

Abolitionists in Africa

Antislavery, evangelicalism, and the "American factor" in West Africa.

STEWART DAVENPORT AND WIEBE BOER

In his most recent work, Lamin Sanneh offers a novel perspective on nineteenth-century antislavery movements. Instead of the usual narratives of William Wilberforce in England or William Lloyd Garrison in America, Sanneh tells of the vital role Africans—albeit often Americanized or Anglicized Africans—played in the abolition of slavery both on their own continent and around the globe. Much of the existing scholarship on antislavery has focused on the arduous campaigns in England and the United States to destroy the political and economic structures that supported the peculiar institution. While these histories focus on the countries whose plantation systems and involvement in the transatlantic market created the demand for chattel slavery, Sanneh wants to draw our attention to the continent that supplied the slaves. The campaign to end slavery in the New World, he argues, “was only half the story.”

Slavery in Africa was older than and in many ways more intractable than slavery on the other side of the Atlantic. From time immemorial, Africans had been enslaving one another. Selling captives to European and American slave traders—beginning around 1500—was a comparatively recent and much more lucrative variation on the common practice of capturing, trading, and selling slaves within the continent. In general, as Sanneh explains it, political existence in precolonial West Africa was exceedingly harsh. A leader's esteem, and therefore power, rested on the number of people he controlled—thus the incentive to enslave others and keep them enslaved. Distancing himself from those scholars who attempt to gloss over precolonial African slavery as a comparatively innocuous institution, Sanneh writes that the law of the land was “the law of the survival of the fittest, with no second chance for losers.” Convincing a chief whose powers derived from this system to surrender his slaves, then, was tantamount to asking him to forfeit much of his political power and risk being enslaved himself by a stronger and shrewder neighboring chief who refused to give up the custom.

This was the dilemma antislavery forces in West Africa had to overcome if

they were to be successful. The solution to the problem, as Sanneh puts it, was “antistructure,” a radically different way of organizing society that would ultimately undermine chiefly authority. In general, by antistructure Sanneh means the establishment of free colonies in the midst of West African slave societies. In such zones of freedom, those at the very bottom of society—ex-slaves—could challenge the power of those at the top.

As Sanneh makes clear, the challenges to establishing enclaves of freedom in West Africa were great, but so were the potential rewards. The existence of free colonies in the heart of the slave trade would strike the institution at its literal source, providing a haven for runaways and a powerful model of what Africa without slavery could look like—an example both for neighboring Africans desperate for a different way of life and for Western abolitionists concerned with defending the humanity of Africans. Such colonies would provide valuable ammunition against the prevailing Western notion that Africans were somehow less than human and thus naturally suited to bondage. Like John Winthrop's “city on a hill,” free colonies would demonstrate to the rest of the world that Africans were fully capable of governing themselves responsibly and treating their neighbors compassionately.

For those of us familiar with the usual narratives of the Anglo-American antislavery movements, Sanneh's assertion of the importance of African antislavery provides a healthy corrective to our overly Western-centric point of view. But if in Sanneh's narrative the setting (Freetown, Monrovia, Abeokuta) and main characters (Equiano, Cuffee, Crowther, Ezzidio, Blyden) are unfamiliar, the general outline of the story—and especially its turning point—is not. What ultimately terminated the centuries-old tradition of slavery in Africa was an injection of powerful and radical religious ideas.

David Brion Davis's magisterial histories of slavery and antislavery in the West have shown that abolition was unthinkable without the motive force of relig-

ious conviction. “Men could not fully perceive the moral contradictions of slavery,” Davis writes, “until a major religious transformation had changed their ideas of sin and spiritual freedom.” Before this transformation, Davis explains, sin had been seen as a kind of slavery, and the institution of slavery itself as an unfortunate but natural manifestation of sin in the world. Then, beginning in the eighteenth century with the American Quakers and British Latitudinarians, the theological landscape began to shift. Rejecting the doctrine of original sin and embracing instead man's ability to improve, and perhaps even perfect, himself and his society, these sectarian Protestant groups initiated an intellectual revolution against the idea of human bondage.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, British and American evangelicals, more numerous and more organized than their eighteenth-century brethren (and theologically orthodox in their understanding of original sin, but with a strong emphasis on the transformative power of the Holy Spirit), then continued the struggle to its successful conclusion: the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies and the American South. These same religious ideas, when carried back to Africa in the minds and

hearts of Anglicized and Americanized African Christians, uprooted slavery and revolutionized African society.

