

The Krio of West Africa

*Islam, Culture, Creolization, and
Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century*



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Introduction

TWO CENTURIES AFTER ITS ESTABLISHMENT as a haven for Africans freed from enslavement and captivity in the Americas and Europe and on slave ships, the myth of Sierra Leone as a colony of predominantly Christianized and Europeanized Africans has become an ingrained part of the postcolonial historical reconstruction of this West African country.¹ The eminent Sierra Leone historian Akintola Wyse, who argued for the use of the nomenclature *Krio*, instead of *Creole*, in reference to the descendants of the former slaves and captives, and who worked laboriously to establish their credentials as a distinct “ethnic group,” has been credited with creating this myth.² Despite acknowledging the persistence of African elements in their culture and being critical of British policies toward them, Wyse insisted that the Krio were “in essence Black Englishmen, [who] would eventually be the agents for the propagation of European civilisation ‘as beacons of light in darkest Africa.’”³ It is a view of Krio society that obfuscates its religious, class, and cultural complexities.

There is no doubt that Wyse was among the most eminent and prolific intellectual architects of the Krio myth, but he was not its sole creator. Christopher Fyfe, the British government archivist at the time of independence and author of *A History of Sierra Leone* (1962); and Arthur Porter, the first Sierra Leonean head of the history department at Fourah Bay College, and author of *Creoledom: A Study of the Development of Freetown Society* (1966), also played a crucial role in laying the scholarly foundations of this myth.⁴ The myth was systematically fleshed out by various scholars in subsequent decades; however, its most emphatic scholarly articulation was the publication of the volume commemorating the bicentennial of the Sierra Leone Colony in 1987.⁵

This work, *The Krio of West Africa*, focuses on the Muslims in the Sierra Leone Colony in the nineteenth century and challenges the underlying paradigms and received wisdom about the development of Krio society in the volume commemorating the bicentenary. It rejects the assumptions that Christianity and Europeanization were prerequisites for inclusion in a society that evolved out of the multifarious groups of Africans resettled in the Sierra Leone Peninsula. It argues that African Muslims played a crucial role in the evolution of Krio society, which included vital contributions to the social, economic, and political landscapes of nineteenth-century Sierra Leone and West Africa. Muslim agency was critical to the development of the evolving Liberated African community during the nineteenth century in several ways. The forceful assertion of their religious worldview and their African cultural praxis in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, especially in their relations with the established Church of England and colonial state officials, ultimately enhanced the capacity of Krio society in general to maintain their sense of autonomy in the constricted social space of British colonial rule.

The leading scholars of Krio society do paint a complex portrait of the historical experience of the group, highlighting especially its “African” elements, social hierarchies, and economic fault lines, and the racist and deleterious impact of British colonialism on its development. These scholars, however, ultimately derive their intellectual cues from the British “philanthropic” sponsors, imperial proconsuls and missionaries, who narrowly envisioned the Sierra Leone settlement as a Christian- and European-oriented enterprise and loyal subjects of the British Crown. These cues produced the inelegant elitist and gender-biased characterization of nineteenth-century Krio society as a colony of “Black Englishmen” steeped in Victorian English values.⁶ They have also been responsible for the production of a historiography that has concentrated largely on the Westernizing impact of the Christian evangelical missions on the manumitted Africans and their descendants, rather than highlighting the multifarious religious, ethnic, and cultural processes that molded their lives and historical experiences. It is a historiography that excludes the contributions of Muslims in the molding of Krio society, and unnecessarily renders parochial the country’s historical experience. It is also an interpretation of Sierra Leone history that flies against the observations of nineteenth-century chroniclers, who were much more attuned to the ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity of the Sierra Leone Colony and its environs. Interrogated much more deeply, the historiography stands in stark contrast to the historical and contemporary realities, and indeed the lived experiences of the people of Sierra Leone.

The process of forging Krio identity in nineteenth-century West Africa was a dynamic and deeply contested one that pitted members of Krio society against one another, “outsiders,” and British colonialists. Nonetheless, the development of Krio identity and society both allowed for and transcended ethnic, cultural, class, and religious differences. Ultimately, what distinguished Krio society was not its separateness from other Sierra Leonean ethnic groups, but its ability to absorb different elements from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and to continuously re-create itself in response to the changing social and political realities of nineteenth-century British colonialism. The malleability and adaptability of Krio society partly derives from the transatlantic and creolizing experiences of the first batches of repatriated Africans resettled in the Sierra Leone Peninsula in the late eighteenth century. These groups had not only gone through the crucible of enslavement and cultural acculturation in Europe and the Americas, but they had returned “home” to Africa, armed with cultural fragments from the different lands and climes that they had traversed, to reconstitute a new “province of freedom.”⁷ As shown in the first chapter of this work, subsequent generations of repatriated Africans, though arriving with much more grounded cultural elements, would not only amplify the themes of malleability and adaptability but creatively deepen the processes of creolization/kriolization in Sierra Leone.

It is within this expansive interpretative framework of Krio adaptability and creative responses to internal and outside forces that I situate the historical experience of the Muslims within Krio society in Sierra Leone and West Africa. Within the contemporary realities of Sierra Leone, where the Krio as a whole have been politically marginalized, the history of the Muslim Krio has unfortunately become a story of the marginalized within the marginalized. Yet the historical experiences of a group whose endeavors were critical to the shaping of the nineteenth-century West African landscape that became Britain’s first colonial enterprise in Africa, in spite of the fact that the group had hitherto been relegated to the margins in the historiography of the region, cannot be overemphasized. The history of Muslim identity within Krio society not only offers new possibilities of expanding the confines of nineteenth-century Sierra Leone history, it also facilitates the rethinking of the various forms of marginalization that characterize the region. Equally crucial, it offers a fascinating lens into dynamic local and global forces shaping religion, culture, and society then as well as now. It suggests a more measured reflection on the recent confrontations and conflict between proponents of Islam and Christianity, especially the demonization of Islam in popular media and scholarly

circles.⁸ As the history of the Muslim Krio demonstrates, the relations between Christians and Muslims have been complex, spanning centuries and different global locations, and have involved not only conflicts about competing faiths, worldviews, and cultures, but also accommodation and meaningful intercultural exchanges.

RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND LIBERATED AFRICAN MUSLIMS

Scholars of Krio and West African history are necessarily wrong in utilizing religion as a lens to analyze and delineate the boundaries of Krio society. After all, religion had a profound impact on the development of the Krio from the inception of the settlement of freed Africans in 1787 up until recent times. The Africans repatriated from England, North America, and the Caribbean between 1787 and 1800 came with their plethora of Christian churches and train of missionaries. For these groups, Christianity was not simply an external imposition but part of an identity that had been forged in the crucible of Atlantic enslavement, resistance, and freedom. While they had many disagreements with their abolitionist benefactors, some of them violent, Christianity did provide a common ground for the different groups.⁹ The Africans rescued from slave ships on the Atlantic Ocean bound for the New World (Liberated Africans) beginning in 1808 also became the subjects of intensive and rigorous state-sponsored evangelization and socialization designed to Christianize and Europeanize them.¹⁰ In an alien landscape far from home, some of the recaptured Africans no doubt embraced the faith of those who had rescued them from cauldrons of enslavement in the New World, and became active propagators of Christianity within and outside the colony.

There is no doubt that these assimilationist projects profoundly affected the evolution of the religious and social character of the Krio and colonial Sierra Leone. It was the work of the missionaries that propelled Sierra Leone to the apex of modern education in sub-Saharan Africa during the nineteenth century, and earned the Krio elite many accolades in a variety of fields. However, to privilege the achievements of the Christianized and Westernized segments of Krio society to the detriment of those who were Islamized or followed indigenous African religions in chronicling the history of Sierra Leone, as the extant literature has done, is deeply problematic.

From the onset of the Sierra Leone Colony, Christianity never held the field uncontested. The earliest settlers arrived in a landscape that Islam had already a foothold. While it would be on the margins of the Sierra

Leone settlement for the first couple of decades, with the arrival of the Liberated Africans from 1808 onward, Islam moved on to the heart of the Sierra Leone Colony. From this point on, as shown in the work, it would be engaged in intense competition with Christianity and other African religions for the hearts and minds of not only members of the evolving Krio society, but also people across West Africa. Ultimately, Islam would have a much broader impact in the colony and the hinterland. There were simply greater numbers of Muslims in these areas, and Islam won more converts before, during, and after British colonial rule. As David Skinner argues, Islam also “gained influence among non-Muslims because Muslims possessed resources which were highly valued by local peoples.”¹¹

Long established in the Sierra Leone Peninsula before the advent of Europeans, Islam had the unmistakable advantage of being perceived, in spite of its extra-African origins, as an African religion. Christianity, on the other hand, remained the religion of the European ruling class in the colony, effectively “the religion of the colonial oppressors.” Indeed, the perception of the faith as the religion of the Oyinbo was a crucial consideration in the resistance of many a Liberated African to the missionary activities of Christian European and African clergy in the colony. European missionary groups began to arrive in West Africa and elsewhere in the continent in the nineteenth century with the end of the slave trade, while the Islamic presence can be traced back to about the tenth century BCE, when Muslim traders from the Mandé empires in the West African savanna region began penetrating the area. The Christian missions were therefore faced with the task of playing catch-up with Islam in terms of the latter’s wide distribution and latitude. This challenge was further compounded by the pervasiveness and resiliency of African traditional religions. European missions had to deal with an equally tenacious missionary zeal on the part of Muslim traders, clerics, and scribes, as well as the fealty of believers in the Yoruba orishas and various other gods of the different groups in the colony.

It was precisely due to these challenges in the colonial environment that the colonial and mission officials embarked on a social engineering project geared toward reshaping the lives of Liberated Africans. Undertaken in an atmosphere of European paternalism in colonial Freetown, the instruments of this social engineering included the King’s Yard, rural villages and CMS superintendents, parishes, churches, schools, and the courts. New returnees to the colony were relocated into King’s Yard, which in many ways represented a way station of sorts for many rescued from slave ships. They were subsequently sent to work in such places as Ascension Island, Fernando Póo, the West Indies, and the Gambia. Those not outsourced

to such places were distributed as “apprentices” to the villages, or mobilized as a labor force for the construction of stone churches, public buildings, schools, and provision stores. Liberated Africans were conscious that the project of the state was not simply to ensure that they were skilled or gainfully employed, but also to fundamentally reshape their social and religious identities. Thus many resisted the activities of church and colonial officials and their promotion of cultural and social policies aimed at “Christianizing” and “civilizing” them. Their actions ran the gamut from defiance and protest to migration, outright war, and court battles. The anti-colonial resistance actually transcended religious differences.

More than any of the repatriated groups, it was the Liberated Africans, rather than the earlier repatriated groups that had been privileged by leading scholars of Sierra Leone history, who profoundly shaped the transethnic and transcultural character of Krio identity and society. This conglomerate group included Temne, Baga, Bullom, Mende, and Mandinka from the areas surrounding the fledgling Sierra Leone Colony; the group also included Kru, Wolof, Congo, Akan, Igbo, and Yoruba from the farther reaches of West and West-Central Africa. These groups brought a polyglot of languages and religious and cultural practices, including Islam, to Sierra Leone.¹² The different languages ultimately gave way to Krio, which, “through a gradual systematization of its linguistic structures,” became the full-fledged native language, with its own syntax and grammar, of the descendants of the repatriated Africans.¹³ While the language initially became the hallmark of the distinctiveness of Krio identity and culture, it eventually transcended the boundaries of its original speakers to become the contemporary lingua franca of Sierra Leone.¹⁴ The different African religious systems and cultural practices waned in the face of proselytization from Islam and Christianity, but not without significantly influencing both religions and contributing to the cultural bedrock of the society.

