krahns and Mandingos in its advance to the Monrovia capital, and many Krahn civilians were killed in the earlier stages of the war" (p.42). By 1990, thousands of Liberians had been killed, because of their ethnicity.

The atrocities that many Liberians faced during the early stages of the war were not only experienced at the hands of the rebels; the Armed Forces of Liberia, which consisted of mostly Krahns, were just as guilty as the rebels, since they, too, upon the orders of Doe, embarked on a massacre of the Gios and the Manos and those who opposed him. Innocent men, women and children were brutally murdered, and entire villages were set ablaze. Equally disturbing were the reports of hundreds of babies and children that were thrown into wells to drown after their parents had been killed (William, 2002). The senseless massacre of hundreds of innocent Liberians in Nimba county sparked off national and international criticism of the Doe government, and several groups appealed to the government to end the hostilities. One of those voices was the then U.S. Ambassador to Liberia, James Bishop. He called for an end to the hostilities and asked the government to declare Nimba a disaster zone for relief aid to be sent to the region, but the government declined his request (William, 2002). Doe continued to stand his ground and refused to resign and threatened that more lives would be destroyed, if the NPFL did not surrender to the government.

By April 1990, the structure of the NPFL was beginning fracture. Commander Price Yormie Johnson had split from the NPFL and formed the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, after Taylor had executed some of his soldiers for their defeat by government forces in Ganta (Aboagye, 1999). The split between Taylor and Johnson now created a second war front, as both fought against each other, as well as the government. However, the rebel groups made their way to the capital, Monrovia, and the stronghold, which Doe had had on the country for years, began to weaken. The West African states, at this time, began to make constructive efforts to bring peace into the country.

ECOMOG and Peace Efforts in Liberia

In 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), was created to promote regional economic integration and friendship among its member states. In 1978, the Committee Protocol on Non- Aggression, which was established in April 1976, was expanded when the protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defense was signed. Under the protocol all acts of hostility or aggression on a member state constituted a threat against the entire community (Aloa, 1998). Therefore, as innocent Liberians continued to lose their lives, leaders of the ECOWAS met in Banjul, the Gambia, from August 6-7, 1990, to discuss the Liberian crisis. Under the auspices of the ECOWAS Peace Mediation Committee, and with the approval of the members' heads of state, the ECOWAS concluded that something needed to be done quickly to resolve and to restore peace in Liberia. Nigeria's Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida, was at the fore front of the campaign. Consequently, the ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group

(ECOMOG) was sent to Liberia in late 1990, consisting of soldiers sent from the various member states.

Although it was agreed that a peace keeping force should be sent to Liberia, some member states, including Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast, opposed it arguing that such force would only prevent an imminent victory for Charles Taylor's NPFL, which cause they supported (Alao, 1998). Mali and Togo also refused to contribute troops to the peace force. In fact, Burkina Faso had provided some of its prisoners to join the NPFL and had hosted some of its training camps. Some members were also concerned about Nigeria's dominance in the peace process and saw it as a mechanism for further dominance in the region. Also opposing the ECOWAS intervention was Charles Taylor, who believed that Nigeria could not be trusted, especially since its leader, Babangida and Doe were close friends. Babangida was also criticized by his people, for many Nigerians saw the dispatching of ECOMOG, on the part of Babangida, as one of his preservation strategies (Alao, 1998). The Liberian population, on the other hand, embraced the idea and saw the ECOMOG as the answer to their prayers. President Doe and the INPFL leader, Prince Johnson, also supported it.

On August 24, 1990, three thousand five hundred ECOMOG soldiers arrived in Monrovia. Their specified mandate was to, maintain law and order, protect life and property, maintain essential services, provide security to the interim administration, observe elections and to conduct normal police duties in Liberia (Aboagye, 1999). As the naval ships made their way into the seaport, missiles fired by the NPFL, which opposed their intervention, hit them. On the other hand, the peacekeepers were welcomed by Prince Johnson's INPFL rebel group, which now controlled the seaport. There were also tremendous amounts of celebration from the Liberian civilian population. Upon their arrival, the ECOMOG took over the roles of a humanitarian group, as many starving civilians made their way to their camps to receive food. The soldiers were very generous and shared their food, and the sick and wounded also received free medical treatment from the doctors, while refugees fleeing the country were evacuated to neighboring countries by the ECOMOG Navy, and the corpses that lay in the streets of the city were also removed and buried. It is important to note that the ECOMOG was the only symbol of order and help in Liberia at the time (Nass, 2000).

