

Socio-Cultural Integration of Mandinka Ethnic Group in Liberia

Jankai Abdulliah Sesay¹, Dr. Shradha²

¹Master of Art, Department of History, Sharda University, India

²Supervisor, Department of History, Sharda University, India

Abstract

The socio-cultural integration of the Mandinka people in Liberia traces its roots to the early arrival of Mandinka traders and Islamic clerics from Kankan, in present-day Guinea, to the Grain Coast region of West Africa. These early arrivals played pivotal role in the religious and cultural transformation of parts of Grain Coast, now Liberia. Historical accounts suggest that Mandinka clerics and traders often intermarried with indigenous women, many of whom were among the first local converts to Islam. This laid the foundation for the spread of Islamic faith and Mandinka cultural influence among the native populations.

The Mandinka settled more successfully in the northern and western regions of Liberia, where they encountered indigenous groups with whom they shared certain cultural and linguistic similarities. This facilitated peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange, leading to the emergence of new hybrid languages such as Bopolu-Kpelleh and the increasing use of Arabic language for religious and scholarly purposes. In contrast to this trend, in southeastern Liberia dominated by the Kwa-speaking ethnic groups the Mandinka faced strong resistance, particularly in relation to religious integration. As a result, while Islam flourished in the north and west, Mandinka efforts in the southeast were largely limited to trade.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, there was a significant influx of Mandinka migrants from Guinea and Sierra Leone. This movement coincided with the onset of European colonial encroachment along the West African coast. A critical turning point came with the expansionist campaigns of Samori Touré in the late 19th century. As Touré waged war against French colonial forces and sought to consolidate Mandinka political power, many Mandinka fled Guinea to escape conscription into his military or to avoid subjugation. These migrants sought safety, economic opportunity, and religious freedom in Liberia.

Islamic integration was facilitated through a three-stage approach: **Guarantee, Mixing, and Reform**. In the *Guarantee* phase, trust was built through trade and peaceful engagement; the *Mixing* phase saw the blending of Islamic and indigenous religious practices, particularly in the north and west; the *Reform* phase involved the gradual adoption Islamic beliefs and practices. This process illustrates the dynamic interplay between Islam and local traditions during this period.

Trade between the Mandinka and indigenous Liberians was primarily conducted through barter. Commercial settlements established by the Mandinka grew into major towns and eventually cities. These traders and clerics thus played dual roles: as economic agents and as religious missionaries promoting the spread of Islam.

However, while conflict did occasionally arise, Mandinka communities in the north and west often resorted to dialogue and negotiation to resolve disputes. In contrast, persistent rejection in the southeast meant that Islam made little inroad there, and the Mandinka in that region remained primarily traders rather than religious missionaries.

The arrival of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in the early 19th century brought another major shift. With the ACS came freed African Americans and a strong Christian missionary agenda. This Christian dominance, especially in coastal and administrative centers, created further barriers to the expansion of Islam in Liberia. As a result, the historical trajectory of Islam in Liberia remained uneven, with a strong presence in the north and west but limited influence in other parts of the country a legacy that continues to affect the religious landscape of Liberia today.

1.1. Introduction

Upon the arrival of MTC from Guinea to Liberia, they were warmly welcomed by the local population as part of a broader African solidarity. The MTC interaction with the indigenous people in the upper north and west of Liberia was a bit easy due to language and cultural similarities, while in lower north and west was difficult due to language barrier. These regions have multiple languages and diverse cultural practices.

Initially, the socio-cultural interaction between the Mandinka traders and clerics and the local tribal groups in lower northern and western Liberia began with overcoming of language barriers. This led to the development of a native language known as Bopolu Kpelle. This language emerged from blending of several languages, including Mandinka, Lorma, Vai, Gbande, Mende, and Gola. The creation of Bopolu Kpelle effectively bridged the language gap between the local population and the Mandinka ethnic group.

The integration of the MTC contributed to the formation of a complex society that had significant impact on the socio-cultural, economic, and religious structures of Liberia, especially from the perspective of the indigenous tribes. Long before the MTC came to Liberia, indigenous people had their own religious beliefs system, trade system, traditional education system, and way of life. This process of socio-cultural integration between the local tribes, the Mandinka traders and Islamic missionaries unfolded through various means, including trade and commerce, religious affiliation, intermarriage, and political alliances.

Notably, the Mandinka ethnic group developed an organized system of family structure, with polygamy playing a central role. This family structure, established by the Mandinka traders and clerics (or Islamic missionaries), contributed to the expansion of large family networks across the northern and western regions of Liberia. To broaden their trade network and spread Islam in Liberia, these Mandinka traders and Islamic missionaries established their presence in numerous areas across these regions. First let us examine the indigenous beliefs system and practices of Liberia prior to the migration of the Mandinka traders and clerics and how they obtained socio-cultural integration within the Liberian society.

The dual roles of Islamic clerics and traders helped spread Islam across West Africa, including Liberia. Islam found converts in a state of freedom and independence, with individuals able to

choose the faith for themselves. The Arab missionaries, often traveling without money or provisions, quietly spread their religion by teaching the Quran. Native missionaries, such as the Mandingoes and Fulani, combined their religious teachings with active trade, presenting themselves as both traders and preachers. In this way, they subtly and almost imperceptibly influenced local leaders, turning them into devoted disciples and zealous propagators of Islam. Converts generally embraced Islam by choice and conviction, a transition from their former religious practices to support their new faith.