The Yoruba-speaking groups who came from the Bight of Benin, such as the Egba, Ijesa, Ibadan, and Oyo, however, stood apart from other Liberated Africans in terms of their numerical strength and the persistence and depth of their religious and cultural impact on Krio society. Despite the disparate origins of the various Yoruba groups and their different states of origin in the Bight of Benin, they coalesced around shared beliefs and customary, artistic, and cultural practices. In the process, they provided the polyglot Liberated Africans with crucial cultural elements to anchor their shared historical experience and forge a cohesive community. The Yoruba impact on other enslaved and free African groups is not unique to Sierra Leone, and it is in fact emblematic of their enduring historical influence

in the many slaveholding and contemporary societies in the Caribbean and Latin America.¹⁵ J. D. Y. Peel notes that Yoruba-speaking groups had “an indigenous religious culture of unusual vitality, adaptiveness, and tenacity.”¹⁶ J. Lorand Matory further echoes this view of the vitality of Yoruba traditional religion in his study of the Candomblé in Brazil.¹⁷ As in their native cultural milieu in the Bight of Benin, the Yoruba groups of Sierra Leone demonstrated the ability to make a lucid and fully considered decision as to what religious worldview and cultural outlook they were going to embrace. While the cultural contributions of the Yoruba were crucial in the reconstruction of Muslim and Christian Krio identities and served to bridge the religious divide between the two Abrahamic faiths in colonial Sierra Leone and West Africa, they also posed tremendous challenges for those Krio, especially the elite, concerned about the purity of their monotheistic faiths.

THE 1905 ACT AND THE COLONIAL INVENTION OF THE AKU

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British colonial administrators chose to draw the boundaries of Krio society in its construction of tribal administration to ensure stronger political control over various non-Krio ethnic residents in Freetown. Ordinance no. 19 of 1905, the main legal and political instrument deployed by the state to delineate group identity, insisted on a presumed ethnic and cultural difference between Krio and the tribal “Other.” The assimilated and detribalized Krio were conceived of as being exclusively Westernized and culturally assimilated Christians descended from the various resettled African groups. Unlike the “tribal” others administered indirectly through colonially sanctioned tribal heads and customary laws and institutions, the Krio, considered the true residents of the city, were deemed subjects of the Crown. Thus the Krio were ruled directly, through British-derived political institutions, British common law, and their own municipal government. Curiously excluded from the colonially delineated Krio society was a new “tribe” known as Aku, which, under the so-called Tribal Administration System, had its own titular head, the alimami. As far as the purveyors of the 1905 Ordinance were concerned, the construction of Aku as a tribe, as distinct from the rest of the Krio, was solely based on religious differences. The so-called Aku were Muslims, and the Krio, of course, were Christians.

The construction of Aku as a distinct “tribe,” separate from Krio, was not simply the consequence of the late nineteenth-century European colonialist drive to pigeonhole Africans into legible racial and tribal categories in order to rule them effectively. In Sierra Leone, the assignment of a tribal

identity to this segment of the Krio population is a legacy of the persecution of Muslims. In the early nineteenth century, Liberated Africans were perceived as a serious threat to a Christianized and Europeanized Freetown that evangelical missionary societies and colonial administrators wanted to manufacture. It was a project that was completely at odds with the nature and spirit of the city. Nineteenth-century Freetown was not simply the colonial capital of Sierra Leone, it was evolving as a vibrant West African commercial hub where different religious and cultural traditions intermixed. The determination of evangelical missionaries to foist on all the city's inhabitants a form of Christianity, based on Victorian English values, created social tension and conflict. The dogged determination of some Liberated Africans to adhere to Islam, or African traditional religious practices, repeatedly invited the wrath of missions and colonial officials. Around the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial state, for primarily economic reasons, adopted an ambivalent stance on the missionary project of repressing other religious beliefs and converting all Liberated Africans to Christianity. The improvement of the colony's economic fortunes at the turn of the century witnessed the resurgence of the evangelical forces within the colonial administration; they resumed their efforts to finally put an end to the religious and cultural resistance of Muslims and worshippers of Yoruba orishas, including Sango and Ogun.

The 1905 Act marginalized all non-Christians, who henceforth were "tribalized" and excluded from the mainstream of Freetown colonial politics. In assigning the ethnonym of "Aku Mohammedans" to Muslims within Krio society, the colonial state conveniently obfuscated the reality and historical evolution of the society. From the inception of the rural villages outside the colony to facilitate the relocation and resettlement of those rescued from slave ships in the Atlantic, Liberated Africans of Yoruba origin were known as Oku, a term derived from their common salutation of "Oku'o."¹⁸ With the inauguration of the Tribal Administration System in 1905, British colonial officials merely anglicized the term and appended it to their faith, making it *Aku Mohammedan*; a new epithet that was uncritically appropriated by scholars and interpreted as a derivative of the word *Akuse* (or *Ekuse*), another form of salutation used by Yoruba Liberated Africans. In reality, however, neither the Liberated Africans nor their progeny in Krio society, including such luminaries as Mohammed Sanusie, Hadiru Deen, Sir Samuel Lewis, Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther, and the Reverend Abayomi Cole, identified themselves as Aku. Without equivocation, they all consistently identified themselves as Oku.

The creation of the Tribal Administration System following the promulgation of the 1905 Act is reflective of the widespread imperial strategies of

the British and other European powers to racialize and tribalize Africans. Europeans did not create ethnic and cultural differences in Africa; however, the process of colonial conquest, resistance, and reorganization of the African landscape gave them political and ideological force in many instances that they'd never had.¹⁹ In reflecting on the tragic origins and consequences of the conflicts in Rwanda, Congo, and Darfur, Mahmood Mamdani argues that race and ethnicity in Africa are primarily political identities "imposed through the force of colonial law" and carried out through colonial administrative arrangements.²⁰ In the case of Darfur, he draws our attention to the fact that "whether colonial rulers invented tribes or acknowledged existing ethnic groups as tribes, the meaning of *tribe* under colonial indirect rule was an administrative unit."²¹ So it was in the case of colonial Sierra Leone; the British did not invent the Liberated African people who styled themselves Oku, but they did create an Aku Mohammedan "tribe" that existed in a defined relationship to the other ethnic groups and the colonial state. The construction had clear ideological and political functions; it falsely delineated a monolithic Krio society and signaled their creation as passive "native clones of Western modernity through a discourse on civilization and assimilation."²²

The intention and power of the colonial state in Africa notwithstanding, the construction of identity was, and remains, a complex phenomenon. The process is sometimes opaque and its outcomes uncertain. While the state insinuates a "coercive force of external identification(s)" on individuals and groups, African individuals and groups can also forge their own modes of identification and identity autonomously or in response to external pressures. In light of this consideration, the Krio of the late nineteenth century identified as members of a common community, even though they were unequivocally aware of their cultural and religious heterogeneity. Whether Muslim, Christian, devotee of Yoruba orishas, or of working-class status or belonging to the educated elite, the members of Krio society embraced their collective identity, in spite of the state's project to categorize its Muslim members as a "tribal" Other. Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker's differentiation between "identification," the process evident among the Krio, and "categorization," the strategy adopted by the state, helps us understand the disjunction between the colonial state's project and Krio self-identification. While acknowledging the fact that "*identification* lacks the reifying connotations of identity," Cooper and Brubaker suggest that state-sanctioned identification will not "necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve."²³ Ordinance no. 19 of 1905 clearly failed in generating cultural sameness in Krio society, but it was a society

that had a sense of its “group boundedness” that was cognizant of its own religious and class differences.

