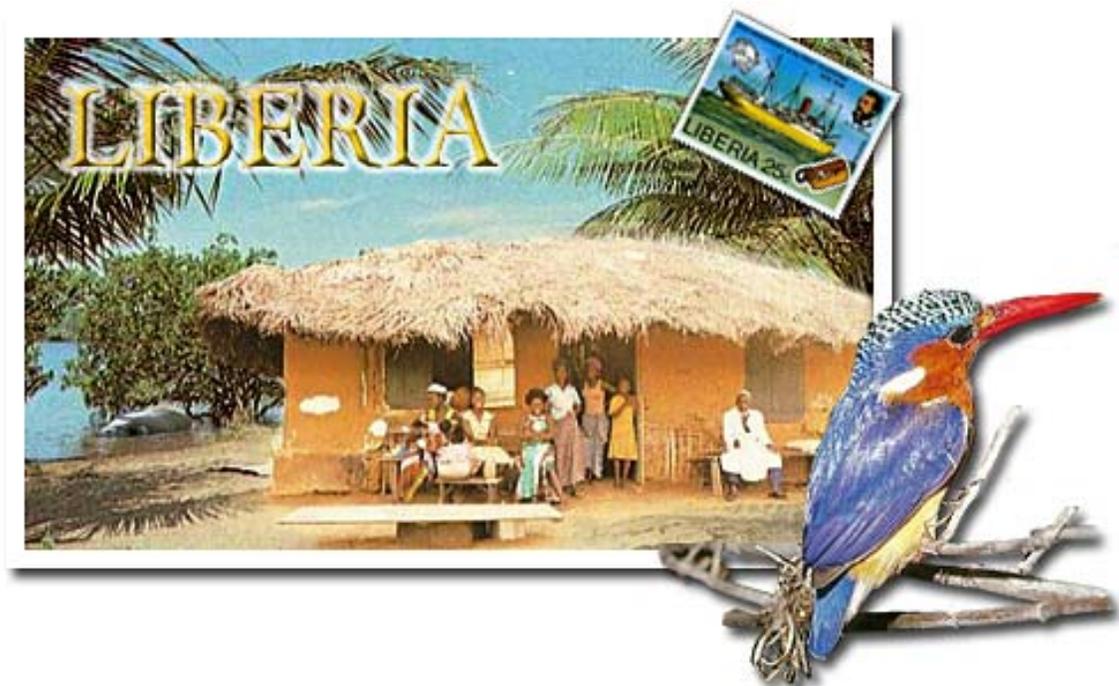


Liberia in Perspective

An Orientation Guide



Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center
Curriculum Development Division
Instructional Design Department
February 2006

A Brief Profile of Liberia

Introduction

If the name 'Liberia' seems related to the words 'liberty' or 'liberation,' this is no accident. Liberia was founded by liberated African-American slaves in 1822 and became the first independent African republic in 1847. Since 1990, Liberia has suffered the bloodshed and chaos of civil war. However, the early history of this country differentiates it fundamentally from any other African state. The chapters that follow will view Liberia through the lenses of culture, history, social customs, politics, and economy.



Liberia in Facts and Figures¹

Population: 3,317,176 (July 2003 est.)

Age structure:

0-14 years: 43.4% (male 724,960; female 716,831)

15-64 years: 53% (male 858,191; female 898,851)

65 years and over: 3.6% (male 59,539; female 58,804) (2003 est.)

Population growth rate: 1.67% (2003 est.)

Birth rate: 45.28 births/1,000 population (2003 est.)

Death rate: 17.84 deaths/1,000 population (2003 est.)

Net migration rate: -10.7 migrant(s)/1,000 population

Note: 200,000 Liberian refugees are in surrounding countries, though slowly returning (2003 est.)

Sex ratio: *At birth:* 1.03 male(s)/female

Under 15 years: 1.01 male(s)/female

15-64 years: 0.95 male(s)/female

65 years and over: 1.01 male(s)/female

Total population: 0.98 male(s)/female (2003 est.)



Infant mortality rate: *Total:* 132.18 deaths/1,000 live births

Female: 125.11 deaths/1,000 live births (2003 est.)

Male: 139.03 deaths/1,000 live births

¹ Information in this section courtesy of the CIA World Factbook, online at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>, as well as from the U.S. Department of State Country Guide on Liberia, available on the web at <http://www.state.gov/countries>



Life expectancy at birth: *Total population:* 48.15 years
Male: 47.03 years
Female: 49.3 years (2003 est.)

Total fertility rate: 6.23 children born/woman (2003 est.)

Nationality: Noun: Liberian(s) Adjective: Liberian

Ethnic groups: Native African tribes 95% (including Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, and Bella), Americo-Liberians 2.5% (descendants of immigrants from the US who had been slaves), Congo People 2.5% (descendants of immigrants from the Caribbean who had been slaves)

Religions: Christian 30%, Muslim 10%, Animist 60% (2003 est.)