After a week of arriving in Monrovia, the peace keeping force successfully set up an Interim Government of National Unity (IGNU), which was headed by Dr. Amos Sawyer, Professor and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Liberia. The Interim government was set up in accordance with the Banjul Resolution of 1990, which made it clear that whatever temporary government that was going to be set up in Liberia, should exclude all three warring factions. However, the war between Doe's AFL forces, the NPFL, and the INPFL continued.

The capture and the inhuman execution of Doe left many wondering how effective the ECOMOG was, as they were unable to prevent Prince Johnson from capturing him. Doe's death caused his Krahn constituents of the AFL and other supporters to battle Prince Johnson's forces, as well as those of Charles Taylor. However, Taylor saw Doe's death as an opportunity for him to claim presidency of the country.

The ECOWAS, realizing what had happened with the death of Doe, changed the ECOMOG mandate from peacekeepers to peace enforcers and the ECOMOG was given orders to enforce an immediate cease-fire on September 12, 1990 (Alao, 1998).

Unfortunately, those who had come to preserve life and to bring peace to Liberians now had to destroy some of these lives in the quest for peace and stability. More troops were brought in from Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal to help in enforcing the peace. The ECOMOG wasted no time in enforcing the new peace mandate, and with more troops and weapons, they were able to successfully get all the warring factions to sign a cease-fire agreement by November 1990. However, throughout the 1990s, there was constant fighting between the warring factions, as the ECOWAS continued with its search for peace in Liberia.

In August 1996, the Heads of State of the ECOWAS member countries met in Abuja, Nigeria to review the Liberian situation. This meeting was a follow up to the 1995 Accord. The three main points highlighted at the meeting were: (1) when and how to reschedule elections to seek a legitimate government for Liberia; (2) when and how to revive disarmament and demobilization; and (3) whether and how to change the structure and membership of the Council of States (Nass, 2000). As part of the Accord, leaders of the three major warring factions were to oversee the disarmament of their fighters for free and fair elections to be held by 1997.

All the major warring factions agreed to the 1996 Abuja Accord and disarmament began in November 1996, as scheduled. Although, the pace of disarmament was slow, it proved to be successful and on July 23, 1997, elections were held in Liberia, and Charles Taylor won thus becoming the 22nd president of the country. However, his regime was never stable due to his oppressive policies and human rights abuses of those who opposed his government. In addition, he has been named as suspect in the trafficking of arms to help other dissidents of the region to destabilize their governments, and has also used the country's diamonds to buy weapons. Recently, the United Nations declared him a war criminal and has been seeking his arrest and trial.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the Liberian civil war has claimed thousands of innocent Liberian lives, including women and children. It has not only created social, economic and political decay and ethnic tensions, but sadly, thousands of children have also been turned into soldiers, who have no understanding of the many grizzly crimes they have committed against their own people. The war has been the result of the economic and political exclusion policies implemented by the Americo-Liberians, since their arrival in the region in 1822. This political strategy has now turned the ethnic groups against each other, whilst the aspiring political leaders are capitalizing on the issue to their selfish advantage. In August 2003, Charles Taylor was forced into exile in Nigeria, to assist the ECOWAS to achieve temporary peace in the country. However, his exile does not rule out another flare up of the conflict, if the fundamental issues of economic and political exclusion of the ethnic groups are not addressed. It is, therefore, important for the peace efforts to consider that Liberia needs a democratic government, which gives equal representation and opportunities to all Liberians. This policy would ensure equal representation and freedom, and would remove unnecessary tensions among the various groups in the country.

It is also suggested that the United Nations enacts an international law that would stop those western nations involved in buying illegal diamonds from Liberian officials,

who use such profits to finance their selfish political goals and the bloody civil wars. It should also put an embargo on arms sales to Liberia, until the conflict has been resolved.

Finally, African states and their regional organizations, particularly the ECOWAS, and the new African Union, should be more active in pursuing peace both in Liberia and across the African continent.

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