1.2. Indigenous Religion, Practice and Belief System of Africa

Generally, before the arrival of religions from Asia to Africa, the African had traditional African belief systems, based on the veneration of supernatural or supreme powers, were widespread across the African continent. These belief systems varied by locality, language, and culture, but they often shared common elements. The traditional African belief has existed centuries before imported religions came to the African continent and upon the contact of these Asian religions, the African perceive the coming in of these religions as points of religious deviant.

The complexity of incorporating religion from outside of the African continent became a serious challenge for native African across the continent, and Liberia was never an exception. The larger part of the African population did not easily accept Islam, which is believed to be among the earlier religions that came to west African. To resolve this growing problem between the Islamic traders and missionaries and the African people, the Islamic missionaries relax components of Islamic principles to incorporate varies Traditional African beliefs systems. As a result of this early establishment, Islam in Africa facilitated the formation of a belief system that blended Islamic religion with traditional African belief (Teayah,1886).

1.2.1. Sufism

Sufism, which represents the mystical branch of Islam, played a significant role in the widespread adoption and expansion of the religion across Africa. Dedicated Sufi scholars and missionaries journeyed extensively throughout the continent, spreading Islamic teachings through sermons, spiritual mentorship, and the creation of Sufi brotherhoods. These orders adapted to local traditions and cultural practices, blending them harmoniously with Islamic principles to facilitate acceptance among diverse communities. By the 8th century, Sufi traditions had firmly taken root in West Africa, influencing religious practices, and shaping the spiritual landscape of the region.

1.2.2. Almoravid Movement:

The Almoravid movement was founded by Abdallah Ibn Yasin in the 11th century, Abdallah was instrumental in spreading Islam across Africa. This movement, led by the Lamtuna Berber tribe, and the movement emphasized strict adherence to Islamic law. Initially, the people of west Africa rejected some of the Almoravid beliefs of strictly adherence to Islamic law but blended with some local African belief systems. The Almoravid Movement had developed a strong military network in north Africa and gradually took cease of major trading routes and centers. Almoravid movement military campaigns and religious influence accelerated the

conversion of African peoples, particularly in West Africa, where they established religious schools and mosques that institutionalized Islam and later Mali empire as an Islamic empire.

1.2.3. Qadiriyya Order

The Qadiriyya order was founded by Abdul al-Jilani, focused on mysticism and personal devotion to God. This order had a lasting impact on West African spirituality, encouraging practices that hugely blended traditional African beliefs with Islamic teachings. Similarly, the Muridiyya movement, founded by Amadou Bamba in Senegal, emphasized hard work, community service, and spiritual devotion. This movement inspired followers in the subregion to engage in social and economic development as part of their religious practice (Alie,1990; p 207).

1.2.4. Indigenous Religion of Liberia

Historically, before the 18th century the tribal people of Liberia primarily practiced Animism, Ancestor Worship and Traditional African religions, which formed the foundation of cultural and social connections within communities. These belief systems were polytheistic and animistic, reflecting the connection between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The Traditional people of Liberia belief in a superior power guided by a tribe in which they express their faith. These traditional people had regular communications that were directed toward the supernatural force believed to have created mankind.

In additional to the Traditional African religion in Liberia was the Ancestor worship which became a key component of the belief systems and the direction of faith among some tribal people. It is believed that the Ancestor worshipers hold the view that their ancestors acting as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world, offering spiritual guidance and protection. They offer Rituals and sacrifices over time based on situation or problem confronting them. They are made to store their faith in the Ancestor and honor the ancestors.

The Traditional African belief system and the Ancestor Worshipers believe that Divinity and Animism provided the basis for understanding the universe as spiritually inhabited. Spiritual forces were believed to reside in natural elements such as rivers, trees, rocks, animals, and other aspects of nature. The indigenous people sought to live in harmony with the spiritual world through regular rituals and sacrifices and continue to seek the blessings from the supreme through faith.

The Secret Societies of Liberia: In Liberia, secret societies and rituals were viewed by many tribal people as vital institutions for training young men and women to become responsible members of society. The Poro and Sande societies, often referred to as traditional schools, preserved cultural values, moral teachings, and spiritual knowledge. These societies initiated unique rituals reserved for their members. Festivals and communal ceremonies were held to celebrate events such as childbirth, successful agriculture, marriage, and mourning. These ceremonies involved singing, dancing, and sacrifices, marking the completion of the spiritual process. The Mandinka traders and clerics attended these ceremonies of the local population in observance of the ritual and spirituality of the secret societies in Liberia, by then the Mandinka traders and clerics were pulling in Liberia now (Teayah,1886).

1.3. Migration to Liberia

Consequently, the movement of people in the Mano River Basin was dominated by the Mandinka people from present-day Guinea to Sierra Leone and Liberia. Islamic chronicle unveil that the migration significantly shaped the demographic and cultural landscape of Liberia. Some of these Mandinka were traders and clerics, who were travelling for trade purpose and the spread of Islam through missionary work, while others fled Guinea to seek for better lives. It was highlighted that the Mandinka ethnic group started this mass migration southward from their traditional homeland in Guinea around the 1700s and by the 1800s, they have intensified the migration to Liberia.

Several factors contributed to this migration, including economic opportunities, the spread of Islam, political conflicts in Guinea (especially the Samori Touré war between 1882-1898), and lastly the imposition of colonial rule by the French in Guinea, which exacerbated the situation. Meanwhile, As the conflict escalated, many Mandingo people fled Guinea to escape the violence and persecution associated with French colonization. This mass migration of Mandingo people into Liberia created tension between France and the United States, as the French accused the U.S. of supporting Samori Touré's empire against French colonial power.