The process of tribalization and categorization of colonized peoples is merely one facet of the multilayered agenda of the colonial enterprise in Africa, and in the Atlantic World writ large. It aimed not only at fashioning instruments of imperial control; it also desired to re-create and represent the colonized to denizens of the imperial metropolises and to themselves. And in this, the church was complicit. In examining the close relations between European Christian evangelicalism and imperialism in what is described by J. D. Y. Peel as “both creating and representing the colonial and post-colonial worlds of Asia and Africa,”²⁴ Valentine Mudimbe reminds us that missionary efforts were not limited to the conversion of souls or “the transmission of the Christian faith”; these efforts were motivated by such factors as “cultural propaganda, patriotic motivations and commercial interests.” He categorized the church as “the best symbol of the colonial enterprise.”²⁵ The social impact of Christian missions in Africa transcended merely ecclesiastical issues. In South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff point out that from the mid-nineteenth century on, the evangelical activities of protestant missionaries and “their civilizing mission was simultaneously symbolic and practical, theological and temporal.” Missions were not only conveyors of religious messages, but also vehicles of a moral economy that celebrated the global spirit of commerce, the commodity, and the imperial marketplace.²⁶

While the close relationship between church and state in European colonial projects in Africa is indisputable, care must be taken not to simplify its dynamics or social impact. Peel takes issue with the Mudimbe and Comaroff interpretation of the relationship between church and state, and the social impact of Christian evangelicalism on African societies. He rejects it as “too simple,” even as he acknowledges that the “picture of consistency and fit, both within missionary messages and between their project and the secular projects of their age, certainly conveys something of the reality.”²⁷ Peel reminds us that missionaries and colonial officials often disagreed not only on policies, but also in the treatment of the colonized. In nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, the character of the relationship between the church and colonial state is closer to the interpretations of Mudimbe and the Comaroffs than to that of Peel. In a period when the overriding agenda of the state was the resettlement and control of the disparate Liberated African groups, a close cooperation existed between the colonial state and the Church Missionary Society (CMS), both of which shared a common objective of molding them into a generally legible and pliant population.

The CMS and the British colonial administration closely worked together in organizing the Liberated African population in the rural villages outside Freetown. Colonial administrators placed the material resources needed by the resettled Africans in the hands of the European evangelical officials. These officials made deliberate efforts to privilege Africans who adhered to the teachings of the church and toed the official line. In the process, the church and the state consciously or unconsciously engaged in a process of producing social stratification. The resultant social engineering, championed by European officials, was not limited to the allocation of resources such as foodstuffs, clothing, and housing; it involved the far-reaching agenda of “detrribalizing” the Africans who converted to Christianity. In reciprocation for the resources dished out by the church and the state, these Africans were expected to jettison all indications of their Africanness, including their “native” attire in favor of garments imported from England. Pupils from the Liberated African communities enrolled in the mission schools were prohibited from speaking patois on pain of severe flogging and other forms of penance.

The enactment of Ordinance no. 19 was clearly consistent with the long-pursued intent of the founders of the original settlement to establish it as a “Christian city.” It was also in consonance with the colonial agenda of creating a bifurcated society in which the Christianized educated elite of Freetown would not only serve as an appendage of the colonial state, but also serve the socioeconomic interests of the imperial metropolis. The bifurcating agenda, however, failed to recognize the extent to which the indigenous groups, the “tribes,” were also crucial to the making of nineteenth-century Krio society. Indeed, by the late 1830s onward, colonial administrators began to realize that the economic viability of the colony depended on the growth of the colony-interior trade.

An important factor in this colony-interior trade was the Liberated Africans who held steadfastly to their Muslim faith and utilized it as a vital bridge in their relations with the different groups in the Sierra Leone hinterland. The sustainability and vitality of the trade came to heavily depend on the cordial and cooperative relationship between Muslim Liberated African traders of Freetown and their coreligionists from the interior. Commerce did not only bring economic benefits to the Krio, it also provided an avenue for Muslim Krio to redefine their place both within and outside the Krio community, and in relationship to the colonial state in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. As trade flourished between the colony and the interior, Muslim and Christian Krio traders became increasingly

connected to the interior peoples, through intermarriage and other “cross-cultural encounters,” over the ensuing decades.

COLONY-INTERIOR TRADE AND THE MAKING OF KRIO SOCIETY

The Liberated African Muslims did not create the trade networks that the Sierra Leone Colony became increasingly dependent upon in the nineteenth century; they merely tapped into and extended them. Commercial activity between people in the Sierra Leone hinterland and Europeans predated the foundation of the colony in 1787 and the formal takeover of the Freetown settlement by the British Crown in 1808. Officials of the Sierra Leone Company were acutely aware of the vibrant commercial landscape in the hinterland in the eighteenth century and, consequently, sought to tap into that trade very early on. The company was also immediately aware of the almost symbiotic connection between Islam and commerce. By the late eighteenth century, the territories in the interior were already under the control of Muslim rulers, who subsequently came to play a pivotal role in trade between the coast and the interior. Upon their assumption of control of the settlement after 1787, the Sierra Leone Company officials recognized the usefulness of the interior states to the economic development of the coastal settlement.²⁸

Mande Muslim trading and clerical families supplanted most of the indigenous ruling houses in the vicinity of the “province of freedom” before 1787. The Mandinka ruling families, as well as the Soso, Sarakoulé, and Jakhanke, were considered important enough that the agents of the Sierra Leone Company established relations with them by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²⁹ Company officials reported a thriving long-distance trade system involving a wide distribution of agricultural and mineral resources. They also mentioned the role played by Islamic institutions in this trade system. David Skinner observes that the Sierra Leone Colony government developed a growing interest in the Northern Rivers precisely because of the crucial role played by the river system in regional and long-distance commerce, as well as “its influence as a centre of Islamic education and missionary activity.”³⁰ The region produced substantial quantities of rice, salt, palm oil, poultry, camwood, groundnuts, benniseed, and other sundry trade items, including tobacco, cotton, coffee, and cloth.