This, in short, is what Sanneh calls “the American factor in West African Christianity”—this set of Protestant, but particularly American Protestant, beliefs that had dramatic consequences when applied to the African political and social environment. The most important of these ideas, Sanneh explains, was the radical notion of individual liberty, expressed first by seventeenth-century English Puritans and then refined by eighteenth-century American republicans at the time of the American Revolution. According to this tradition, individuals, redeemed directly and personally by the grace of God and apart from the ministrations of church hierarchies, themselves constituted the

church when gathered together in an ecclesiastical setting, and the state in a political setting.

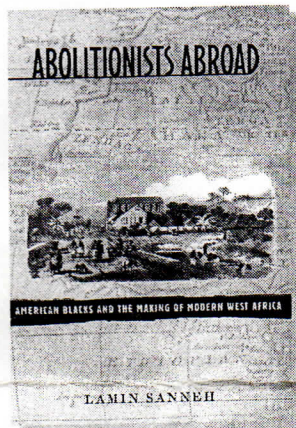
This ecclesiology placed the locus of authority at the bottom, with the people, instead of at the top, with the elites, forever changing not only religion but also politics on the North American continent and around the world as well. No longer would someone's religion be determined by their ruler, as in the days of Christendom. The centuries-old attempts at converting Africans from the top down, using the model of European Christendom, had never succeeded. It was only with this new bottom-up approach of Americanized Christianity that the faith gained a firm foothold in West Africa.

The first ambassadors of these American ideas, ironically, were ex-slaves who had fought for the British in the American Revolution. At the conclusion of the conflict, having ended up on the losing side, these soldiers had nowhere to go. The British made good on their promise and freed them at the conclusion of the war, unlike the Americans, but did not enthusiastically invite them back to mother England. Some did go to England, but the bulk of them ended up in Nova Scotia.

These homeless ex-slaves were being moved around the British Empire at the same time that many British abolitionists were pushing for a free settlement at the heart of the African slave coast. Thinking that the black war veterans, many of whom were living in abject poverty in London, would make the perfect settlers for their scheme, the abolitionists arranged for them to be sent to Sierra Leone in 1787. They were followed by settlers from Nova Scotia—more Loyalist rejects as well as Jamaican Maroons—who began arriving in 1792.

The first decades of settlement were harsh, with many taking up employment in the slave trade or being tragically resold as slaves themselves. The settlement did not take off as a successful enterprise until the population was augmented by the arrival of tens of thousands of “recaptives” taken by the British from illegal (at least according to British maritime law) slaving vessels after their government had abolished the slave trade in 1807.

It was in the cultural milieu of these diverse recaptive elements of African society that the individualized American brand of Christianity blossomed. To the recaptives, offered a rare second chance at life, Christianity was a means



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American Blacks and
the Making of Modern
West Africa**

by Lamin Sanneh

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Stewart Davenport is a doctoral candidate in American Religious History at Yale University. Wiebe Boer is a graduate student in African History at Yale.

to find structure and community in an upside-down world. As Sanneh puts it, "The recaptives, uprooted from their own traditions, became in effect the first mass movement in Christianity in modern Africa." Dedicated to education and self-advancement, many who arrived in chains became remarkably successful, the colony having at one time a higher literacy rate than Great Britain itself.

Within a few short decades, many recaptives desired to return to the places within the African continent from which they were stolen in their youth.

Following their hearts, they journeyed homeward and in the process spread the gospel of Christianity and of anti-slavery to other parts of West Africa, especially the region that would become Nigeria. Taking into consideration the special, yet often unmerited, attention given to white missionary heroes in the eventual success of Christianity in Africa, Sanneh writes, "It is significant that the modern missionary movement [in Africa] began largely as the initiative of freed slaves and ex-captives and carried the message of abolition as the timely expression of

the message of Christianity." Many of those who returned home played an active role in leading and restructuring their society, fulfilling the prophecy of a disgraced Yoruba king who cursed his detractors by telling them that slaves and sons of slaves would one day rule them.