Liberia, as a protectorate of the United States, provided a different political environment. The French colonization of Guinea was marked by oppressive measures that prompted large-scale migration to neighboring countries, including Liberia. The Samori Touré war, which involved violent confrontations with the Mandinka people, was a major catalyst for migration. Samori Touré, the leader of the Wassoulou Empire, saw the French occupation and suppression of the Mandinka as a direct threat to his people, leading him to forcibly recruit men into his army for defense. The oppressive policies and violent confrontations during this period caused many Mandinka families to flee Guinea and seek refuge in Liberia (*Konneh, 1867*).

1.3.1. Samori Touré War in Guinea 1882-1898

Samori Touré was a prominent Guinean leader of the Mandinka tribe, a subset of the Mandingo ethnic group. He was born around 1830 in the Milo River Valley, Guinea. Initially, Samori Touré followed in his father's footsteps as a trader. However, after witnessing the capture of his mother into the slave trade, he became emotionally charged and offered to serve in the army of her captors to secure her release. This experience shaped his ambition to become a military leader, and he later emerged as a fierce resistance leader against French colonialism in Guinea.

In the year 1874, Samori Touré established the Wassoulou Empire, a powerful West African state that encompassed vast regions of present-day Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast. The capital of this empire was situated in Bisandugu, a strategic location that allowed Touré to effectively govern his expanding territory. Between 1874 and 1880, he worked tirelessly to consolidate his authority, successfully strengthening, and extending his kingdom through military conquests and strategic alliances. His army was renowned for its discipline, high morale, and exceptional combat skills, making it a formidable force in the region. One of the key advantages that contributed to the strength of Touré's military was its access to modern weaponry. Due to the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between Britain and France, Touré managed

to secure advanced firearms and ammunition from British suppliers. This acquisition significantly bolstered his army's capabilities, allowing them to resist French colonial expansion more effectively.

The conflict between Touré and the French began because of France's territorial ambitions in West Africa, which intensified after the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. During this conference, European nations formalized their claims over African lands, leading to increased French efforts to expand their influence in Guinea. As part of their broader colonial strategy, the French sought to exert full control over the region, seeing it as a critical part of their empire. However, Samori Touré viewed their encroachment as a direct threat to the sovereignty and independence of his people. Determined to defend his territory, he mobilized his well-trained forces to counter the French invasion.

Initially, Touré's military campaigns against the French were highly successful. His forces engaged in fierce battles, employing superior tactics, and demonstrating exceptional leadership under his command. Through a combination of strategic warfare, resilience, and tactical ingenuity, Touré managed to repel French troops on multiple occasions, solidifying his reputation as a formidable resistance leader in West Africa.

Touré was loved by his people and commanded over 35,000 well-armed soldiers, trained in guerrilla tactics. His forces were highly effective against the French, which included Senegalese soldiers. However, by the 1890s, the French forces regrouped and, after intense fighting, eventually defeated Samori Touré's forces. Touré was captured and sent into exile in Gabon, where he died in 1900. The war, often referred to as the Mandingo War, had far-reaching effects beyond military engagements.

1.3.2. The Impact of Migration on Liberia

The influx of Mandinka refugees from Guinea had profound economic and social impacts on Liberia, creating significant hardship in the country. The refugees, many of whom had developed trade and professional skills over time, contributed to the economic and social life in Liberia. The Mandinka ethnic group under different captions settled across the western and the northern regions of Liberia and engaged into intermarriages with women from the local population. The absolute vast majority of the Mandinka people were of the Islamic faith, used the medium to spread Islamic teachings in the community they live. It is believed that the Mandinka ethnic group relax the practices of Islaam to have easy integration in the Liberia society. Liberia, like many other African countries, blended Islamic practices with local Traditional Belief Systems, Ancestor Worship and Animism which were notable across various cultures. The secular nature of Islamic practices in Liberia allowed different religious identities to coexist. (Alie, 1990:147-148).

1.4. Mandinka Commercial Activity in Liberia

Historical record showed that the Mandinka traders contact with what became Liberia can be traced back to the 14th and 15th centuries and overtime this trade continue at low paste until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During the 19th century the Mandinka traders engaged in extensive trade with the indigenous ethnic groups of Liberia, like the Vai, Kpelle Gola, Lorma,

Gbandi, Kissi, and Mende. Overtime these Mandinka traders migrated from Mali, to Guinea and later to Liberia in trade connection. The Mandinka traders exchanged goods like Kola nuts, gold, salts, textile, tobacco, metal goods, beads, horses, and cloths for local products including ivory, slaves, and agricultural products. The Mandinka traders came to Liberia in huge numbers which facilitated the establishment of trading post like Voinjama, Foya, Vahum, Zorzor, Ganta, Gbarnga and the famous Bopolu town that gradually developed into cities.

As a result of the trade interaction that developed into a network between the Mandinka traders and the Indigenous people of Liberia, which led to socio-cultural exchanges and integration of these Mandinka traders in Liberia. In the same vine, the Mandinka traders introduced new languages in Liberia, precisely the Mandinka and the Arabic language. The Mandinka traders who were Muslims did not hold back in term of spreading Islamic religion, rather they were vigilant and managed to spread Islam in areas they covered. The MTC established Madrasas which improve intellectual activity under their domain. The trade between the Mandinka traders and the indigenous people also facilitated economic growth and developed many surrounding towns into cities.

1.5. Mandinka Missionary Activity in Liberia

The Mandinka traders adopted a dual-purpose approach that combined commercial endeavors with the propagation of Islam. This strategic integration of trade and religious outreach significantly influenced the successful expansion of both economic and religious activities in Liberia. The historical movement of the Mandinka ethnic group can be traced back to the 14th and 15th centuries, during which they began migrating from the Mali Empire to distant territories beyond their homeland near the Niger River. Several factors contributed to this large-scale migration, one of the most notable being the flourishing long-distance trade networks that connected the forest regions of West Africa with the commercial hubs of the Niger Basin.

