

Liberian Muslims

“Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness... And darkness is not a subject for history.”

-Hugh Trevor-Roper (b. 2003), British historian^[1]

It is, without doubt, difficult to assess the intentions of the British historian who stated the above during his lecture on African history at the University of Oxford in 1964, but telling people that they have no history “at present” is also telling them that they have no place in human history. Thus, the people of Africa are pushed out of history, and their existence is made meaningless or rather completely reduced to their relations with Europe. Whereas, in actual fact, people from the whole continent of Africa, Liberians included, have histories that go back centuries. In order to shatter the arguments of this British historian, all we need do is look at a) information transmitted through oral tradition, b) information on the continent provided by Muslim historians from the early period onward, and c) Turkish sources, primarily the *Book of Navigation* written by Piri Reis, which, either as a result of the Ottoman interest in the continent or for some other reason, includes information on the continent. This is because these sources provide information on the ethnicities in Africa and on the destinies of the states that were founded by them. Therefore an excruciating need emerges for comprehensive texts based on reliable material on the history of the Black Continent in general, and on the history of Muslims in particular.^[2]

After providing a short summary of Liberia’s political history, the present study will offer observations on the history of Muslims in the country and their present circumstances.

A Short History of Liberia

Liberia stands out as having a relatively different history from that of other modern African states. This state emerged as a result of the resettlement of “freed slaves” from the United States in West Africa by the American Colonization Society in the 1820s. According to the official motto of the country, *The love of liberty brought us here*, it was “love of liberty” that brought the slaves here.^[3] However, when they landed on the island of Monrovia, the current capital which is named after the fifth president of the USA, James Monroe, these freed slaves were not considered “lovers of liberty” by the indigenous tribes – among whom were Muslims – who were the real owners of the land. Nevertheless, unlike the other tribes, the Muslims helped the newcomers to resettle. Having subdued indigenous tribes thanks to their financial and military strength, this new elite founded Liberia in 1847. Based on the constitutional system of the USA, the country at first denied indigenous people their constitutional rights; primarily the right to vote. Thus, this minority, which accounted for 5% of the population, began ruling the country. Ruling the country until the 1980s thanks to their access to the sea, the modern technical equipment in their possession, their higher levels of education and literacy and their strong ties with American institutions, this ruling elite had continuous tensions with the indigenous people which at times evolved into civil conflict. The tension between this Christian elite, which considered Western civilization to be superior and filled the country with American-style houses and churches, and the 16 tribes which included Muslims in their numbers, ended in 1980 with the military coup staged by Samuel Doe, a Master Sergeant of the Liberian army belonging to the Krahn tribe. Even though Doe became the first indigenous president, his presidency did not see any change in the relations with the US. Forming close ties especially with Reagan, Doe’s tribalist policies became an obstacle to stability in the country and two civil wars broke out (1989-1996, 1997-2003) in which the interests of the USA played a major part.^[4]

In the first election following the civil war, which had claimed the lives of over 200,000 people and forced thousands into exile as refugees in neighboring countries, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Harvard graduate born to indigenous and Americo-Liberian parents, was chosen as head of the transitional government. The government formed by Sirleaf prepared the country for the elections of 2011. Having won 43.9% of the vote in the first round and 90.7% in the second, Sirleaf was elected president.^[5]

Liberia’s Current Situation

Having one of the fastest growing populations in the world, Liberia's population is now over 4 million. [\[6\]](#) With the majority of its territory remaining "untouched", the country is considerably rich in diamond, rubber, iron ore, lumber and fish; however, 85% of the population remains unemployed and try to survive on a daily income of about a dollar. This is because rubber, one of the most important income sources in the country, is monopolized by companies from the USA, which grow rubber trees over thousands of acres of land. Meanwhile, fishing is mostly controlled by European states. The capital city of Monrovia, a coastal city, is one of the rare places where the population has very little access to the sea because of the giant harbor walls built on the side of the harbor facing the city. The parts of the coast which do not have harbors are surrounded by hotels and luxurious dwellings for the rich, which makes access to the area almost impossible for the common people.

The most important source of income of the Liberian state is its status as a flag of convenience. Hundreds of ships owned by international carriers from over 50 countries fly the flag of Liberia. Ships from numerous countries thus save themselves from serious financial burdens and international responsibilities.

Corruption being one of the most significant problems in the country, there are serious issues with tax collection and providing infrastructure. Only certain streets in urban centers have access to running water and electricity. While access to water is provided by wells mostly dug by NGOs, people use diesel generators for electricity.

