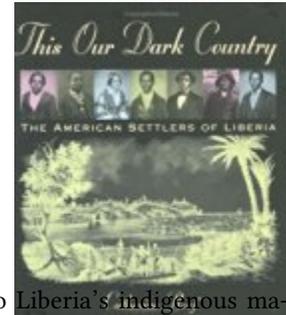


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine Reef. *This Our Dark Country: The American Settlers of Liberia*. New York: Clarion Books, 2002. 136 pp. \$17.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-618-14785-4.

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This is a beautifully rendered volume with extensive use of powerful period photographs and historical drawings. The author uses many primary sources, including letters, documents, and photos to describe the motivation, journeys, and struggles of the African Americans who chose or who were forced to leave the United States for the uncertainty of emigration to West Africa. Unfortunately, the underlying premise of the author and some sections of this book suffer from Eurocentric and nineteenth-century biases.

In chapter 1, “These Free, Sunny Shores,” the author takes her frame of reference from the settlers, seeing in their pioneering spirit a reflection of the American pioneers who settled North America. She often ignores or patronizes the local peoples, their history, and the relationship of the West African majority to the settlers. Reef states that “Liberia was a great experiment. No one knew what would happen when people born and raised in the United States of America went to live in an unsettled region of Africa” (p. 3). On the contrary, Liberia was occupied by indigenous peoples from many language groups. Mel, Kruan, and Mande speakers have lived in the area since at least C.E. 1400. Reef contradicts her own sweeping statements because she does include some information on indigenous groups such as Kru, Mandinka, and Vai (pp. 7-9). These Africans were farmers, merchants, and experienced mariners who traveled the coast of West Africa. By using phrases such as “building a nation in the wilderness” (p. 3), “survive in the wilderness” (p. 20), and “American pioneers” (p. 25), she misses the reality of the African coast, the many peoples located there, and the irony of the goals of the settlers. In the introduction, in her description of the region, even animals are noted before the first mention of local people (p. 7).

Reef persistently refers to Liberia’s indigenous majority as “natives” (pp. 7, 43, 102-103). “The native people of the region were more resistant to change” (p. 43), as if that were a cultural trait. She also fails to adequately describe their resistance efforts. Local leaders and their peoples certainly resisted Liberian settler control, and fought many wars to that effect throughout the nineteenth century (during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1890s) and during the first three decades of the twentieth century. These are only occasionally noted. Reef apparently has difficulty maintaining a balanced point of view because of her sources. She did not cite one of the most noted scholars on Liberia, J. Gus Liebenow, *Liberia: The Quest for Democracy* (1987), or the Liberian political scientist and former interim president, Amos Sawyer, who has written, “the idea of Liberia was flawed in conception, design and implementation.”[1]

Chapters 2 and 3, “Beyond the Reach of Mixture” and “Divine Providence,” provide a clear, detailed, and readable history of free blacks in the United States, early emigration efforts, and the origins of the American Colonization Society which sponsored the early emigrants to Liberia. The author describes the efforts of the Liberian settlers to disrupt the local African slave trade, but does not acknowledge that throughout the nineteenth century the settlers also sought to divert trade through their own ports and businesses, and taxed African businesses while Africans were not allowed to participate in the political process.

Chapters 4 and 5, “Americans” and “Life Upriver,” give a thorough description of the settler recreation of American culture and customs, based primarily on the work of Tom Shick in *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth Cen-*

*turey Liberia* (1980). Though Reef quotes a newcomer who noted the contradiction of Liberia, "I wonder to think that a people who themselves have but just been redeemed from fetters should ... look with an evil eye upon the freedom of others" (p. 45), this questioning of the settler perspective does not inform much of her text. Reef perpetuates the notion that Africans believe that gods reside in "trees, rocks and other natural objects" (p. 44), a misrepresentation of African religious beliefs. Lastly, in this section her description of the settler ward system or fostering of African children is described as primarily benign. While many African families did send their children to live with settlers and coastal families for education and a better life, this system also exploited the labor of these children who were treated as servants and sometimes worse.

Reef uses many primary sources and her focus is necessarily on the American settlers; however, the African context of the area in which they settled and the early history of the Liberian state are missing. This not only leads to a focus on a small piece of Liberian history but also is a distorted view of Liberia and the settlers themselves. Chapter 6, "Progress," describes the processes and events that led up to the Independence of Liberia in 1847. Because of the sources Reef consulted, the focus is on Monrovia and Montserrado county. The coastal settlements in Bassa, Greenville, and Cape Palmas are not noted. These groups often competed with Monrovia.

There are authors, books, articles, and Liberian scholars who could have been consulted. Reef's bibliography includes Warren D'Azevedo, but his work is not evident. Other works that would have given more balance to this account are M. B. Akpan, "Resistance of the African peoples of Liberia"; Ronald W. Davis, *Ethnohistorical Studies of the Kru Coast*; and Jane J. Martin, "'Krumen down the Cost': Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the Nineteenth Century." [2]

Chapter 7, "Some Fertile Country," is a very effective and thorough description of the debates and discussions in the United States regarding colonization and emigration to Liberia. Within the African-American community and the ranks of abolitionists, this subject was debated with passion and commitment. Chapter 8, "The Beclouded Sun," provides the context of the United States after the Civil War, noting the hopes of Liberian settlers to

gain new citizens against the backdrop of new hope and aspirations of African Americans in the United States. In spite of the challenges facing freed slaves, there was little interest in emigration and Liberia struggled to maintain its independence.

The summary of the events of the twentieth century in chapter 9, "Liberia, Troubled Land," does justice to the presidencies of William V. S. Tubman and William R. Tolbert Jr. from the 1940s to the 1970s, but significant events are omitted and some errors are included. The entire Kru Coast revolted against the government in 1915.[3] This revolt was only put down with U.S. intervention. This same area was in the news again in the 1930s when a slavery scandal on the Kru Coast rocked the government of Liberia and prompted intervention by the League of Nations. In addition, Reef notes incorrectly that Charles Taylor executed dictator President Samuel K. Doe, who was killed in 1990 by another rebel faction leader, Prince Johnson.

The last three pages of this book are a moving statement of the aspirations and disappointments of the nation of Liberia and could have made an effective introduction. There are many contradictions within the history of Liberia and the settlers who have led that country. These need to be acknowledged and could have informed the frame of reference. Liberian settlers, their experiences, and their hopeful and ironic history deserve a fine book that could appeal to young adults. Sadly, this is not it. This volume needs to be used with caution and supplemental materials.

#### Notes

[1]. Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1992), p. 41.

[2]. M. B. Akpan, "Resistance of the African peoples of Liberia," *Liberia-Forum*, 3:4 (1987); Ronald W. Davis, *Ethnohistorical Studies of the Kru Coast* (Newark, 1976); and Jane J. Martin, "'Krumen down the Cost': Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the Nineteenth Century," Boston University, African Studies Center Working Paper (1982).

[3]. Jo Sullivan, "The Kru Coast Revolt of 1915-16," *Liberian Studies Journal* 14:1 (1989).

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