As trading activities intensified, a variety of goods were exchanged between different regions. Essential commodities such as salt, horses, and cattle, along with various manufactured products, were transported from North Africa and Europe through the well-established trans-Saharan trade routes. This extensive trading system not only facilitated economic interactions but also played a crucial role in the spread of Islam across West Africa. The dissemination of the Islamic faith was not solely dependent on military conquests but was also achieved through peaceful means, including commercial exchanges, and dedicated missionary activities.

The introduction and gradual establishment of Islam in West Africa followed a three-phase process commonly referred to as the Guarantee, Mixing, and Reform (GMR) model. In the initial Guarantee phase, Islam was introduced into the region by external influences, primarily through traders and Islamic scholars who provided religious services such as prayers, spiritual guidance, and divination. During this early stage, the number of local converts remained limited, and only a few individuals possessed the knowledge necessary to interpret Islamic principles accurately. However, orthodox Muslim communities managed to sustain their faith despite being in a predominantly non-Islamic environment.

As time progressed and more people within the local population began embracing Islamic teachings, the Mixing stage took place. During this period, new converts integrated Islamic beliefs with their indigenous religious customs and practices. This blending of faiths led to a unique form of Islam that incorporated elements of traditional African spirituality. Eventually, the third and final stage, the Reform phase, emerged, marking a conscious effort to purify Islamic practices and realign them with the core principles outlined in the Quran and Hadith. This reform movement unfolded over multiple generations, as scholars and religious leaders emphasized the importance of Quranic studies, Islamic jurisprudence, and religious commentaries.

One of the most notable centers for this Islamic reform movement in Liberia was Grand Cape Mount, located in the western part of the country. This region became a hub for religious scholarship, where efforts were made to uphold and maintain an authentic Islamic community. The gradual but steady growth of Islam in Liberia was thus shaped by both trade and missionary work, underscoring the interconnected nature of commerce and religion in West African history (Corby, 1988: 46).

It is believed that the Vai ethnic group of Liberia gained a broader understanding of Islamic education and religious practices through the Mandinka clerics, who have earlier penetrated the region from Guinea. As their interest in Islam deepened, some Vai individuals traveled to the Fouta Jallon region to study the Holy Quran and acquired Islamic knowledge under Fulani clerics in the holy city of Fokumba. During the 1800s, Islamic scholars, known as Karamokos, transmitted knowledge of Islam to the Vai people in Grand Cape Mount. While it is unclear how deeply Islam penetrated the Vai-majority region at the time, many Vai people pursued advanced Quranic education and earned degrees in Fouta Jallon, Guinea. Fokumba, regarded as the "Holy City" of Islamic learning, became a popular destination where the Vai students studied Maliki works, Islamic Sciences, History, and Geography. Some Vai Muslims spread Islam to neighboring regions occupied by the Gola and Dey ethnic groups through trade in the 19th century. (Corby, 1988: 48).

Significantly, during the Mandinka traders and clerics contact with the Vai ethnic group the Arabic was the primary written language in Grand Cape Mount, which played a vital role in the spread of Islam. The use of the Arabic language facilitated intellectual and material exchanges, such as trade, record-keeping, correspondence, and contributed to a sense of superiority in the region. Arabic literacy, along with the use of African languages written in Arabic script, aided communication and reinforced the influence of Islam in the region. The Mandinka traders and Islamic clerics were proactive in the dissemination of Islam in Liberia, particularly in the western and northern parts of the country. Their trade ventures and missionary work continue to impact modern Liberia, with the Islamic community playing a significant role in the economy (Corby, 1988: 45).

1.6. Mandinka Interaction with Grand Cape Mount in Liberia

Historically, the people of Liberia, formerly known as the Grain Coast, considered Upper Guinea as the homeland of the Mandinka tribe, as well as those in Liberia with similar historical and tribal connections. It is important to note that terms like Mandinka, Manding, Mandingo,

and Mendi are used interchangeably to refer to the tribal people of Western Sudan. During the 17th and 18th centuries, it is believed that the Mandinka ethnic group, particularly the Kamara clan from Konia in Upper Guinea, began to move away from the highlands where their sacred capital, Musadugu, was located and settled in the coastal and forested areas of Liberia.

The earliest recorded presence of the Mandinka in Grand Cape Mount, among the Vai people, dates to 1724. The Vai people were considered relatives of the Mandinka due to cultural and linguistic similarities. Linguistic experts from Liberia have clarified that the Vai language is a subdivision of the Mende language group in the country. Cultural anthropology further points out that the Vai tribe and the Mandinka share close cultural affinities, and the Mende were drawn to Grand Cape Mount for its salt and trade resources. The MTC referred to the Vai as the Dyula of Western Liberia. These cultural and linguistic similarities enabled the Mandinka to integrate into the Liberian society, as both the Vai and Mandinka were predominantly Muslim. Some of the Mandinka traders and Islamic missionaries who had previously settled in Lofa were drawn to the Vai settlements in Grand Cape Mount, thereby facilitating the trade with the Europeans along the Piso River (Holsoe, 1976: 1).

1.7. Outcome of Migration and Integration in Liberia

It is widely believed that Islam first came to Liberia in the early 14th century through coastal trade by Mandingo traders from the ancient Mali Empire. However, the trade remained concentrated in the coastal areas for an extended period. As trade along the coast flourished, the Mandinka traders, who were also Islamic scholars, began to introduce Islamic practices along the Grain Coast and gradually moved inland. This effort coincided with the Mandinka ethnic group's dual mission, trade, and the spread of Islam to the northern and western regions of the Grain Coast. The Mandinka ethnic group have been regarded as the pioneers of Islamization across much of West Africa, they were the key players who played significant role in introducing Islam to Liberia.