Deprived of opportunities for jobs with a steady income, the population resort to small-scale trade. The capital city of Monrovia, in particular, resembles a large market square. Trying to survive another day, people sell everything they can set their hands on, from threads and needles, to soaps and medicine. Merchants from India and Lebanon are responsible for the country's high commercial activity in imports/exports.

The high number of rape cases especially before 2003 sparked a campaign to raise awareness in the country against this crime. In Liberia, where AIDS constitutes a serious problem, healthcare services are mostly provided by missionary organizations.

School enrollment in the country where efforts are made to introduce compulsory education, is also taken care of mostly by organizations associated with the Church. With only one of the universities in the country being public, *the others generally belong to Protestant organizations.*

Islam in Liberia and Liberian Muslims

1. The Arrival of Islam in Liberia

"When settlers arrived in 1820, in addition to Sao Boso [the dominant power in the region], there was another king in the region, Ibrahim Asisi, who was almost more powerful. Ibrahim Asisi's army comprised of about a thousand cavalry units equipped with swords and shields. They could defeat and eradicate any enemy they confronted. He gave people land. There were bandits attacking the merchants traveling between Medina [al-Munawwarah] and here [for pilgrimage and trade]. Ibrahim Asisi sent an embassy to Monrovia, carrying a letter in Arabic which expressed his wish to join forces with the Liberian forces to clear this route of bandits for the safe passage of commercial goods. There is a library in Baopulu containing exclusively Arabic works. Asisi would go there to study. Ibrahim Asisi is the only person to have risen from the ranks of a commoner to a ruler. In those days there was a huge amount of infighting, but he told the king, "My soldiers are your soldiers." Then they cleared that trade route. Many people are trying to understand what is happening here without knowing the history."

-Emmanuel Bowier, Former Information Minister of Liberia[\[7\]](#)

As stated by E. Bowier, Liberian intellectual and former minister, Islam arrived in Liberia before the resettlement of people here by the USA and, according to Sheikh Kafumba Konneh, head of the National Muslim Council of Liberia, it is a history that goes back over 500 years. [\[8\]](#) In his study on the subject, A. Y.

Kallay traces it back to the 10th century CE, and argues that Islam arrived in West Africa, including Liberia, through the agency of proselytizing Moroccan Muslim scholars. According to Kallay, this proselytizing movement led by Sheikh Abdullah b. Yasin spread rapidly among the Mandingos, who constitute the Muslim population of Liberia today. The Mandingos established Islamic centers in the north of what is now Liberia, and led the Islamization of the region.[\[9\]](#)

In the years that followed, Muslims managed to found an independent Islamic state in the region and started large-scale Islamic movements, led primarily by the Mandingo and the Maraka, targeting pagan tribes. Important steps were taken for Islamic proselytizing in the region, especially under Imam Samorie (1830-1900), when new mosques were built and memorizing the Quran was encouraged. [\[10\]](#) Therefore, when the Americans arrived in the region for the first time in 1820, Muslim tribes were already settled there. They even helped Americans with protection and establishing a secure environment.[\[11\]](#)

However, the “freed slaves” who were led by America also paved the way for important missionary activity. The modern state of Liberia emerged as a Christian state in this region where American-style churches had been spreading rapidly. When the Samorie Imamate was defeated in its conflict against the French, the stage was set for the complete Christianization of the region. So much so that, until 1980, all the presidents of Liberia were bishops.[\[12\]](#)

2. Muslims in Modern Liberia

Rich in religious diversity, in addition to Islam, the country is home to indigenous religions, Christianity and, although in small numbers, the Bahá'í faith. Muslims constitute the majority of six out of 16 ethnicities in the country. The most populous are the Mandingo who are dispersed throughout the region, principally in neighboring Guinea. Even though it is not possible to obtain conclusive data supported by a concrete evidence, the Muslim population is estimated to be around 30-35%.[\[13\]](#)

Thanks to the then president William V. S. Tubman's (1941-1971) policy of openness toward non-Christian indigenous peoples and Muslims, Muslims in the country gained their right to vote, to stand as candidates in elections, and to be represented in the government. As a result of this policy, the Muslim Congress of Liberia was formed in 1960, giving Muslims the right to official representation.[\[14\]](#)