Literacy: Definition: age 15 and over can read and write

Total population: 57.5%

Male: 73.3%

Female: 41.6%

Note: (2003 est.)



Country Name:

Conventional long form: Republic of Liberia

Conventional short form: Liberia

Government type: Republic

Capital: Monrovia

Administrative divisions: 13 counties; Bomi, Bong, Grand Bassa, Grand Cape Mount, Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru, Lofa, Margibi, Maryland, Montserrado, Nimba, Rivercess, Sinoe



Independence: 26 July 1847

National holiday: Independence Day, 26 July (1847)

Constitution: 6 January 1986

Legal system: Dual system of statutory law based on Anglo-American common law for the modern sector and customary law based on unwritten tribal practices for the native sector.

Suffrage: 18 years of age; universal

Executive branch: The executive branch is in transition with elections to be held in October 2006.

Cabinet: The Cabinet is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

Elections: The president is elected by popular vote for a six-year term, which is renewable.

Legislative branch: The bicameral National Assembly consists of 26-seat Senate, whose members are elected by popular vote to serve nine-year terms, and a 64-seat House of Representatives, whose members are elected by popular vote to serve six-year terms.

Judicial branch: Supreme Court



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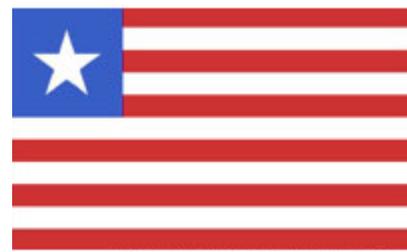
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Political parties and leaders: All Liberia Coalition Party (ALCOP); Liberian Action Party (LAP); Liberian National Union (LINU); Liberian People's Party (LPP); National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL); National Patriotic Party (NPP); People's Progressive Party (PPP); Reformation Alliance Party (RAP); True Whig Party (TWP); United People's Party (UPP); Unity Party (UP)

International organization participation includes: ACP, AfDB, CCC, ECA, ECOWAS, FAO, G-77, IAEA, IBRD, ICAO, ICFTU, ICRM, IDA, IFAD, IFC, IFRCS, ILO, IMF, IMO, Inmarsat, Intelsat (non-signatory user), Interpol, IOC, IOM, ITU, NAM, OAU, OPCW, UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, WFTU, WHO, WIPO, WMO

Diplomatic representation in the US: *Chancery:* 5303 Colorado Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20011.
Telephone: (202) 723-0437 *FAX:* (202) 723-0436
Consulate(s) General: New York.

US Diplomatic representation in Liberia: *Chief of mission:* *Embassy:* 111 United Nations Drive, Mamba Point, Monrovia. *Mailing address:* Use US Embassy street address. *Telephone:* 226-370 through 226-382. *FAX:* 226-148, 226-147



Courtesy of the CIA World Factbook

Illicit drugs: Liberia is increasingly being used as a trans-shipment point for Southeast and Southwest Asian heroin as well as South American cocaine for the European and US markets.

Geography

For a small country of 43,000 square miles (just slightly larger than the state of Tennessee), Liberia has a surprising variety of geographical features. To start, the Atlantic coast line of Liberia stretches for 350 miles. A number of rivers, streams, creeks, and lagoons drain into the Atlantic. The Mano River forms the border with Sierra Leone in the northwest; in the southeast, the Ivory Coast lies just across the Cavally River. In addition to these two principal waterways, the Lofa flows in the north while the St. John, St. Paul, and Cestos Rivers flow in parallel directions, forming a right angle with the Atlantic Coast. A dam has been built on the Farmington River, providing hydro-electric



power. With all these rivers and their tributaries interlacing the land, Liberia seldom faces a shortage of water. On the other hand, low-lying areas are subject to flooding during the rainy season. Moving inland from the shore, the topography is characterized by a rolling coastal plain extending some 25 to 50 miles. Towards the edge of this plain, the land rises to form plateaus approximately 800 feet above sea level, covered with grass and rainforest and broken with hills and mountains. These mountains belong to two ranges, the Bong and the Putu. At 4,528 feet, Mount Wuteve, situated in the north near the borders with Guinea and Sierra Leone, stands as Liberia's highest point.

With such proximity to the equator, Liberia enjoys a warm, tropical climate year round, with average temperatures of 80°F (highs in the 90s) on the coast and coastal plain and 65 degrees in the mountainous area of the north. The rainy season lasts from May to October, and then the dry season takes over until April. Rainfall, however, is not uniform across the country. Certain parts of the coast, such as Cape Mount, may receive as much as 205 inches per year, while only 70 inches of rain falls on the central plateau annually. In December and January, a hot, dry wind known as the *Harmattan* originating in the southern Sahara Desert blows dust across Liberia.