Initially, the interaction between Islamic missionaries and the indigenous people of Liberia was challenging for both parties, primarily due to language barriers and differences in social integration. Liberia, a complex society predominantly made up of traditional worshippers, viewed Islam as a deviant institution, in contrast to their animistic and polytheistic beliefs. As a result, the Mandinka traders and Islamic missionaries faced resistance in spreading Islam among the indigenous population. Despite this, the Mandinka traders, and Islamic clerics, acting in dual roles as both traders and missionaries, penetrated deeply into northern and western Liberia. They established trade centers while simultaneously promoting the Islamic religious doctrine.

Over time, the Islamic missionaries' encounters with the indigenous people improved. Initially, language and cultural barriers hindered their progress, especially in lower northern and western regions, while in the upper western and northern regions, language exchange occurred more freely. The tribes in northern Liberia, with cross-border connections, facilitated communication between Islamic missionaries and the local population and the Vai in upper western Liberia had language and cultural similarities with the Mandinka ethnic group. These traditional societies had already developed their own systems of governance and religious practices,

primarily the worship of ancestors and natural forces. The introduction of Islam, with its monotheistic beliefs, was initially slow. However, Islam gradually took root in northern and western Liberia, with Islamic clerics initiating intermarriages with indigenous women and recruiting young boys for Quranic studies.

This period marked the beginning the spread of Islamic religion in Liberia. The Islamic missionaries established large families with multiple wives, many of whom brought their own extended family members into the marriage. This practice remains a tradition in Liberia today, with these extended family members often converting to Islam and practicing its doctrines. According to traditional accounts, the women involved in marriages with Islamic clerics in western Liberia were predominantly from the Gola, Vai, and Dey tribes. In the northern part of Liberia, indigenous women from the Lorma, Gbande, Kissi, Mende, and Kpelleh tribes were married to Islamic missionaries and clerics (Konneh, 1867).

1.8. Islamic Missionary Activity in Southeastern Liberia

The spread of Islam in the southeastern region of Liberia faced several challenges during its early stages. Unlike the northern and western regions, where Islamic missionaries encountered fewer obstacles, the southeastern region proved more difficult for the Mandinka traders and Islamic missionaries to penetrate. The northern and western regions of Liberia had proximity to neighboring Sierra Leone and Guinea, areas where the Mandinka were prominent in both trade and Islamic missionary work. However, the southeastern region, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and Ivory Coast, presented different dynamics. The southeastern region comprises Grand Gedeh, Maryland, River Gee, Sinoe, Grand Kru, River-Cess and Bassa counties, all part of the Kwa language-speaking group in Liberia.

Before the arrival of the American Colonization Society (ACS), the trans-Saharan trade route, which connected the ancient Mali and Songhai empires, spread across the West African sub-region, with the Mandinka deeply involved. These Mandinka traders and missionaries entered southeastern Liberia through trade networks, their penetration was slower due to resistance from local tribes.

In the southeastern region, repatriated ex-slaves initially settled in Sinoe and Maryland under the Maryland Colonization Society and the Mississippi Colonization Society, respectively. These settlers were largely engaged in Christian missionary work, which took cease of the region. As part of their mission to spread Christianity, the ex-slaves extended education and other services to the indigenous population, whom they sought to 'liberate' from what they considered backwardness and bring to modern civilization.

The MTC in south-eastern Liberia met real resistance in term of moving deep and deeper inland to spread Islam. Many traditional accounts highlighted that the local chiefs and kings across the south-eastern region saw the MTC as people who were searching for settlement and the local authority decline to grant these Mandinka traders and clerics the opportunity to penetrate deep inland. The MTC experience much more difficulties in the south-eastern region as compared to the northern and western regions of Liberia. Generally, the interaction between the MTC and the local population in the south-eastern region was based on trade and to the largest extends Islamic teaching and preaching was rejected. The arrival of the former slaves

from the United States of America, who were on Christian missionary work exacerbated the already fracas situation between the MTC and the local population (Cooper, 1842).

1.9. Conflict between the Mandinka and Indigenous People of Liberia

The Mandinka ethnic group, who are believed to have come from upper Guinea, were known for their involvement in trade and Islamic missionary activities across Africa, including Liberia. The MTC began their movement into northern and western Liberia long before the 1800s, establishing trade contacts with indigenous people and at the same time preaching and teaching Islamic practices meant to spread Islam. However, the indigenous population view the MTC dual missions as threat to the local cultural mainly trade and Traditional African Religious practices and often resisted the Mandinka, leading to conflict.

The reasons for the conflict were primarily based on religious threat, land, and trade. The indigenous people were concerned about maintaining their religion, the potential exploitation of their lands, as they also viewed the Mandinka as competitors in trade. Economically, the MTC were rivals by indigenous traders, who relied on a subsistence-based barter system. In contrast, the Mandinka established a more centralized market-driven economy that involved long-distance trade in goods such as salt, gold, and kola nuts. This economic shift disrupted the existing local trade networks, further increasing tensions.

Culturally and religiously, the Mandinka, who were Muslim, clashed with the Traditional African religions practiced by the indigenous populations. These differences created tension, but the Mandinka traders and clerics managed to prevent these tensions from escalating into full-scale conflict. The MTC used trade as a mean to penetrate deeper into the interior, which, in some communities, was a direct provocation.