As the momentum for European conquest and colonialism picked up, the official roles and responsibilities of the recaptives and other Africans in both church and colonial administration dwindled, much to their consternation. It is therefore not surprising

that many of the early agitators for African control of the church and the state were descendents of these remarkable Africans who began the transformation of their continent.

In contrast to the success of Sierra Leone, the American-launched free colony, Liberia, was a disaster right from its inauspicious start. The land for the settlement was secured when a startled local ruler was informed at gunpoint of the benefits of enlightened American rule and was in this manner "advised" to sign away some of his territory. It was the fear of what free blacks would do to American society that brought about the establishment of Liberia.

Sanneh observes that Liberia began as a private solution to the public evil of slavery in the United States. And it remained a private initiative, because even after much debate, the founding of Liberia failed to receive any official United States government support. Several thousand free American blacks were settled there along with a smaller number of recaptives, but in contrast to the widespread influence of Sierra Leone, Liberia and its people had little impact on the rest of the continent, a continent which they sometimes seemed to forget they were a part of.

What seems most striking to our modern multicultural sensibilities is that almost all of these free black settlers and recaptives meant to remake Africa in the image of the United States or Great Britain. What Sanneh calls "antistructure" was clearly an American liberal (in the Lockean sense) or bourgeois structure. Most Americans, both today and in the nineteenth century, would identify with this plan for remaking Africa. But this vision of a liberal, bourgeois, Americanized or Anglicized, and evangelized counterculture in Africa is clearly problematic.

One of the most striking aspects of this book, in fact, and one that is sure to generate a great deal of discussion among scholars, is that, rather than questioning the project of introducing Western beliefs and social structures to Africa, Sanneh unabashedly champions these Americanized Christian ideals and their liberal social manifestations—not just because they replaced the oppressive system that upheld African slavery, but because he apparently considers them good in and of themselves.

What Sanneh is doing, in effect, is sanctioning the imposition of Western bourgeois and Christian values and social structures on the African continent. Anti-colonialists cringe at the idea, of course, because such an imposition compromised the autonomy of indigenous cultures. Sanneh does not seem to mind, though, because when placed in contrast to the chiefly slave system with its deeply entrenched patterns of repression and dehumanization, the alien antistructural system of

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equality before the law and individual rights and liberties wins hands down.

One counterpoint that Sanneh fails to address is that the replacement of the slave trade with "legitimate trade" in Africa often actually led to increased slavery on the continent. Therefore, elements of antislavery and American liberalism sometimes contributed to the increase of slavery within the continent itself, as well as to a level of destabilization which was later used as an excuse for full-fledged colonial occupation.

The structure of antistructure was that of American liberalism. But Sanneh consistently emphasizes throughout his narrative that it was not just the

"American factor" that made a difference in West Africa, but the evangelical factor as well, with the vital point of connection being a respect for the dignity of individuals no matter how low their position in society. Just as liberalism valued the rights of all individuals (although not at first in the United States), so evangelicalism told those same individuals that they had the right to become children of God. It was this set of radical ideas, both political and religious, that restructured American and later African society from the bottom up, allowing, sometimes literally, the first to be last and the last first. As Sanneh puts it, "A new world order

came into being in Africa, not by military might but by belief in the power of redeemed and sanctified persons who as slaves, captives, and other downtrodden members of society the chiefly structures exploited and repressed, and yet whose freedom, dignity and enterprise evangelical religion championed as its own."

Sanneh's narrative poses some of the broadest and most important questions in the history of global colonization and modernization. Should we agree with him that the imposition of Western liberal cultural values and social organization in Africa—when these values were promoted by Afri-

cans themselves—was unambiguously a good thing? Should the entire world therefore be made over in the image of the United States with its notion of individual rights?

Obviously this book opens many important issues of debate not only for students of African history but for students in many different fields, including American history, the history of slavery and antislavery, and the history of Christian missions. It seems evident that Sanneh's work, with its innovative terminology and bold assertions, is going to both influence and create controversy across a range of disciplines, and rightly so.