Muslims lived in a relative state of liberty until 1997 when they began to experience serious problems again after the election of Charles Taylor. They started a resistance movement against Taylor who imposed anti-Muslim policies and made efforts to Christianize the country, and their struggle, led by Muhammad Gomando, continued until 2003 when Taylor resigned as a result of international pressure.[\[15\]](#)

3. The Sociocultural State of Muslims

“It is possible to describe our activity and organization here like this: The National Muslim Council of Liberia, of which I am head, has taken shape through a merger between all the Islamic organizations in the country. What we have been advocating and striving to achieve so far is getting Islamic organizations to teach Islam to people and help spread Islam in the provinces where they are active. And also getting them to join the National Muslim Council of Liberia as the highest relevant unit. The mission of the National Muslim Council is to help, encourage, and provide security for organizations which are engaged in activities to promote Islamic awareness, provide an Islamic education for children, and to spread Islam.”

-Sheikh Kafumba Konneh, the National Muslim Council of Liberia[\[16\]](#)

Muslims in Liberia are represented at two distinct levels. To use the terminology they employ, there is a national council regulating their “worldly relations”. Led by the jurist Kafumba Konneh, this council comprises of representatives from different provinces of the country. Moreover, it acts as an umbrella organization for Muslim NGOs. Meanwhile, the office of the Mufti, led by Abubakari Soumaro, regulates “purely religious affairs”. Among the responsibilities of this office are the regulation of religious education

and mosques, but, because the employees are not government officers, they continue to stay active thanks to “donations”.

Muslims provide for their own educational needs through the schools that they establish themselves. In these schools, where education is in Arabic in the morning and in English in the afternoon, lessons are given on the fundamental principles of Islamic, such as the Quran, hadith, the life of the Prophet, exegesis and doctrine. Students follow the official curriculum of the Ministry of Education and take both West African and Pan-African exams, with many achieving successful results. In Arabic classes, primarily the Saudi Arabian and Egyptian curricula are followed. These countries offer scholarships to Liberians who succeed in the relevant exams so that they can study in the country. Noting that this process is an important source of support for Liberia and for Muslims in particular, Konneh states the following:

“The kids who are educated in [the above-mentioned] schools in English can become lawyers. Some graduates of this system serve as members of the supreme court, some as secondary judges, and still others as academics at Liberian universities. Some graduates work as doctors in Liberia, America and other countries. What we strive to do is to provide as good an education as possible. We have schools offering education from pre-school level up to high school level, but we would like to have our own colleges and universities. Because this is the only way we can provide an effective education for our people. We also intend to renovate our mosques and to build new ones. We believe that there must be schools providing education within these mosques. Because a mosque which does not offer education cannot fulfill its mission. Why should people coming to these mosques to pray send their kids to a school far away? Schools should benefit from these conditions, too.”[\[17\]](#)

It can be observed that Muslim students studying at universities outside Liberia, primarily in the Arabian peninsula, choose mostly to study theology, law and medicine.

An important issue for Muslims is the proselytizing efforts targeting non-Muslims. Various problems are encountered in this process led mostly by educated generations. Konneh summarizes the situation as follows:

“Discrimination that feeds on hatred toward Islam has not been eradicated. Christians who are against Islam take every opportunity to hinder the spread of Islam. For this reason, they target Muslim-majority tribes. They target our mosques and schools. If you take a tour of the country, you will see that all of our schools have been devastated, that our mosques are used as exhibition centers, movie theaters and restaurants. They have damaged everything that we have in this country. Even though we as Muslims have been targeted in this war, we have understood that war is not the solution to our problems. This is why we have endorsed Christian-Muslim interaction within the peace process.”[\[18\]](#)

It is necessary to note that the Liberian Muslims who face all these hardships also suffer from very low levels of income. The Muslims of Liberia try to provide for their financial needs mostly through relations established with the Muslims of neighboring countries such as Guinea and Sierra Leone, and with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. They have, however, a series of basic needs. At the top of the list is a prestigious cultural center to be built in the capital. Again, the renovation of schools and mosques, maintenance of orphanages [\[19\]](#) and digging of water wells are needs that apply here as with all parts of Africa. In a serious shortcoming, Muslims do not even have a radio station, which is available even to the Bahá'í community of a few thousand people. As has been stated by Kafumba Konneh, Head of the National Muslim Council of Liberia, in comparison to missionary organizations which have ecclesiastical universities and tens of hospitals/clinics throughout the country, Muslims do not even have a university or a hospital. [\[20\]](#) Petitions for sharia courts regulating Islamic affairs relating to family law and inheritance law are also on the rise. [\[21\]](#)

Three points stand out in the call of Liberian Muslims to the Muslims of Turkey. The first is their request that the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose increasing interest in Africa they are aware of, open an embassy in Liberia. It is clear that this would strengthen the relations between the two countries and especially the position of Muslims within the country. The second is that Turkish businessmen invest in Liberia. However, they particularly request that they do not take their national riches abroad, but rather make investments to contribute to the people of the country. The last is that young people from Liberia are given the opportunity to study at Turkish universities. This last point seems especially important because

of the need for people trained in medicine, engineering, communications and agriculture.