Politically, the MTC were educated and experienced in governance from the ancient Mali Empire, they sought to influence the local power structures in communities they live. In contrast, the indigenous people's political systems were fragmented, and the MTC capitalized on this weakness to increase their influence. Despite these sources of conflict, the MTC sought to build relationships through dialogue and social integration, which allowed them to gradually gain acceptance among the indigenous people widely in the western and northern regions of Liberia, while in the south-eastern region the MTC were rejected (Cooper, 1842).

1.9.1. Conflict Resolution

The Mandinka traders and clerics began to settle in indigenous communities, marrying local women to bridge cultural and social gaps. These intermarriages helped create social connections and foster mutual understanding. Additionally, the Mandinka traders and clerics adopted certain traditional cultural practices, blending Islamic religious practices and indigenous customs to ease tensions. By the time, the ACS arrived in the 19th century, Liberia's political structure began shifting from traditional tribal governance to a more centralized form of democratic governance.

The ACS, later referred to as the Americo-Liberian government, supported the integration of the Mandinka ethnic group into the interior of the newly emerging nation, contributing to the peaceful coexistence between the Mandinka traders and the indigenous people (Cooper, 1842).

1.10. Christian Mission in Liberia

In Liberia, it is believed that Christianity can be traced to the early arrival of the ACS, which constituted most of the population since its establishment in 1821. The ACS was a movement formed in the United States of America with the responsibility of resettling freed African Americans and formerly enslaved people back to Africa after the abolition of slavery the Americas. The ACS organized a small administrative staff to oversee the repatriation process and subsequent settlement of ex-slaves in Sierra Leone at first and subsequently on the Grain Coast, which later became Liberia. The ACS introduced Christianity to the Grain Coast, now Liberia, through various Christian Denominations under the guidance of missionary efforts aimed at spreading Christianity throughout the region.

Initially, the Christian mission in Liberia ushered in Protestant denominations, including the Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran and Presbyterian Churches. The membership within ACS were largely part of the Christian mission in Liberia. It is clear, that they were under guidance of the ACS many of whom were educated and had received western style of training, significantly influence the formation and subsequent independence of Liberia ACS a nation state and consolidated the Christian mission in the establishment. The arrival of the ACS gradually brought an end to tribal rule in Liberia and initiated the formation of Liberia as a nation-state under democratic governance. It is believed that the framers of the Law enshrined in the 1847 constitution that Liberia was founded on basic of Christian principles, with three counties, Montserrado, Bassa, and Sinoe, being referred to as Liberia, while several territories remained under tribal kings.

The indigenous people of Liberia, who practiced traditional African religions, Animism, and Ancestor Worship, resisted Christianity from the onset, as they also rejected Islam. However, the introduction of Christianity by the missionaries led to the development of a strong educational system across Liberia and western civilization, which the American Colonization Society used as factors for participation in the governance of the state. This system played a crucial role in the recruitment of Christians in Liberia. Many Christian denominations, including the Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Lutheran and Presbyterian school systems, were established, contributing to the growth of Christianity. As the nation moved toward improving democracy by expanding the state, the enrollment of Christian missionaries in Liberia also expanded Christian institutions, with the establishment of Catholic schools, Assembly of God schools, and Lutheran schools.

Christian missionaries institutionalized Christianity in Liberia, significantly contributing to the development of the faith. Education became a key factor in attracting the indigenous population to various Christian denominations. The government's foundation on Christian principles was believed to have served as the basis for the rapid growth of Christianity in Liberia (Stephen, 1863).

1.11. Emergence of New Language in Liberia-Arabic

Historically, the Arabic language has played a crucial role in shaping Liberia's educational landscape, particularly before the introduction of Western-style education. Islamic missionaries, known as Ulama, introduced Quranic education, which became the first formal

educational system in the region. These missionaries recruited young boys from different ethnic backgrounds and enrolled them in madrassas, where they were trained in Islamic teachings, Arabic literacy, and religious principles. The Mandinka traders, who were also involved in spreading Islam, used profits from their trade to establish mosques and madrassas, further integrating Arabic into the cultural and educational framework of Liberia. In northern and western Liberia, especially in Bopolu, Islamic schools followed a structured curriculum in which students first learned to read and memorize Arabic texts before being taught their meanings, emphasizing oral recitation and memorization as the foundation of education.

The Quranic educational system was rigorous, requiring students to master recitation before delving into the interpretation of texts such as the *Jalaleyn*, a well-known commentary on the Quran. Those who demonstrated exceptional academic dedication studied history, religious traditions, and Islamic jurisprudence under the guidance of scholars. Advancing in Islamic education required students to pass an intensive seven-day examination conducted by a panel of Imams and Ulama. Successful candidates were honored in grand ceremonies, wearing traditional attire, and celebrated by their communities. The Islamic educational tradition in Liberia, particularly in Bopolu, fostered a rich literary culture, with the local Islamic library preserving historical manuscripts, poetry, and philosophical works. Beyond religious texts, this library housed documents detailing the formation of the Mandinka Kingdom, highlighting the deep historical and intellectual contributions of Arabic scholarship to the region.

The Arabic language significantly influenced Liberia's geopolitical, socio-cultural, and economic systems, serving as the primary medium for record-keeping and intellectual discourse in the hinterlands. Before the arrival of the Americo-Liberians, Arabic was used to document state affairs, marriage contracts, historical events, and military strategies. Islamic scholars, fluent in Arabic, formed the intellectual elite of northern and western Liberia, influencing local vernaculars and social customs. Arabic also shaped cultural aspects such as dress codes, greetings, and architectural styles. Recognizing the language's importance, prominent scholars like Dr. Edward Wilmot Blyden advocated for the inclusion of Arabic in Liberia's formal education system. His recommendations, along with those of historian Cassell, led to discussions about incorporating Arabic studies at the University of Liberia, reinforcing its role in shaping the country's intellectual and cultural heritage. (Blyden, 1887, p 7).