The continued traffic in captive Africans in the region after the promulgation of the Abolition Act of 1807 also engendered an active engagement by the Sierra Leone Colony government with the Muslim states of the interior

in the early nineteenth century. On 3 October 1808, the administration of Governor Thomas Ludlam initiated diplomatic contact with one of the interior rulers, Almany Amara of Moriah, advising the latter that the colonial government would not allow slave trafficking to continue.³¹ However, Ludlam and his successors, Thomas Thompson and Charles Maxwell, recognized the need to maintain peace and mutually beneficial relations with the interior states. The colony government remained constantly aware of the pivotal role of these states with regard to the economic viability of the colony. The rulers of the interior states were equally conscious of their indispensability to colony-hinterland relations; they frequently reminded colony officials of their sovereign rights whenever they perceived any appearance of interference in their economic and political activities. The ruler of Moriah, for instance, dispatched a letter to Governor Maxwell, written in English and signed in Arabic, dated 2 March 1814, reminding the latter that he was but a stranger in the region, while “we are the proprietors of the land.”³²

The implicit assertion of sovereign authority and a not-so-subtle determination to defend that sovereignty by the local rulers had the desired effect. The colonial government subsequently regulated its relations with the interior states through formal diplomatic ties. Four treaties were signed between the interior states and the colony between 1818 and 1820, formally recognizing the colony’s economic and political interests in the hinterland. Two more treaties were entered into in 1826 and 1827, guaranteeing the participation of colony subjects, including the growing merchant class of Liberated Africans and their progeny, in trade with the interior states. While these treaties were aimed at helping the colony government solidify its control over the neighboring territories, they also had the effect of making it easier for Mande merchants and other interior groups to settle and establish trading communities in the colony. Consequently, Freetown and the adjoining rural villages continued to attract a growing number of Mandinka, Fula, Soso, Bambara, and other trading groups from the interior throughout the nineteenth century.³³

The increasing population of immigrant traders in the colony strengthened trade relations between the colony and the interior. The emergence and growth of identifiable Muslim communities in the colony in turn served to attract itinerant Muslim clerics, scribes, and others, while also facilitating the flow of commerce.³⁴ The interaction between immigrant Muslims and their coreligionists in the Liberated African communities, consequently, served to enhance the development of Islam in the colony. The developing relations also helped link the colony of Freetown with the interior Islamic regional centers of Timbo, Kankan, and Dinguiraye in the

Senegambia valley, as Allen Howard has noted.³⁵ These developments were occurring at a time when the social environment of the colony was recovering from the protracted struggle, discussed in chapter 3, between adherents of Islam and the Christian evangelicals and colonial establishment. Thus, between 1831 and 1833, the colony government sought to restrict the movement of Muslim scribes from the interior who were characterized as “aliens,” due to the strong belief within the colonial establishment that they (Muslim scribes) were largely responsible for the spread of Islam in the colony. However, such efforts to curtail the further impact of itinerant Muslims were strongly protested by merchants, including Christian and Muslim Liberated Africans, as well as Europeans who were concerned about the potential impact of such restrictions on trade with the interior.

But even prior to the protestations of the various merchant groups, the colony government was already noticing a trend in colony-interior trade relations that it could not afford to ignore; in 1824, the acting governor, Daniel Hamilton, informed the Colonial Office in London of the financial and economic impact of the Fula, Mandinka, and other immigrant groups on the colony’s political economy. During a visit to Freetown by some Fula from Timbo, Hamilton noted that the visitors had “expended . . . not less than five thousand pounds worth of gold.”³⁶ The acting governor therefore advised the secretary of state for the colonies that in order for the colony of Sierra Leone to thrive, a European resident should be posted to Timbo “with sufficient number of the coloured inhabitants as a retinue, [so] that in a few years a very expensive and beneficial trade will be established.”³⁷ In correspondence with Lord Bathurst in 1824, Hamilton informed Whitehall that for the first time in his twenty years of residence in Freetown, the increasing trade with the Fula from Timbo offered the best hopes for the colony to become “a place of profit to the mother country.”³⁸

Hamilton sent thinly veiled threats to interior rulers whose activities he deemed inimical to colonial interests along the trade routes. In June 1824, he sent word via a messenger to Pa Kompa, the ruler of Racon, advising him to cease and desist from creating obstacles to Fula traders trying to reach Freetown. Hamilton reminded Pa Kompa of assurances the latter had once communicated to the colony that he would not “do anything to keep those traders from coming down here.”³⁹ He therefore advised the ruler of Racon to clear the way for the Fula traders to get to Freetown, or “I am afraid we shall not long remain on friendly terms.” By 1840, when a new administration under Sir John Jeremie was inaugurated, colonial policy was henceforth concerned less with religious than with economic issues.

Jeremie took office with the immediate and pressing mandate from Whitehall to address the deteriorating financial situation in the colony and to secure the viability of the colonial economy. The Colonial Office in London was concerned about the increasing financial uncertainty of the colonial treasury and was no longer prepared to undertake the responsibility of using British taxpayers' money to sustain the colonial budget. Jeremie directed his attention to colony-interior trade and sought to de-emphasize the colony administration's policy regarding religion, which had weighed heavily against Islam. He was clearly interested in forging "paths of accommodation" with the Muslim community and therefore advised the secretary of state for the colonies, Lord John Russell, to desist from carrying out the policy of the previous administration aimed at expelling all Muslims from Freetown, and provided assistance to the Muslim Krio community at FulaTown, which had seen its mosque destroyed by arson during the administration of Col. Richard Doherty. Jeremie had a cooperative dialogue with Russell, who was committed to the idea of maintaining good relations with the interior states in order to facilitate British commercial interests in the region. The governor was astute enough to recognize the centrality of Muslim Krio traders in colony-interior trade and therefore to the revivification of the colonial economy.

