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 978-1-108-46187-0 — Abolition in Sierra Leone: Re-Building Lives and Identities in  
 Nineteenth-Century West Africa  
 Richard Peter Anderson  
 Excerpt  
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## Introduction

### *Sierra Leone: African Colony, African Diaspora*

The history of Sierra Leone is one of departures and arrivals. Between 1581 and 1867, European slave traders carried away an estimated 389,000 Africans from the regions in and around what now constitutes the country of Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup> In the late eighteenth century, as Britain began contemplating the legal abolition of the slave trade, Sierra Leone became the destination for a reverse migration of enslaved Africans and their descendants who sought to return from the Americas. Between 1787 and 1800 more than two thousand formerly enslaved men, women, and children sailed from Britain, Nova Scotia, and Jamaica to populate a nascent colony financed by British abolitionists and like-minded businessmen. On the coast of West Africa these three waves of colonists hoped to create what abolitionist Granville Sharp called a “province of freedom.”

Starting in 1808, Sierra Leone’s fledgling settler population was joined by a fourth, much larger wave of forced migrants who never reached the Americas. Britain’s 1807 Act to Abolish the Slave Trade led to the deployment of the Royal Navy to intercept slave ships along three thousand miles of West African coastline. Freetown became the epicenter of Britain’s judicial and military campaign against the slave trade, serving as a base for the Navy’s squadron and the point of disembarkation for Africans on captured vessels. Between 1808 and 1863, an estimated 99,752 Africans disembarked from slave vessels at Freetown’s waterfront. As many as 72,284 resettled in the Sierra Leone colony; the rest were forcibly relocated to fulfill the labor and defense needs of Britain’s Atlantic empire.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 18–19.

<sup>2</sup> For the calculation of these estimates, see Chapter 1 and Richard Anderson, “The Diaspora of Sierra Leone’s Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and ‘Liberation’ at Freetown, 1808–1863,” *African Economic History*, 41 (2013): 101–138.

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Known first as Captured Negroes, and after 1821 as Liberated Africans, these ostensibly freed captives were drawn from countless societies across West and West Central Africa. Once legally emancipated before Freetown's Vice-Admiralty Court and Courts of Mixed Commission, these Africans of diverse origins began new lives along the narrow Sierra Leone peninsula, a laterite outcropping some twenty-five miles long by ten miles wide. The result was one of the most geographically concentrated African diasporic communities of the nineteenth century and one of the most ethnolinguistically heterogeneous societies in the Atlantic world.

This book explores the origins, experiences, and identities of this population released by the British Navy. It is at once a history of colonial Africa and of the African diaspora. The diverting of freed slaves to Sierra Leone was the third largest movement of Africans in the nineteenth-century Atlantic, exceeded only by the Brazilian and Cuban slave trades. As a place of disembarkation for Africans on slave ships after 1807, Freetown was exceeded only by Rio de Janeiro, Bahia, Havana, and Pernambuco. Sierra Leone became one of the largest communities of Africans forcibly displaced by the transatlantic trade, albeit a vastly different colonial setting than on the other side of the Atlantic. The Sierra Leone colony was also Britain's first permanent colonial endeavor in sub-Saharan Africa and the location of some of the earliest Protestant missions to the continent. The society that emerged in Sierra Leone was simultaneously part of the African diaspora and early colonial Africa.

### Sierra Leone: Abolition and Imperialism

The historiography on Sierra Leone has been reinvigorated over the past decade. The 2007 bicentennial of the 1807 Abolition Act has prompted new attention from imperial and naval historians, while the conclusion of Sierra Leone's civil war (1991–2002) enabled foreign researchers to return and undertake fieldwork and archival research.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Gibril Cole, C. Magbaily Fyle, Mac Dixon-Fyle, and

<sup>3</sup> Alexander X. Byrd, *Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants across the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008); Paul E. Lovejoy and Suzanne Schwarz (eds.), *Slavery, Abolition, and the Transition to Colonialism in Sierra Leone* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014).