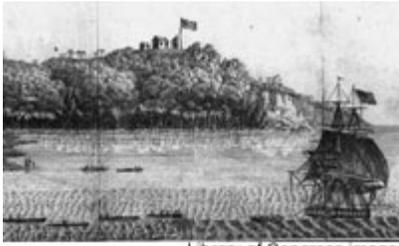
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Liberia's crops include: bananas, cacao, cassava, coffee, kola, mango, okra, palm oil, papaya, and rubber. Iron ore tops the list of Liberia's mineral wealth, making this country one of the top iron exporters in the world. Liberia also mines barite, cyanite, diamonds, gold, graphite, lead, and manganese.

History



Library of Congress image

Portuguese Exploration

Like most other African countries, Liberia is a parcel of real estate carved out of the continent by non-Africans and confined within artificial frontiers that neither reflect tribal territories nor respect the traditional borders based on ethno-linguistic divisions. The first foreigners to set foot on the soil of what is now known as Liberia were the Portuguese in the 15th century. They gave the names “Cape Mesurado” and “Cape Palmas” to two of the prominent coastal areas. Their initial interest lay in the acquisition of African pepper to trade in Europe. In subsequent centuries, the Portuguese plying the shores of western Africa shifted their attention to the slave trade, which soon turned into a flourishing business.

American Colonization and the Founding of Liberia

In 19th century America, sentiment for the abolition of slavery began to grow. Furthermore, the idea of repatriating freed African-American slaves to the continent of their heritage gathered support. In pursuit of this objective, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was formed in 1817 with the support of churches, abolitionist groups, and border state legislatures. ACS representatives accompanied US government officials in finding land in Africa and negotiating with King Peter Zulu Duma to purchase the land. This land was located in the vicinity of Cape Mesurado and in 1821 the transaction was completed. The first repatriated African-Americans arrived at the mouth of the Mesurado River in 1822. For the next forty years, the ACS assisted in the repatriation and settlement of some 6,000 freed slaves, but the native Africans were not necessarily thrilled with the arrival of these settlers. On November 11, 1822, members of two native tribes attacked the colony in a skirmish that came to be called the “Battle of Crown Hill.” This was not an isolated incident. Antagonism between the ACS descendants and the natives continues to be a major factor in the Liberian Civil War.



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The first leader of Liberia was neither a freed slave nor a native African, but rather a white Methodist minister named Jehudi Ashmun, who arrived in Liberia in late 1822. For the next eight years, he helped the colonists establish a government, write laws, and set up a rudimentary economy. New towns and villages were founded and named after famous American people and places, most notably Monrovia, the capital, named after President James Monroe. In 1836 Thomas Buchanan was appointed as the first governor. The ACS drew up the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Liberia in 1839, modeling it after the US Constitution. In 1842, Joseph Jenkins Roberts, the first African-American to lead Liberia, was appointed to take Buchanan’s place as governor. Roberts, who had

been born a free man in Virginia, was democratically elected president in 1847. He remained in power until 1856. During his term of office, he expanded the boundaries of Liberia, encouraged economic growth, and led his fellow Liberians in declaring Liberia an independent republic – the first in Africa – in 1847.

Growing Pains

As the map of the west (Atlantic) coast of Africa shows, Liberia has neighbors to the northwest (Sierra Leone), the north (Guinea), and east (Côte d'Ivoire). During the early decades of existence, Liberia was plagued by border disputes with the British in Sierra Leone and the French in Côte d'Ivoire. The conflicts ostensibly came to an end due to treaties in 1885 with the British and in 1892 with the French; however in reality, French encroachments continued until 1919, when Liberia finally ceded 2000 square miles of interior territory to Côte d'Ivoire. These territorial losses were balanced by gains along the coast line. By 1860, Liberia had significantly expanded its borders to cover 600 miles of seacoast, as a result of land purchases, wars with native tribes, and treaty agreements.

In the 19th century, the world could not have predicted the coming of an economy based on automobiles, burning petroleum and rolling on *rubber* tires. If the chiefs of the native peoples of western Africa had had a crystal ball, they might not have sold their land – replete with rubber trees – to the ACS. That notwithstanding, Europeans would eventually regard western Africa with ambitions. Germany became one of the first European powers to carry on a trade relationship with Liberia, so much so, that when the First World War broke out in 1914, Liberia declared neutrality rather than antagonize its trade partner. By 1917, however, the US had entered the war and, along with Britain, pressured Liberia to side with the allies against Germany.