The arrival of traders from the interior increased significantly just before the 1870s as a result of the construction of "a stone Grain Market" at Susan's Bay, which freed the immigrant produce traders in Freetown from the stranglehold of the "landlord-stranger" relationship that hitherto existed. This development served to ensure the centrality of Muslim traders in the period after the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1850s, the main thoroughfare in central Freetown, Kissy Road (later renamed Kissy Street), saw an influx of immigrant traders plying their wares.⁴⁰ Many of these traders were already congregating in the neighborhood of Bambratogn (Bambara Town), about a mile south of Susan's Bay, which became the most cosmopolitan locality in the colony. Established in 1821, the Bambratogn neighborhood was mostly inhabited by Bambara, Mandinka, Soso, and other Mande traders, who were later joined by Temne, Krio, Fula, and other groups, ultimately making it an important center of cross-cultural interactions in colonial Freetown. The area continued to attract additional immigrant groups, including Yoruba, Hausa, and others entering the commercial life of the city following the turn of the century.⁴¹ Bambratogn ultimately came to exemplify the importance of indigenous groups to the cultural growth of Krio society. The neighborhood constituted, in effect, "substantive evidence of the interpenetrating influences that largely accounted for the ability of Krio

society to imbibe multifaceted African cultural mores that the Krio upper class, socialized in Victorian English values, could not have provided.⁴²

The cosmopolitan community of itinerant traders from the interior of Sierra Leone and other parts of the Upper Guinea coast also positively contributed to the process of creolization and the making of Krio society. Largely due to its proximity to Susan's Bay, Bambratogn continued to attract more immigrant traders from the interior, thereby becoming the prime location for non-Krio cultural groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These groups did not demonstrate any evident interest in political affairs, instead restricting their attention to their commercial, religious, and social lives. A variety of goods, including kola nuts, shea butter, gara/fente clothes, gold, and other commercial items, changed hands and were widely distributed from this center.

This locality could be compared to Saint-Louis during French colonial rule in mid-nineteenth-century Senegal.⁴³ Like the trading communities of Saint-Louis, where African traders handled commercial transactions between the coast and the interior, immigrant traders at Bambratogn moved fluidly between Freetown and the interior, often spending "several months each year" in the centers of production in the interior and subsequently returning to Freetown with items of trade procured in interior trade centers. The more prosperous "big men" among these traders often stayed for extended periods in Freetown, relying on the ability of young men in their employ to travel inland in order to obtain the requisite trade goods.⁴⁴ Like Saint-Louis, Freetown was "a place of opportunity" for the immigrant traders. The cosmopolitan nature of the community allowed immigrants to practice their Islamic faith without any encumbrances and, like their counterparts in Saint-Louis, to maintain "a strong consciousness of being members of *Dar al-Islam*,"⁴⁵ even if they did not necessarily rule themselves in Sierra Leone.

The Bambratogn community thus facilitated the creolizing, "interpenetrating influences" that allowed Krio society to emerge with the "multifaceted African cultural mores" that solidified its authenticity as an African ethnicity. The shared cultural space inhabited by Christians, Muslims, and others devoted to religious syncretism (or dualism), significantly contributed to the complexity of an emergent Krio society by the late nineteenth century. Christians worshipped in their respective Methodist congregations at Gibraltar Church at Kissy Road and Ebenezer Church at Circular Road; while Soso, Hausa, and other Muslim immigrants adhered to their faith by congregating at their mosques located on Regent and Sackville Streets. But, as was the case with Muslims in Senegal, to employ Robinson's formulation

once again, “the paths into the colonial and regular relations with the administration [for the Muslim Krio] were not simple. What was required was a transition from a world where people assumed they were part of the Dar al-Islam to one in which Islamic identity could be maintained underneath, or in spite of, European over-rule.”⁴⁶ Before the Muslim Krio could come to the realization of a need to forge “paths of accommodation” with the colonial state, a protracted struggle for control of their social and religious lives and resistance to the requirements of social subservience by the colonial state would occupy the Muslims, a subject addressed in chapter 2.

The “path of accommodation” necessitated not only Muslim adjustment to the realities of colonialism, but also the recalibration of British paternalism to meet the needs of its non-Christian subjects. In the engagement with African Muslims, British paternalism lagged behind French paternalism. The French in Senegal developed a “reputation for working with Muslim societies,” acquiring what Robinson characterizes as “symbolic capital.” Thus the French experience led to a reduction in the need for constant deployment of violence in their interactions with, and control of, Muslim communities under their rule.⁴⁷ Only later in the nineteenth century, after a protracted struggle with the Muslims in Sierra Leone, did the British colonial state come to appreciate the need to develop this “symbolic capital.” Just as in French-ruled Senegal and Mauretania, the development of this capital was a dynamic process emerging out of not only conflicts but also sites of mutual interests.

KRIO NOMENCLATURE AND LANGUAGE

It is evident from efforts by the colonial state to “tribalize” Krio Muslims, and the highly contentious scholarly debate that raged in the 1970s and 1980s on what to call the descendants of Africans resettled in Sierra Leone, that the group nomenclature is important. *Creole* or *Krio* continues to be deployed, depending on the perspective of the author. I choose, with cogent reasons, the term *Krio*, instead of *Creole*. The extant literature is replete with attempts made in earlier scholarship to ascribe the origins of the nomenclature *Krio* to extra-African provenance. It should be noted that the term *Krio* is not an adaptation of *Creole*, denoting the “offspring of Old World progenitors born and raised in the New World.” To the extent that the term *Creole* literally means “of the place” or “homegrown,”⁴⁸ as used in the New World context, particularly in colonial Louisiana, a case can be made that the progeny of the manumitted population resettled in the “province of freedom” could indeed be classified as Creoles. However, the

Louisiana or Caribbean understanding of the name Creole is plausible in the Sierra Leone context only as a referent for the multifarious ethnicities assembled in the Sierra Leone settlement before and after the promulgation of the Abolition Act of 1807; the creolizing environment of that settlement allowed for the ultimate coalescing of these ethnicities and cultural groups into what became Krio society in the late nineteenth century.