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Joseph J. Bangura have continued the rich tradition of Sierra Leonean scholars writing the history of their country.<sup>4</sup> Several recent studies have looked at Sierra Leone as a case study in imperial history, examining how policies foreshadowed both post-emancipation societies around the Atlantic and later British colonies in Africa.<sup>5</sup> Sierra Leone has resumed its place in the history of British antislavery, with historians increasingly acknowledging the role of the colony in the burgeoning antislavery movement of late eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the historiographical effervescence on Sierra Leone's place in British abolition, the broader historiography of abolitionism has remained focused on the historical processes leading up to the 1807 Act: Why Britain? Why at that moment?<sup>7</sup> There has been a great deal of research on *abolitionism* as a humanitarian campaign, and far less on *abolition* as the implementation of that campaign's parliamentary success.<sup>8</sup> A peculiar feature in this historiography is the scant attention on Africans for whom the Abolition Act and its naval enforcement was meant to help. This study, by contrast, explores the human

<sup>4</sup> Joseph J. Bangura, *The Temne of Sierra Leone: African Agency in the Making of a British Colony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Gibril Cole, *The Krio of West Africa: Islam, Culture, and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013); Mac Dixon-Fyle and Gibril Cole (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Krio of Sierra Leone* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Turner "The Limits of Abolition: Government, Saints, and the 'African Question,' c. 1780–1820," *The English Historical Review*, 112.446 (April 1997): 319–357; Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom's Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Bronwen Everill, *Abolition and Empire in Sierra Leone and Liberia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The literature on British abolition is vast. See in particular Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944); Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Drescher, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Brown, *Moral Capital*. For the history of British antislavery after abolition, see Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Padraic X. Scanlan, "MacCarthy's Skull: The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone, 1792–1823," unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2013, 6.

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consequences for the supposed beneficiaries of this campaign, in other words, the immediate human impact of abolition. The emphasis is not on Sierra Leone as a case study in British imperial history; it is, rather, a history of a particular kind of African diaspora formed from British imperial and abolitionist policies. The central theme of this book is how Africans, forcibly removed from their homelands, rebuilt new lives, communities, and collective identities in an early British colony in Africa.

The lives and experiences of recaptives provide unique comparative insights within the field of studies on post-emancipation societies. The “age of emancipation” has become a major field within the historiography on slavery and the Black Atlantic.<sup>9</sup> In the nine decades after 1800, between seven and eight million people around the Atlantic world passed through a variety of emancipation processes.<sup>10</sup> Sierra Leone was an early site of the “mighty experiment” where Britain hoped to display the advantages of free labor in tropical agriculture. While most slave societies in the age of emancipation comprised different proportions of African and colony-born slaves, all Liberated Africans were born in Africa and thus provide an African perspective on responses to emancipation and the meaning of “liberation.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Howard Temperley (ed.), *After Slavery: Emancipation and Its Discontents* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Seymour Drescher, *The Mighty Experiment: Free Labor versus Slavery in British Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Domingues da Silva, David Eltis, Philip Misevich, and Olatunji Ojo, “The Diaspora of Africans Liberated from Slave Ships in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of African History*, 55.3 (November 2014): 348.

<sup>11</sup> For Liberated Africans in the British Caribbean, see Monica Schuler, “Alas, Alas, Kongo”: *A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Schuler, “Liberated Central Africans in Nineteenth-Century Guyana,” in Linda M. Heywood (ed.), *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Roseanne Marion Adderley, *New Negroes from Africa: Slave Trade Abolition and Free African Settlement in the Nineteenth Century Caribbean* (Bloomington:

The nineteenth century is often heralded as an age of abolition. But it was also an age of massive forced migrations. The trans-shipment of Liberated Africans to face adjudication before British courts was one such strand, a redirection of the coerced labor migrations originally destined for Brazil and the Caribbean. As a by-product of the transatlantic slave trade, Sierra Leone's recaptives represented part of a broader African diaspora in the Atlantic, albeit under different conditions and circumstances on arrival. The combination of a large population of African birth arriving between 1808 and 1863, and the unique colonial project of forging a Christianized "free" labor society, makes Sierra Leone a fruitful comparative case study in the social and cultural history of the African diaspora. Scholars of the diaspora have largely chosen to work on migrations to the Americas rather than diasporas within Africa. As Pier Larson points out, this emphasis on transatlantic diasporas at the expense of diasporas in the Indian Ocean and within Africa effaces the diverse experiences of millions of Africans in diaspora.<sup>12</sup> This book argues that the concept of diaspora applies to Sierra Leone's Liberated African communities in ways that illuminate processes of ethnogenesis across the Black Atlantic.

David Northrup was the first to suggest that Sierra Leone's recaptive community offered a fruitful comparative case study to African identity formation in the Americas. Like slaves in the Americas, Liberated Africans experienced the trauma of enslavement, forced migration, and disembarkation in an alien, colonial landscape. But the differences between the experiences of Liberated African and their New World counterparts are equally insightful. For Liberated Africans, the key factors in community formation were the relative state of freedom combined with far more robust attempts to convert them and to instruct their children in an Anglican fashion. As Northrup points out, "recaptives' greater freedom shows how the process of community and identity formation operated when removed from the coercive

Indiana University Press, 2006). For Brazil, see Beatriz G. Mamigonian, *Africanos Livres: A Abolição do Tráfico de Escravos no Brasil* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Pier M. Larson, "Horrid Journeying: Narratives of Enslavement and the Global African Diaspora," *Journal of World History*, 19.4 (2008): 443.

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power of the slave master.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the important administrative and ecclesiastical role played by Protestant missionaries and their attempts to extirpate “idolatry” and Islam were impediments to this freedom.

The study of ethnogenesis in the New World is often plagued by scanty evidence, recorded by outside observers, and from late in the process.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Sierra Leone provides perhaps the best-documented diasporic community in the Black Atlantic due to the recordkeeping of Freetown’s Liberated African Department and the copious records of the Church Missionary Society, Wesleyan Methodists, and eyewitness accounts of contemporary observers. In contrast to the Americas where African origins are often difficult to unravel, Sierra Leone sources allow a study of people’s regional origins and often the specific home states, towns, or even villages. This level of detail in tracing origins allows an examination of the processes of identity formation among different cohorts of Liberated Africans during fifty-six years of settlement.

This detailed documentation pertains not only to the mass migration of Africans on intercepted vessels but to individual life histories. Most of the estimated 12.5 million victims of the transatlantic trade left no account of their lives and experiences. Yet a disproportionate number of recaptives did exactly that. The documentary record of Sierra Leone as a diaspora born of the slave trade is at its richest in the personal narratives left by those who experienced the journey. This includes the well-known narratives of Samuel Crowther, Joseph Wright, and others among Freetown’s educated Christian converts. But there remains a treasure trove of less known and unpublished life stories. These narratives recount experiences of warfare and enslavement that were common in nineteenth-century West Africa, but also unique life trajectories as unwilling migrants entering a peculiar colonial experiment. Whenever possible, these individual narratives take a central place within this study.

Missionary records, when approached with requisite caution, are similarly rich sources for how Liberated Africans interacted with each other, the degree to which they perpetuated the religious and cultural

<sup>13</sup> David Northrup, “Becoming African: Identity Formation among Liberated Slaves in Nineteenth-Century Sierra Leone,” *Slavery and Abolition*, 27.1 (April 2006): 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

practices of their homelands, and how they responded to the offering and imposition of Christianity and European culture. Sources written by individuals in institutions antagonistic to African religions and cultures unintentionally became records of cultural vitality. Moreover, many recaptive converts became missionaries, catechists, and schoolmasters, meaning that they often documented the religions of their homelands in the Liberated African diaspora.

