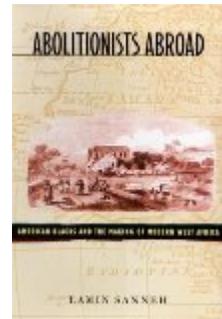


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lamin Sanneh. *Abolitionist Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999. 352 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00060-5.

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In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Mr. Kiaga, the African interpreter and missionary to the Mbanta, does the unthinkable. He opens up the door of his mission church to the efulefu (worthless man) and the osu (outcast cursed by a god). Mr. Kiaga defies the traditional structures of the Mbanta in the name of Christianity and firmly declares to his converts who reject his openness to the osu that the essence of Christianity is human freedom and acceptance. "Before God," states Kiaga, "there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers." This evangelical fervor and conviction held by an African, Mr. Kiaga, is the subject of Lamin Sanneh's book *Abolitionist Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa*.

Sanneh's book take us over familiar ground in revealing ways. *Abolitionist Abroad* revisits the founding of Sierra Leone, the formation of Liberia, and the mission efforts of African Americans and Africans, such as Olaudah Equiano, Samuel Ajayi Crothwer, Paul Cuffee, and Edward Blyden. Sanneh reminds his readers of the Christian world view that the men and women held. Evangelical Christianity draped the world view of many American ex-slaves and West African recaptives. From their Christian perspective, they determined that human slavery was a supreme moral evil that had to be eliminated. Their antislavery sentiments were woven together with the promises of the American Revolution that human beings were equal both in the sight of God and the law. In Sanneh's estimation, this evangelical faith was an antistructure to the hierarchical and monarchical political establishment of the West African chiefdoms that were caught in the world of power, greed, and slave trading. It was through the pipeline of American ex-slaves and Christian African recaptives that the antislavery movement

became an indigenous movement among West Africans. "With the antislavery campaign," Sanneh writes, "something new and permanent was attempted in African societies, and that represented a significant enough break with the old political morality." (p. 10) Further, he writes that the "evangelical doctrine concerning the possibility of instant personal salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit" had a profound affect on the former slave. These religious affections "provided a welcome shelter for the outcast, the downtrodden, the excluded, former slaves and captives whose violation was approved by establishment structures and who carried on account of it a permanent stigma." The successful diffusion of Christianity and humanitarian virtues came not from the medieval notion of Christendom where religious faith needed to be adhered to first by rulers to Christianize a society. This type of Christian mission had failed on numerous occasions in Africa, such as in the Kingdom of Kongo. The Christian mission as carried out by earlier Catholic missions had been subject to easy manipulation chiefly by political self-interest. Missions with notions of Christendom undergirding them failed. This failure left the old hierarchy intact with its belief that slavery was a natural human institution. However, through evangelicals, who courted the social rejects, West Africans were drawn into an indigenous and transforming antislavery movement. "The central institutions of society such as religion, education, law government, business, and the family were stamped with the values of antistructure, the values, that is of elevating freed slaves, ex-captives, women, and other despised members of society into a position of leadership and responsibility. Before this movement nothing similar in scale and deliberate purpose had been tried in tropical Africa."(p. 18)

Sanneh borrows the term antistructure, using Victor Turner's notion that "emphasizes symbolic action in the process of overthrowing the constraints of mainstream society." However, he broadens the definition to address the specific history of the African Americans and African recaptives in this movement that challenged the normative political behavior by West Africans. The argument he pursues "here is that the continuity of the old world structural tradition was broken with the collapse of the intellectual scaffolding for slavery and the slave trade." (p. 19).

Sanneh achieves his goal by linking Africa, Europe, and America through the story of former slaves and their abolitionist counterparts. He reminds us that central to the conversation about the African diaspora is evangelical Christian missions that African Americans and African recaptives led. At the center of this book is the establishment of the colony of free people in Sierra Leone. The colonizing of Sierra Leone is set in the expansion of slavery in America, the American Revolution, and the blooming evangelical faith of the late eighteenth century. Sanneh hails the daring move of former slaves from British Colonies of North America who escaped the South to Nova Scotia after the defeat of the British forces and joined with the black poor of London to found the colony of Sierra Leone. These men and women, the latter slave recaptives (those slaves found aboard ships that the British Navy prevented from leaving the coast of the African continent and deposited them at the free colony of Sierra Leone), and the British government provide the antistructure to the chiefdoms of West Africa. The revivalistic missionary movement flourished in Sierra Leone with the support of the London Missionary Society, the Christian Mission Society, and the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, and the British government's intervention. According to Sanneh we witness the explosion of a new societal ethic spreading evangelical Christianity and antislavery sentiments from Sierra Leone into the Yorubalands of Southwestern Nigeria. This is, however, not a totally triumphant story. There are considerable ironies.