4. Perspectives for the Future

“Muslims in Liberia live in really difficult conditions. We have the responsibility to lead our lives in accordance with Islamic sensibilities. It is important for us that beverages containing alcohol or things with haram (forbidden) ingredients are not consumed, that our daughters do not marry non-Muslims. We do not allow Muslims to marry non-Muslims. Our attitude is to offer them our own food, but not to eat theirs. Christians apparently consider this to be a snobby attitude, and think that we look down on them. This is of course not our goal. We do not send our children to their schools, which makes them think of us as a people who never change and need to be restructured. Our responsibility is to teach the Quran and Islam to our people. But they see us as reactionary people. This is how things are for Muslims in Liberia.”

-Sheikh Kafumba Konneh, Head of the National Muslim Council of Liberia^[22]

According to some statistics, the number of African slaves who were taken away by Europeans and Americans in shackles exceeds 20 million. Many of these slaves, among whom were a significant number of Muslims, died during the journey and whose made it to the destination suffered long years of captivity.

After 1815, when the abolitionist movement began, the Western world was faced with a generation of former slaves born into and have grown up in their own societies. Britain, France and the USA reached a consensus as to how they should deal with these people: using the concept of “liberty” to send as many former slaves back to Africa as possible. Hence, why Britain founded Sierra Leone with its capital Freetown, France founded Gabon with its capital Libreville (Free City), and the USA founded Liberia (Country of Liberty).

The following are the reasons underlying the resettlement of freed slaves:

- a) These people and their intellectual backwardness were seen not to have a place in society.
- b) Racist attitudes in society did not allow for a peaceful coexistence.
- c) The presence of these people set a bad example for slaves who hadn't gained their freedom, giving them dreams of liberty.
- d) Industrialization had made these people redundant.

In the case of Liberia in particular, the relations of the resettled community with the indigenous resembles the remarks of Ibn Khaldun on the vanquished and the victor. According to his work *The Muqaddima*, “The vanquished become subjects of the victor. They follow these people whose subjects they are in every respect, especially in their dress. For people erroneously assume that their own subservience to the victor is not due to certain material dynamics, but to the perfection of the victor. Thus, they adopt all the manners of the victor and assimilate themselves in a show of loyalty.” This quote is the best description of the process that has been ongoing in Liberia since the 1820s. The country might have never been colonized, but it still could not escape the administration of a ruling elite whose members were enslaved by the transformation they had experienced and so acted like colonial governors. All these negative developments had a direct consequence for Muslims, who constitute a significant section of the population.

Even though efforts were made in the restructuring process that followed the 2005 elections and the fragile ceasefire to eradicate all the visible marks of the civil war and to help people forget the miserable events of the past, the current structure of injustice which disregards the dynamics within society does not seem to be sustainable with such transitory measures.

Liberia is one of many countries that has been gifted to us by the capitalist era. The global system which burdens its citizens with liberal capitalism will last for as long as the ports and rubber farms of Liberia can be exploited by foreigners. A political attitude that takes the voice of conscience into account and gives priority to the concept of justice has become imperative not only for Liberia, where the outbreak of a civil war seems probable, but for the whole world.

Correspondingly, the following call from Kafumba Konneh, the highest representative of Liberian Muslims, to Turkish Muslims, is especially important:

“Sunnis constitute the majority of Muslims in Liberia. We maintain good relations especially with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar and partly with Bahrain. Because these countries help us, and we try to help them. As for our relations with Turkey, there hasn't been much interaction between the Muslims of Turkey and the Muslims of Liberia until now. But, of course, we would like to have relations with Turkey. Because other countries offer our children scholarships only in the area of religious studies, but in Liberia, we have a serious need for doctors, engineers, mass media specialists, and agriculturalists. And we believe that, if we can manage to get educational support from Turkey, our children will be trained in medicine and in other disciplines. We would really like to do something about this.”^[23]

[1] Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia (TRC), Monrovia: 2009, c. II, s. 94.