1.11.1. Introduction of another language- Bopolu Kpelleh

The early arrival of Mandinka traders and clerics in the lower northern and western regions of Liberia faced significant challenges, particularly in navigating the diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes of the area. These traders and clerics, who were primarily engaged in commerce and the spread of Islam, encountered various indigenous groups, including the Lorma, Vai, Gbande, Mende, and Gola. Effective communication was crucial for trade, religious teachings, and social integration. Over time, sustained interaction between the Mandinka and the local communities led to the gradual development of a shared language, known as Bopolu Kpelle. This language emerged as a linguistic fusion, incorporating elements from multiple local dialects alongside Mandinka. It became a vital tool for communication, fostering economic exchange and cultural assimilation between the different groups.

Bopolu Kpelle played a crucial role in bridging linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling a more cohesive socio-political structure in the region. The widespread use of this language facilitated trade, religious propagation, and political alliances, contributing to the broader integration of Mandinka influences within the indigenous societies. This linguistic adaptation was particularly significant in areas such as Montserrado, Bomi, Gbarpolu, and Lofa, where diverse ethnic communities coexisted. The emergence of Bopolu Kpelle not only underscored the resilience and adaptability of these communities but also highlighted the broader historical processes of cultural fusion and mutual influence that shaped the region. Through this interaction, the Mandinka and local groups established lasting social and economic networks that would continue to define the historical and cultural landscape of Liberia for generations (Dukuly, 1863).

1.12. Development of new Education System in Modern Liberia

The origins of education in Liberia can be traced to the Mandinka ethnic group, who introduced the Islamic system of education with Quranic teachings in the northern and western regions of Liberia. Research has shown the significant roles of the Arabic language and Qur'anic education in Liberia reveals the legacy of knowledge, impacts and understanding. In Islamic tradition, Prophet Muhammad is considered the greatest architect of educational practices, spreading the spirit of learning to his disciples and followers around the world. The importance of knowledge in Islam is emphasized: it enables one to distinguish right from wrong, guides the way to heaven, provides companionship in solitude, and serves as protection from enemies.

In Liberia, Islamic scholars took on the responsibility of spreading education through institutions and programs dedicated to the Islamic spirit. The northern and western regions of Liberia contained Quranic schools where students were made to absorb the Holy Quran. Many of these students learned to read and write the Arabic language, with skillful writing style in preserving the Holy Quran or their lessons. This skill provided them with an income, as they sold Quranic manuscripts to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Dr. Blyden observed that most of the boys could read the Holy Quran fluently from memory, although few of them were proficient speaking the Arabic language or constructing fundamental documents in the language.

The scarcity of *Karamokos* (Islamic scholars) made it difficult for students to practice and master these skills. The *Karamokos* even made their pen from bamboo and ink from tree bark. Blyden suggested that to Islamic scholars to establish a factory for paper production. Imam Abbas, along with a young man from Kankan, was noted as the most fluent in spoken Arabic (Blyden, 1887: 8).

It is challenging to distinguish between the Mandinka ethnic group and Islam in Liberia, as the two are closely intertwined. Islam in Africa has been integral to the establishment of civilization, social organization, and the development of large cities. The Quranic knowledge and teachings of Islam have been instrumental in elevating communities and fostering development.

Muslims in Liberia are intelligent, enterprising, and influential, especially in the economic sector. The Quran is regarded not only as a religious text but also as a source of secular

knowledge that shapes society. It has provided a unifying force among its adherents, greatly contributing to their progress. Non-Muslims were often recruited into Islam, sometimes living in predominantly Muslim communities to protect and sustain their faith. Over time, the impact of Islam led to moral improvements in individuals, with Islamic women playing a crucial role in the spread of Islam in Liberia (Dukuly, 1863).

1.13. Role of Women in Spread of Islam in Liberia

In the early stages of Islam in Liberia, the socio-cultural dynamics between the Mandinka traders and clerics and the indigenous tribes were marked by resistance. In some communities, this resistance escalated into confrontations. Over time, these conflicts were resolved through dialogue and engagement. A key factor in the integration of Islam was intermarriage between Mandinka traders and clerics and indigenous women, which facilitated the spread of Islam in rural Liberia.

In the 1800s, as Islam successfully penetrated Liberia's interior, women played an important role in its spread. Islamic women taught their family members and relatives the importance of prayer, the five daily prayers, and purification through Quranic lessons. Islamic men encouraged their wives to invite family members and relatives to stay with them, using these opportunities to spread Islam. Women also helped spread the religion during social gatherings, such as festivals, where they prepared and distributed food and used the medium and spoke to non-Muslim women about Islam. The women commitment to Islamic religious obligations strengthened the influence of Islam within families and communities.

Although women were less prominent in the Islamic religion compared to men, their role in the socio-cultural integration of Islam was significant. Their involvement in marriage, family, and society highlighted the moral virtues emphasized by Islam, which were embraced by the community. These women became role models, particularly for the youthful population, as they promoted sustainable marriage practices and social harmony (Teayah, 1886).

1.14. Emergence of New Family Settlements in Liberia

The Mandinka people were predominantly Muslim and known for their agricultural skills and artisanal work, including blacksmithing and leatherwork. They established various trade centers in communities and regions across Liberia. However, they encountered difficulties in maintaining a purely Islamic identity due to tensions and conflicts with non-Muslim communities. These challenges convinced the Mandinka ethnic group and Islamic missionaries to incorporate some local traditional beliefs into their Islamic practices.