One irony is that the British in their expanding empire were able to protect the colony of Sierra Leone and allow an antistructural Christianity to bloom and spread Christianity to Nigeria. Later these relations would sour, and the once antislavery government would find itself in Nigeria growing into an imperial power and placing the brakes on the growth of this antinomian form of Christianity among the Yoruba and other clans. The stability of the empire especially on behalf of its merchants

and traders often overrode the religious impulse of the African recaptive missionaries. The antistructural and the antislavery sentiments found among the recaptives were viewed from the colonial perspective as a threat. So, on the one hand, the British looking for "legitimate" trade to end the slave trade on the coast of West Africa, found in the recaptives of Sierra Leone a wonderful model for Africa and her chiefs. And on the other hand, the British encroachment into Lagos was steadily justified by use of antislavery rhetoric. As colonialism took root, they increasingly found these antislavery African Christian missionaries annoying and dangerous to stability. African religious leaders like Samuel Ajayi Crowther were hoisted with their own proverbial petard in the Social Darwinian world of English missionaries.

Although what is today happening in Sierra Leone today is both mystifying and ghastly, nothing in its colonial past could have foretold the horrors to come. In Liberia the spread of violence and war could be seen from its troubled inception. Liberia began not as sustained colony of the United States but as a "private scheme" by the American Colonization Society with no real support from Congress. The American Colonization society wanted to duplicate the successes of Sierra Leone. The colony in Liberia was a failure. It failed because it became an antislavery strategy simply to placate American Southern slaveholders. This strategy left the American emigrants to the colony on their own. They quickly fell into the pattern of the old dispensation, establishing a caste society that contained the seeds of its own destruction. In their battle with a white supremacist society, African Americans ignored the realities of Liberia and imagined it another way. The imagined Liberia served an ideological cause to stave off the indignities of life in America. To support this claim he recalls the legacies of Edward Blyden and Alexander Crummell whose scholarship promoted race pride and the civilization of Africa. In Liberia, the antislavery impulse arising from evangelical Christianity was lost in the struggle to maintain its independence and develop into a nation-state.

What Sanneh has written is quite interesting and readable and should be compared to other works in this genre. He has tried to link the narrative of African Americans with Africans in the Atlantic world through religious faith and ideas. Sanneh helps us to remember that the history of missions is a central part of the ongoing dialogue between Black Americans and West Africans. Another strong feature of Sanneh's book is his conceptualization of how Christianity failed as Christendom but succeeded in its Protestant and evangelical

form. While this book makes some interesting conceptual claims, it also has some hazardous generalizations. For example, Sanneh combines all chiefdoms in West Africa together without distinction of people. Not every society in West Africa promoted slavery. The smaller peoples ("the stateless societies" to use an older terminology) were more often its victims than its promoters. Was there no indigenous antislavery ideology that developed among the less militaristic and imperialistic peoples of West Africa? While African American and African Christians must certainly be given their place in history in spreading antislavery sentiments within West Africa, I find it dangerous to implicitly assert that the moral reasoning of African people could not have provided its own antistructure and antislavery without the Christian impulse. Lastly, Sierra Leone for all its virtues as a Christian colony was as problematic as Liberia from its inception in dealing with the surrounding native populations,

and they, too, were unable to avoid explosive mine fields. Lastly, Sanneh on a couple occasions mentions gender as a factor, but he never explores it. Did evangelical Christianity free African women and provide the foundation for an indigenous women's movement as it did in the antislavery movement? My critiques are not meant to detract from Sanneh's main point in that the evangelical Christianity and the antislavery movement gave birth to an indigenous antislavery movement within West Africa. Rather, it is to remember that religious ideas can be a two-edge sword; they can liberate, and they can also oppress. In the birth of the antislavery movement in West Africa they sometimes did both.

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