[2] For a detailed study on this subject, see. Hatice Uğur, Osmanlı Afrikası'nda Bir Sultanlık: Zengibar, İstanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2005.

[3] This statement is included in the national emblem.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberia#mediaviewer/File:Coat_of_arms_of_Liberia.svg

[4] For a detailed study on the history of Liberia, see. Emmanuel Bowier, “Liberya'nın kanlı tarihi: Elmas, altın, petrol ve ABD”, (Interview: Özgür Kavak), <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/haber/149881/liberyanin-kanli-tarihi-elmas-altin-petrol-ve-abd-ozgur-kavak> (20.03.2014). The former Liberian Minister of Information, Emmanuel Bowier, is one of the most prominent intellectuals in the country. Konneh summarizes the attitude of Muslims during the civil war: “We can express our role during the war in two ways: first, in the National Muslim Council of Liberia (NMCL), we tried to make the people understand that the problem cannot be solved in the battlefield. So we came together with the Christians and established the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia in order to work for peace. Some Muslims in us had decided to enter into the war. However, we declared that we do not allow murdering of any person for any reason. Actually we convinced the both sides on this and decided to struggle for freedom. Until the exile of the President Taylor, we came together with some leaders and took a decision together. Then a government change occurred and the current government took office. Kafumba Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, (Röportaj: Özgür Kavak), http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[5] Liberia, 2011 Presidential and Legislative Elections”, <http://www.necliberia.org/results2011/> (21.03.2014).

[6] The number that the World Bank offered depending upon the 2012 data is 4,190,000. See. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/liberia> (20.03.2014).

[7] Bowier, “Liberya'nın kanlı tarihi: Elmas, altın, petrol ve ABD”, <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/haber/149881/liberyanin-kanli-tarihi-elmas-altin-petrol-ve-abd-ozgur-kavak> (20.03.2014)

[8] It is estimated that the Muslims came to this area in the 1300s. See. http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014)

[9] A. Y. Kallay, “Muslims in Liberia”, MWL Journal, (Jumad al-Oula 1427/June 2006), p. 39-40.

[10] Kallay, p. 40.

[11] E. Bowier says regarding this subject: The Mandingos and the people coming after got on very well. The Mandingos also protected the Christian colony founded in the region. They themselves were Muslims, but they protected the Christians. If they had not, they would have been exiled out of the country.” “Liberya'nın kanlı tarihi: Elmas, altın, petrol ve ABD”, <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/haber/149881/liberyanin-kanli-tarihi-elmas-altin-petrol-ve-abd-ozgur-kavak> (20.03.2014)

[12] Kallay, p. 40.

[13] Konneh says in an interview conducted in 2010 “It is estimated that the real percentage of the Muslim population is around 32-35%. The real reason of the conflict arises from the fact that the Muslims know that the local government serves to the interests of the USA. If you read the international documents, you see that we say that the Muslim population is about 35% and they say that the Christian population is about 30% which is 15% in fact. Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veri-yor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014). Some reports tend to demonstrate this ratio much lower. For example, in a US-based official report this ratio (Muslim population) is 12,2%, while the Christian population is 85,5%. “2010 Report on International Religious Free-dom”, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010/148698.htm> (21.03.2014). Another research gives this ratio as 25%. <http://www.muslim-population.com/africa/Liberia/Liberian%20Muslims%20and%20the%20African%20Napoleon.php> (21.03.2014).

[14] Kallay, p.40-41.

[15] Kallay, p.41.

[16] “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[17] Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014)

[18] Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[19] Konneh states about the orphanage that some problems occurred due to the “US intervention especially in the Bush period due to the American imperialism”. According to him, “Actually, this situation is not exclusive to Liberia but all Africa in that period. They restrained us and stopped our works. Thank Allah, the Islamic Development Bank financed us for the construction of orphanage. http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[20] Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[21] Abdullah S. L. Sarnoh, “The Status of Liberian Muslims and the Advocacy for Sharia Courts”, (November 15, 2002), <http://theliberiandialogue.org/2012/04/02/the-status-of-liberia-muslims-and-the-advocacy-for-sharia-courts/> (21.03.2014).

[22] Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).

[23] Konneh, “Müslümanlar Varlık Mücadelesi Veriyor”, http://www.timeturk.com/tr/2010/12/24/muslumanlar-varlik-mucadelesi-veriyor.html#.UytNuPI_u3M (20.03.2014).