The Mandinka migrated in large numbers, often traveling as families to avoid displacement while fleeing Guinea. Prominent Mandinka families, such as the Sheriff, Kamara, Toure, Dukuly, Jabateh, Massaley, Fofana, Kromah, Cisse, and Barwor, settled in local communities across Liberia and pursued intermarriages with indigenous women, including the Gola, Kpelleh, Gbandi, Lorma, Mendi, and Vai. This strategy allowed the Mandinka to gain land rights and establish settlements in various parts of the country.

The migration began with the Kamara family, who came from Musadugu in Guinea long before the 1800s and settled in Lofa County, where they engaged in agricultural production. These

Mandinka Muslims brought with them superior knowledge of iron technology, and their involvement in local governance paved the way for their early settlement and eventual spread throughout Liberia's interior. The migration of the Mandinka families was particularly prominent in the northern and western parts of Liberia, where their descendants can still be found today.

Traditional accounts of Liberian cultural heritage emphasize the migration that took place over the centuries, resulting in cross-border family relationships. The Sheriff family, for example, migrated from Musadugu and settled first in Lofa County. Many of the Sheriffs were traders, while some were also Islamic scholars. They continued to expand their trade networks, contributing to the spread of the Sheriff family across northern and western Liberia. The Dukuly family entered Liberia through its northern border with Guinea, eventually settling in various regions of Liberia (Sheriff, 1993).

1.15. Minority Presence of Islam in Liberia

Islam spread primarily in the northern and western parts of Liberia, largely due to the country's border relationship Guinea and Sierra Leone. In the southeastern region, however, the spread of Islam struggled due to continuous resistance from the indigenous people and the influence of Christian missionary work in the early 19th century. The rejection of Islamic missionary efforts in southeastern Liberia was partly due to cultural differences and the indigenous population's strong commitment to traditional African religions.

Christian missionary activities served as a factor that undermines the spread of Islam in much of Liberia. As a result, most of the population in Liberia turned toward Christianity. Christian missions-built schools that provided Western education and offered scholarships to less privileged students across the country. They also established hospitals, creating job opportunities for the local population.

Historically, Liberia was founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society, a group of Christians from various denominations. The political elites who helped establish Liberia built the country on Christian principles. This foundation of Christian values played significant role in limiting the spread of Islam after the formation of the state. The government and political elites created a system in which job opportunities were often tied to one's affiliation with the Christian Church. This system led to a strong interest in Western education, which was a pathway to both educational advancement and social mobility through Christian affiliation.

Political leaders in Liberia regularly held meetings in churches, where they made critical national decisions within a Christian framework. The government's relationship with the United States further reinforced the dominance of Christianity in Liberia. The United States provided support to various Christian denominations, which in turn strengthened the Christian presence in Liberia. Overseas Christian organizations established programs to support the Christian mission in Liberia, providing scholarships, establishing non-governmental organizations, and improving the socio-cultural dynamics of Christianity in the Liberia (Konneh, 1867).

Conclusion

The historical interaction between indigenous African religions and foreign faiths, particularly Islam, significantly shaped Liberia's spiritual and cultural landscape. Before the introduction of Islam and Christianity, African societies practiced traditional belief systems centered on animism, ancestor worship, and the veneration of supernatural powers. These religious practices were deeply ingrained in social structures, influencing governance, education, and moral values. Over time, as Islam spread through trade and missionary activities, it blended with existing customs, leading to a unique fusion of spiritual traditions. This process of religious syncretism helped ease the transition for many African communities while preserving key elements of their indigenous beliefs.

The migration of the Mandinka people from Guinea to Liberia played a crucial role in the spread of Islam. Their movement was driven by economic opportunities, religious expansion, and political conflicts, particularly the resistance against French colonization. Mandinka traders and clerics facilitated the dissemination of Islamic teachings by integrating them with local traditions and customs. Through commerce, intermarriage, and religious education, they established a lasting Islamic presence in northern and western Liberia. Additionally, the establishment of Quranic schools and the adoption of Arabic for religious and trade purposes strengthened the intellectual and economic influence of Islam in the region.

Despite their success in the north and west, the Mandinka faced resistance in southeastern Liberia, where indigenous groups had stronger ties to Christianity and traditional beliefs. The arrival of freed African Americans through the American Colonization Society further complicated religious dynamics, as they introduced Western governance and Christian missionary work. Christian institutions gained prominence, leading to the gradual decline of traditional religious practices, and limiting the expansion of Islam in certain regions. Nonetheless, Islam remained influential, particularly in areas with strong Mandinka settlements and trade connections with Guinea and Sierra Leone.

Economic rivalry and religious differences contributed to periodic conflicts between the Mandinka and indigenous Liberian communities. The Mandinka's structured trading networks disrupted traditional barter economies, creating tensions over land control and economic dominance. However, intermarriage and social integration helped bridge some of these divides, allowing for the coexistence of different religious and cultural traditions. Over time, while resistance persisted in some areas, mutual adaptation fostered a degree of harmony between Islamic and indigenous African practices.

In conclusion, Liberia's religious evolution reflects a complex interplay of indigenous beliefs, Islamic expansion, and Christian missionary influence. While Christianity ultimately became the dominant faith due to colonial policies and missionary efforts, Islam maintained a strong foothold, especially in northern and western Liberia. The Mandinka traders' contributions to commerce, education, and religious development left a lasting impact on Liberian society. Today, the coexistence of multiple religious traditions continues to shape the nation's cultural identity, highlighting the enduring legacy of African spirituality alongside foreign religious influences.

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