Notwithstanding the perception by scholars over the years of a correlation between the nomenclature of *Creole* and *Krio*, the evidence suggests otherwise. While *Creole* has been used historically in reference to persons of mixed European/African descent, the term *Krio* has no such antecedents. Its etymological roots are decidedly African (that is to say, Yoruban). As used in reference to the culture and language of the descendants of the freed Africans in Freetown in the late nineteenth century, it is derived from the original Yoruba *Akiriyo*.⁴⁹ The term has been interpreted as denoting the proclivity of Liberated Africans “to walk about and be satisfied.” Its usage in the literature has been associated with the practice of Christian and Muslim Krio going from place to place visiting relatives, especially after Sunday church services and Friday juma’a prayers, respectively.⁵⁰ However, the term entered the lexicon of colonial Freetown in the context of the post-Atlantic commercial landscape.

The term could be traced to the Yoruba verb *kiri* (to trade). In the entrepreneurial environment of early Yoruba society, it was customary for potential buyers in the marketplace, or along the village path, to inquire from traders about their wares by posing the question “Kilo’on *kiri*?” (What are you selling?).⁵¹ The initial inquiry about the trade items from potential buyers would then lead to a process of haggling between seller and buyer, a process that almost invariably resulted in a sale. As Solimar Otero notes, “In the Yoruba *oja*, the key component is the negotiation of the value of something through verbal barter.”⁵² In Sierra Leone, the noun *Akiriyo* was used initially to refer to Yoruba-speaking Liberated Africans who opted for commerce in the rural villages, rather than the farm labor prescribed by the CMS mission officials placed in charge of the villages. According to oral tradition in the Muslim Krio communities, the name was originally used as an *oki/oriki* (praise name) for petty traders in the villages who went about plying their wares.⁵³ The term was used by Yoruba-speaking settlers from the Bight of Benin in reference to other Yoruba-speaking traders in the rural villages; however, other non-Yoruba speakers in the Liberated African communities appropriated the term as a generic referent for all speakers of dialects of Yoruba in the villages, especially as their penchant for commerce became even more pervasive

in the colony. Over time, the term *Akiriyo* evolved to *kiriyo*, and finally to its present formulation, *Krio*.

The etymological roots of the term *Krio* have been a source of debate among scholars of Sierra Leone history in the recent past. Wyse maintained that the term simply refers to the habitual practice of visiting with relatives by Christian *Krio* after church services on Sunday. He later acknowledged that this practice was not exclusive to Christians in *Krio* society, as Muslims also engaged in this practice.⁵⁴ The emphasis on visiting with relatives by Christians and Muslims after worship in *Krio* society, however, neglects the historical significance of commerce not only in Yorubaland, but especially in the economically challenging circumstances of the Liberated African villages in nineteenth-century Sierra Leone. The *raison d'être* for the peripatetic activities of Yoruba-speaking inhabitants of the rural villages was simply trade as a source of livelihood, especially in a colonial environment, where they were mostly left to fend for themselves by the colonial government for extended periods of time without official supervision following their rescue from slave ships in the nineteenth century. The term *Akiriyo* was, as noted, an *oki* (or *oriki*); by definition, praise names are not used as pejoratives by people who would later appropriate the term as an identifying nomenclature. The term was not used by non-Yoruba speakers, nor by those speaking the language, to ridicule, but to identify Yoruba-speaking Liberated Africans by their vocation or avocation, not unlike other parts of the world throughout history where people were primarily identified by their respective trades or vocations as individuals or as corporate groups (e.g., tailor, sawyer, mason, shoemaker, goldsmith, etc.). Thus the claim that it was used as a pejorative is simply speculative and untenable.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

It is imperative that some attention be devoted to the sources and methodology employed in the production of this work, especially given the instability and difficulties that have plagued Sierra Leone in the recent past. Research on this work was pursued and completed in an atmosphere of immense challenges, not the least of which was the protracted, decade-long war in Sierra Leone. The war initially made it almost impossible to conduct research in the country, thereby necessitating the postponement of several trips to the country and delaying the completion of the project. Once I was eventually able to make the trip, the deaths of many of the elders in the Muslim *Krio* communities during the course of the war (though not necessarily as a direct result of it) meant that I could not effectively

tap into their repositories of knowledge and wisdom about their communities. The Sierra Leone National Archive at Fourah Bay College, which was already faced with severe logistical challenges, was badly impacted by the war. The collections in the archives are still poorly cataloged, and the organization remains poorly funded and understaffed. The archive did yield significant resources about the lives of Liberated Africans, which are reflected in the book.

The avalanche of European evangelical missionary societies in the postabolition period of the nineteenth century in West Africa generated a trove of resources about their endeavors in Sierra Leone and West Africa. Missionary societies in West Africa did not only threaten the hegemony of Islam in the subregion, they also had a significant effect on the social and cultural landscapes of the societies of the West African littoral. In addition to converting the vast majority of Liberated Africans to Christianity, the missions also successfully proselytized among the indigenous groups, thereby converting a significant proportion of these groups. Unlike Islamic proselytizing in West Africa, European evangelicalism required a systematic collection of information on the local populations. For example, church officials in charge of the Liberated African communities in the rural villages of the Sierra Leone Colony were expected to maintain journals of their day-to-day activities and interactions with their congregations.⁵⁵ They were also required to keep the central committees of their respective parent groups in London abreast of developments in Sierra Leone and West Africa in the form of letters and quarterly and annual reports.