This study builds on Northrup's argument for studying Liberated African identity formation as a comparative case study in diasporic ethnogenesis. It largely substantiates Northrup's arguments regarding recaptive identity formation, though with some considerable caveats. Northrup has suggested that the dynamics of Liberated African society are best understood as a complementary process of "Africanization" and "creolization."<sup>15</sup> This terminology posits two simultaneous and connected transformations in terms of evolving identities and the impact of European education and proselytization. Northrup's conception of "Africanization" seeks to describe "the construction of radically altered senses of their African identities."<sup>16</sup> But as Northrup concedes, few (if any) first-generation Liberated Africans saw themselves primarily as "Africans" or possessed an inchoate pan-African consciousness.<sup>17</sup> His definition of creolization in Sierra Leone focuses primarily on the acquisition of the English language and of Christianization. This conception of creolization excludes the sizable population of Liberated Africans – including many Muslims – who consciously abstained from official attempts to impose an Anglophone, Christian society.

Within Sierra Leone historiography the dominant narrative remains the rapid acculturation of Liberated Africans into a creole (or Krio)

<sup>15</sup> The ideas Northrup first presented in "Becoming African" are elaborated on in David Northrup, "Identity among Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone," in Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Matt D. Childs, and James Sidbury (eds.), *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 21–41; and Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173–189.

<sup>16</sup> Northrup, "Identity among Liberated Africans," 24.

<sup>17</sup> The problem with this terminology is that it suggests that Liberated Africans were primarily beginning to see themselves as "Africans." Yet what Northrup is really describing is a process in which Liberated Africans "alienated from the rural villages of their homelands . . . began to reidentify themselves with the broader population whose fate they shared." Northrup, *Africa's Discovery of Europe*, 174.

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society through Anglo-Christian education. More recently, though, Sierra Leonean scholars such as Gibril Cole have reaffirmed the important role of Islam in the development of colonial society. Placing Islam at the center of Sierra Leone historiography is an important corrective in studying a country with a Muslim majority. This study similarly places Yoruba *oriṣa* worship as central to a large contingent within Sierra Leonean society, and considers the interplay between Christianity, Islam, and African cosmologies in identity formation.

More broadly, scholars of the African diaspora including James Sweet, Toby Green, and Megan Vaughan have reconceptualized the concept of creolization as a far more complex and dynamic set of sociocultural changes than the unidirectional adoption of certain Western and European linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural practices by Africans removed from their societies of birth.<sup>18</sup> While this study does not attempt to contribute to the extensive historiography on creolization, it does highlight one particular challenge within the literature: the lack of chronological specificity in tracing such processes of cultural and societal change over decades and centuries.<sup>19</sup> This book presents a more geographically and temporally specific case study. Liberated Africans arrived over a period of fifty-six years and settled across a single peninsula. Assessing this group of Africans who experienced enslavement, emancipation, and colonization affords a more nuanced investigation into whether creolization involved people dramatically

<sup>18</sup> Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 53.2 (1999): 251–288; Linda Heywood and John Thornton, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1586–1660* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jane Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). A further complication arises from whether “creolization” is taken as a metaphor for cultural mixtures, or more concretely for the emergence of a creolized language. The latter approach is adopted by Pier M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Toby Green, *The Rise of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> As Sidbury and Cañizares-Esguerra remark, “it sometimes seems that generalization [about creolization and ethnogenesis] leap ahead of the careful empirical mapping of experiences on which they should be based.” James Sidbury and Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “Mapping Ethnogenesis in the Early Modern Atlantic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 68.2 (April 2011): 182.

realtering their lifeways and terms of self-identification, or if this was a cross-generational process.

