



LIBERIA



Area: 43,000 square miles (111,370 sq km)

Population: 5.3 M (2022 est.)

Capital: Monrovia

Ethnic Groups: 16 ethnic groups include the Kpelle (20%), Bassa (16%), Gio (8%), Kru (7%), and Americo-Liberians (5%)

Languages: English (official)

Religion: Christian (40%), Muslim (20%), Other (40%)

Life Expectancy: 59.8 years(male)/62.4 years (female)

Literacy: 48.3% (2022)

Economy: Agriculture (70%), industry (15%), services (2%); rubber accounts for 90% of exports

Gender Development Index: 0.860 (2022; comp. World 0.951)

“A little rain each day will fill the rivers to overflowing.”

---Liberian Proverb

Early Atlantic World

From the Mano to the Cavally, more than fifteen rivers flow in a westerly or southwesterly direction, draining into the Atlantic Ocean from within the territory of the nation of Liberia. Noted by historian Walter Rodney, they created a defining “system of waterways” and helped to define the region’s identity. A strategic position on and inland from the West Atlantic coast allowed the ancestral peoples of Liberia to play a significant role in the global history of trade and economic change. The earliest local farmers harvested salt and practiced rice agriculture. Europeans sought the coveted seeds of *Aframomum melegueta* they called the “grains of paradise.” Once a product in trans-Saharan trade before the 13th century, the pungent and spicy malagueta pepper attracted the earliest Portuguese maritime merchants in the time of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), who claimed the exclusive privileges to engage in the grain trade. Local West Africans knew the seeds as *atinken* or *nzombe*, symbols of ritual intervention and resistance used to activate amulets on the continent and across the African Diaspora, from Bahia to New Orleans.

The rivers of Liberia also fed the trade in enslaved Africans, providing bodies for inhuman cargoes and eventually welcoming African Americans back to the continent in the nineteenth century. Funded by the private NGO American Colonization Society in 1822, Liberia became an outpost for more than 15,000 free Africans, and captured and emancipated slaves from the United States, and eventually was recognized as a sovereign nation in 1847. However, this did not mean the absence of enslavement along the Windward Coast from which nearly 300,000 enslaved Africans were shipped to the Americas, mostly in the 18th century.

Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912) was one of the early Liberian settlers. Born of free parents in the Virgin Islands, Blyden was refused entry to Rutgers University and accepted a teaching job in Liberia in 1850. There he forged the full expression of his intellect and became known as the grandfather of Pan-Africanism. Among his highly regarded works was *Africa for Africans* (1872), an early treatise on African nationalism. Although the abolition of slavery across the Atlantic was responsible for the founding of the independent republic, slavery was not abolished in Liberia until the 20th century. The “recolonized” population constituted a culturally distinct elite, who remained in social and political control until the 1980s.

Politics and Strife

The coup of 1980 set off an era of conflict and corruption. The rice riots that preceded the coup hinted at a much larger economic failure and rampant inequalities. Influence wielded by the Firestone Rubber Company, who produced rubber for American automobile tires and industry, had led to financial control over the Liberian rubber plantations after 1926. After more than fifty years, agricultural investments had lagged while the price of rubber on world markets was depressed, leaving a vulnerable economy followed by political strife.

The coup of 1980 toppled William Tolbert's government and put Samuel Doe in power. Despite leaning into American influence, international and local support for Doe and his government waned. His main opponent was Charles Taylor, who led a brutal civil war (1989-1996) tinged by ethnic affiliations and warlords. In 1997 presidential elections, Charles Taylor won an overwhelming victory that seemed to slow the bloodshed but not the corruption. Amidst a continued flow of "blood diamonds" and arms through neighboring Sierra Leone and Guinea, the Taylor government lost international support and was condemned by the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 1343) in 2001. Eventually, Taylor was indicted and convicted as a war criminal for crimes against humanity. Held responsible for the deaths of around 250,000 people who were killed in Liberia's civil wars, Taylor remains imprisoned in Durham, England, serving a 50-year sentence for his crimes.

Liberian Women and Healing

The Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) was founded by Leymah Gbowee and Comfort Freeman in 2002, after issuing a proclamation: "In the past we were silent, but after being killed, raped, dehumanized, and infected with diseases, and watching our children and families destroyed, war has taught us that the future lies in saying NO to violence and YES to peace! We will not relent until peace prevails."¹ This movement emerged from indigenous roots. As early as 1896, an observer noted how women exerted great influence over the men in Liberian society: "In case of war, if all the soldiers wished to go and fight, and the women rose up and said, 'No, we are not willing, you must not do so,' they would be afraid to go, fearing defeat..."²

The women's voices prevailed then and now. Moreover, Liberian women's organizations were key to the 2005 election of the continent's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who called women voters her "secret weapon." Once in office, Johnson Sirleaf appointed women to key cabinet positions and promoted gender inclusiveness across the nation state. Leymah Gbowee and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (along with Yemeni politician Tawakkul Karman) won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize. When she left office in 2018, Johnson Sirleaf was credited with the peaceful transfer of power to her successor, George Weah.

Opposition leader Joseph Boakai, who was Johnson Sirleaf's Vice President, subsequently defeated the incumbent president and former football (soccer) star George Weah in November 2023, after promising to restore hope to the country. The resumption of a movie house (Kriterion Cinema) in Monrovia, brought back in 2016 through the efforts of enthusiast Pandora Hodge, and the initiation of the new Journey Home Film Festival, likewise sought to stoke the cultural embers of creativity and free expression that remained after the brutal wars. The hope was that a local film industry might create an authentic vision for Liberia's future and replace the collective memory lost during the years of war. The name and concept of Kriterion cinema originated in Amsterdam in the aftermath of resistance to the Nazis in World War II and was adopted in other post-conflict cities, including Sarajevo. It might just be the ticket in Monrovia.

---Written by Candice Goucher, July 2024

Further Reading

Edward W. Blyden, *Africa for the Africans* (1872).

Ruth Blyden, "Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912), *Black Past* (October 27, 2007). Accessed at: <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/people-global-african-history/edward-wilmot-blyden-1832-1912/>

¹ Quoted by Amanda Molinaro, "Women's Peace Movement of Liberia," My Hero Blog, 3/1/2015 https://myhero.com/womens_peace_movement_liberia_08

² Agnes McCallister, *A Lone Woman in Africa: Six Years on the Kroo Coast* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1896), 230-31.

C.M, "A new Image: A film festival aims to change how outsiders see the country," *The Economist* (Feb. 28, 2014).

Karen Garner, "Johnson Sirleaf, Ellen (1938-)," in Candice Goucher, edit., *Women Who Changed the World: Their Lives, Challenges, and Accomplishments through History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), vol. 2: 570-75.

Farida Jalalzai, "Ma Ellen: The Iron Lady of Liberia," in Michael A Genovese and Janie S. Steckenrider, edits., *Women as Political Leaders: Studies in Gender and Governing*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 203-25.