The texts generated by church officials do pose significant challenges for the reconstruction of the history of the Muslim Krio of West Africa. As pointed out earlier, church and mosque were frequently in fierce competition for the souls of the inhabitants of the colony and surrounding region. Needless to say, the missionaries did not see or record their impressions of Muslims through unadulterated lenses. The church documents are littered with pejorative characterizations of Muslims as “Mohametans” (or “Mohameddans” or “Marabouts”), epithets that continue to be used by non-Muslims (and some Muslims!) up to the present. Indeed, Muslims across western Africa returned the favor, as it were, by labeling Christians as “Nasara.” With sensitivity to the biases of the church documents and a careful reading against the grain in many instances, the writing of this book undoubtedly benefited from the letters, reports, and journals of CMS missionaries, which are presently housed at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

Contemporary works on the Krio and other African societies in the

postcolonial era are obligated to closely interrogate the production of knowledge by evangelical missionaries and other European groups vis-à-vis the peoples they interacted with during the nineteenth century. This is not necessarily to discount the significance and usefulness of the literature left us by missionaries; notwithstanding the peculiar interests of the authors of the journals, reports, and letters, they often prove quite useful in understanding the interactions between church officials and their Muslim counterparts. The journals of Bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther, for example, are particularly important for our understanding of not just the attitude and assumptions of Crowther and other Christian clergymen toward Muslims and orisha (particularly Sango) worshippers; they also provide a very useful representation of the integrity of orisha adherents who, for instance, not only resisted what they considered the intrusiveness of the likes of Crowther on their sacred ile, but were always ready to point out the doctrinal contradictions and perceived “hypocrisy” of church officials with whom they came into contact. The ethnographic information provided by Crowther on cultural institutions such as the Egungun, while not without its limitations, also proves to be quite useful.

Indeed, the sources left us by the European missionaries are important; however, interviews conducted in the local communities in Sierra Leone tell us another story. Such interviews provide the basis for further critiquing of colonial literature used as a primary source. The nuances of Krio culture, especially the essential or characteristic customs and conventions of Krio society, much of which was preserved in the Muslim communities and less so in the Christian sector, could have been ferreted out only through oral interviews. The Krio in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in West Africa have retained the social mores transmitted to them across several generations, which became manifestly clear in the interviews.

Muslims were rather cognizant of condescending, and often inaccurate, epithets such as “Marabout” and “Mohammedan” used with reference to them by church officials. The use of such epithets in defining and characterizing the “Other” was all too common among church and colonial state officials. Thus, in consulting the primary sources located at the Public Record Office in London and those at the Sierra Leone National Archive at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, I was always cognizant of the need both for context and for a close interrogation of the sources, an awareness bolstered by an early experience in conducting oral interviews. Archival sources, sans oral interviews, thus tell us only a partial story. The complementary utility of both sets of sources has ultimately helped immensely in bringing this work to fruition.

The dispatches, official correspondences, private letters, Governor’s

Letter Books, Government Blue Books, and so on, as well as the informed voices of the elders in the Muslim communities, have thus been pivotal to the production of this work. While the bulk of archival research was undertaken between 1995 and 1998, I also benefited from earlier consultations, albeit on a limited scale, with archival material as an undergraduate honors history student at Fourah Bay College. The oral interviews conducted at such places as Fula Town and Fourah Bay were undertaken with a view toward providing an insight into the oral traditions and customs of the people of these communities. These interviews ultimately served as a countervailing factor vis-à-vis the journals and reports of church and colonial state officials.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The Krio of West Africa starts with an examination of creolization and (krio) lization in the making of nineteenth-century Sierra Leone, with the interactions among and between the constituent ethnicities and their resultant congealing into Krio. It examines the diffusion of Yoruba culture and its impact on an emergent Krio society. The second chapter examines the growth of Islam in the Liberated African community and the reactions and policies of mission officials and the colonial state toward Muslims in nineteenth-century Freetown. It also investigates the efforts of the European clergy to suppress not only Islam, but also African forms of religious worship and modes of thought, and the reactions of Muslims and adherents of Yoruba orishas in particular. Even though the CMS and other Christian missions were highly successful in proselytizing among the inhabitants of the colony, they encountered much cultural and religious resistance in Freetown and the rural villages.

In chapter 3, I embark on a discussion of the pivotal role of Muslims and their Islamic values in the development of trade relations between the colony and the societies of the immediate hinterland of the colony. The Islamic faith also had a tremendous impact on the movement of Krio merchants and others in what became a Krio diaspora along the Atlantic coast of West Africa during the nineteenth century. I pay attention to individual personalities, including influential women merchants in Sierra Leone and West Africa, whose trade activities were crucial in the local economies and in those of their diasporan communities. The role of women traders reflected not only the capacity of women, often neglected in the literature, to navigate the constricted social environments of colonial society, but also their ability to facilitate their own social and economic empowerment in

spite of the efforts of the European colonial and evangelical officials. In chapter 4, I undertake a social analysis of the diasporan Saro community in the Bight of Benin, the destination of choice for many of the manumitted Africans and their progeny in the nineteenth century. The emigrants from Sierra Leone and their counterparts from Brazil and Cuba, the Aguda, played a crucial role in the growth of the colony of Nigeria.

Following a period of intense persecution by the colonial state and Christian evangelical missions up to the 1830s, Muslims in the colony were able to establish their own identifiable communities and practice their faith. Islam consequently came to play an increasingly central role in the growth and development of these communities. Chapter 5 explores the tensions and conflicts arising from the religious institutions and cultural processes around the reconstituted communal life of Muslim Krio in the nineteenth century. It examines the ways in which traditional culture and the customary practices of Krio society collided with the growing influence of conservative Islam in these communities, especially at Fourah Bay, leading to a socioreligious schism that resulted in a landmark case in the 1890s. Krio society attained a largely hegemonic status in colonial Sierra Leone up until the Hut Tax War era, primarily due to the achievement of the people in the area of education. The European Christian missions, in a bid to effect the conversion of Liberated Africans and others to Christianity, founded schools in the colony and across West Africa.

Thus education and the founding of schools became central to the promotion of European Christendom and to the agenda of *mission civilisatrice* undertaken by both the church and the colonial state, with schools becoming crucial instruments of proselytization and acculturation. Given the competing interests of the Islamic and Christian missionary activists, Islamic education was also emphasized by Muslims. Chapter 6 therefore looks at education and educational reform in the Muslim Krio communities and the ushering in of a period of cooperation and accommodation in relations between the Muslim Krio and the colonial regime.

In the postscript, I draw attention to the resiliency of African cultural praxis in Krio society and the strong sense of cultural nationalism among the people that transcended religious differences. I reflect on the fate of Muslims within the evolving history of the Krio, a group that paradoxically has been progressively marginalized in contemporary Sierra Leone, even as its cultural imprint permeates the entire country.

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