The various uses of “creole” and “creolization” are further complicated by the fact that the descendants of Liberated Africans in Sierra Leone are known as the Krio or Creole people.<sup>20</sup> The term has assumed ethnic connotations to describe a population of mixed ancestry in and around Freetown. Sierra Leonean scholars such as Akintola Wyse and Gibril Cole insist that the term “Krio” derives not from “creole” but from the Yoruba language, attributing it variously to the Yoruba *akiriyo* (“those who go about paying visits”) or *kiri* (“to trade”).<sup>21</sup> The etymology of the term is not in itself important, except for its implications for historical analysis. By attributing a different etymology to Krio, the meaning of the term is detached from colonial birth. The corollary is that Liberated Africans could have conceivably self-identified as “Krio,” whereas earlier scholarship suggested that the term applied only to their “creole” offspring. The consensus largely remains that an overarching “Krio” or “creole” identity, encompassing the descendants of Liberated Africans and settlers, only emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

While this study explores processes of cultural and social adjustment that are often labeled as creolization, it is not a study of the Krio/Creole.<sup>22</sup> The following chapters focus primarily on those who experienced enslavement in Africa and British naval interdiction. In doing so,

<sup>20</sup> See David Skinner and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, “Misunderstandings Arising from the Use of the Term ‘Creole’ in the Literature on Sierra Leone,” *Africa*, 47.3 (1977): 305–319; A. J. G. Wyse, “On Misunderstandings Arising from the Use of the Term ‘Creole’ in the Literature on Sierra Leone,” *Africa*, 49.4 (1979): 405–415; Christopher Fyfe, “The Term ‘Creole’: A Footnote to a Footnote,” *Africa*, 50.4 (1980): 422; David Skinner and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, “Creoles: A Final Comment,” *Africa*, 51.3 (1981): 787.

<sup>21</sup> Akintola Wyse, *The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretive History* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1991); Cole, *Krio of West Africa*, 18–19. The Krio/creole debate is a rather fruitless discussion that cannot be fully engaged with here. The argument that “Krio” derives from Yoruba is unconvincing for several reasons, not the least of which is that neither Wyse nor Cole provide any evidence from the nineteenth century. For the latest contribution to this debate, see Ian Hancock, “On the Origin and Application of the Word Krio,” *The Journal of Sierra Leone Studies*, 5.2 (March 2016).

<sup>22</sup> For the history of the Krio, see Leo Spitzer, *The Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); Wyse, *Krio of Sierra Leone*; Dixon-Fyle and Cole (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Krio*; Cole, *Krio of West Africa*.

this study disaggregates how Liberated Africans and their descendants – generations of significantly different socialization and life histories – identified among their contemporaries, and with institutions of church and state. Among this generation there is no evidence that they referred to themselves as “Krio” or “creole,” or saw themselves as a single, unified people.

Like enslaved Africans throughout the diaspora, Liberated Africans self-identified in ways that enable an analysis of identity formation. They used a range of ethnonyms and “national” designations, including Aku, Igbo, Calabar, Popo, Cosso, Congo, Hausa, Moko, and others. These terms were common in Sierra Leone not just because they indicated where people came from and the languages they spoke, but also because they reflected how people self-identified. These designations were often new, diasporic coinages that demonstrate that people did not self-identify as they had previously done in their homelands. Many of the descriptive terms – from Aku to Cosso to Moko – had no saliency in the regions from where Liberated Africans of these “nations” had come from. Even terms of an older genealogy such as Hausa took on different meanings in a new setting. Group identities were defined and redefined through the process of forced migration, resettlement, quotidian interactions among recaptives, and the relationship with missionaries and the colonial state.

### **Ethnicity and Identity**

The following chapters examine patterns of ethnic identification in the context of diaspora and the colonial and missionary encounter. Ethnicity has been a topic of great discussion within the historiographies of Africa and the diaspora, yet these two fields have approached the topic in very different ways. Africanists have interrogated the degree to which colonial administrators, along with missionaries and ethnographers, created or augmented identities as a technique for ruling. Studies of the slave trade and the diaspora have looked at the prevalence of certain ethnicities in diasporic societies, and the dynamic realignment of identities that forced migrations engendered. Scholars of the diaspora have used records mentioning certain ethnic groups to trace the origins of slaves in Africa to specific regions of the Americas, and their subsequent cultural impacts. But much like the best work by historians of Africa, scholars of the diaspora approach Euro-American