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By 1926, with the rise of the automobile, the need for a vast source of rubber became obvious. When Liberia needed capital to pay off its loans, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company loaned Liberia \$5 million in return for a 1 million acre concession to tap the rubber trees. This concession would pay Firestone handsomely, especially during the Second World War, the first major international conflict to make extensive use of automobiles. (Cars were in existence during World War I, but had still not dominated the roads; armies in Europe depended largely on horses for transportation.) But before World War II broke out, Liberia found itself in trouble with the League of Nations in 1930 when it was discovered that a labor system “hardly distinguishable from slavery²” was being practiced within its borders. The scandal shook the small nation and President Charles D.B. King was forced to resign.



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² From the website of PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/liberia/timeline/time3.html>



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War and Peace

Liberia itself entered World War II in 1944 on the side of the allies. Also in 1944, the democratically elected William Tubman was inaugurated president. He pledged to eliminate laws and practices that treated the native tribes as second-class citizens, as compared with the descendants of the original ACS colonists. Tubman encouraged foreign investment with the goal of supporting economic development. It was during his administration that Liberia became a charter member of the Organization of African Unity and joined the United Nations. Tubman stayed in power until his death in 1971, but gradually turning from democrat to

dictator: He gagged the press, changed the constitution to allow himself to stay in office, and recruited government agents to spy on civilian political activities.

American involvement in Liberia rose to a higher level in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1951, the US and Liberia signed the Mutual Defense Assistance agreement, perpetuating a political alliance which would continue for another two decades. Six years later, America established the first of several Voice of America³ relay facilities on Liberian soil. Liberia was one of the first nations in the world to welcome volunteers from the Peace Corps in 1962. The Peace Corps would remain in Liberia for almost 30 years until the Liberian Civil War broke out in 1990.

The 1970s could be considered the last decade of relative tranquility in Liberia before the thunder of the civil war began to rumble. When President Tubman died in 1971, Vice President William Tolbert took over the reins of power. The major events in Tolbert's presidency pertained to diplomacy and Liberia's relations with its neighbors. To start, Tolbert decided to adopt a more non-aligned stance with regard to the Cold War. Liberia thus established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and several other countries from the Eastern Bloc. In 1975, Liberia became a founding member of ECOWAS: the Economic Community of West African States. The original intention of the ECOWAS, in emulation of the European Union, was to promote economic cooperation and eventual monetary unity in western Africa. The following year, President Tolbert addressed a joint session of the US Congress, a rare privilege extended only to the most favored world leaders.



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Times of Turmoil

Troubles boiled over in the 1980s. "In 1980, the tension between indigenous Africans and the descendants of American slaves finally erupted into a revolution⁴." Samuel K. Doe, a master sergeant in the Liberian Army and a member of the native Krahn tribe, engineered a coup to overthrow the government. Tolbert was assassinated, along with his

³ The Voice of America (VOA) is an international multimedia broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government. www.voa.org

⁴ "Liberia, America's Wretched Stepchild," in *The Week*, 25 July 2003, Vol. 3; Issue 115, page 11

cabinet ministers. Doe's regime unleashed the pent-up resentment among the natives against the loathed elite, but his tribe also terrorized other rival native ethnic groups. In 1989, Charles Taylor, an ACS descendant born in Liberia and college educated in the US, invaded Liberia from across the border in Sierra Leone. He and his militia, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (the NPFL), committed countless atrocities and stirred up a "war of the all against the all"⁵ between and among Liberia's various tribes.



Nevertheless, the Liberian people elected Taylor president in 1997, perhaps thinking that as the most powerful figure, he would be the only one who could put an end to the violence. That did not happen. Instead, Taylor's NPFL troops fought against rebels and at the same time got involved in the support of a revolutionary movement in Sierra Leone which won control of that country's diamond mines. Taylor enriched himself with his share of the mineral wealth and used some of the money to instigate revolutions in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

Recent Developments

On June 4, 2003, the Liberian government entered into serious peace negotiations with two rebel groups. In the same month, the United Nations indicted Taylor on 17 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes. The rebels stipulated that Charles Taylor must step down as president. This he did on 11 August 2003. Exactly one week later, the government and rebels signed a peace agreement intended to end almost a decade and a half of bloodshed. ECOWAS has already deployed 1000 peace keeping troops, and that number will eventually reach 3250. The United States is expected to play a supporting role, and the Bush administration will soon determine how the US can best impact the situation. Meanwhile, Moses Blah occupies the post of provisional



president until October 2003, at which time Gyude Bryant, a successful businessman and administrator, will rule until 2006. General Abdulsalami Abubakar, treaty conference mediator and former Nigerian head of state, said: "Liberia does not need liberators anymore but nation builders and developers. Those responsible for signing this document must take their responsibilities seriously. The international community is getting impatient with this Liberian crisis"⁶.

⁵ Originally mentioned in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

⁶ From the website of AllAfrica Global Media, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200308190077.html>

Economy

The deteriorating security situation in Liberia has worsened the economic conditions in the country. The absence of rehabilitation of the infrastructure and a brittle financial system are causing an already frail economy to deteriorate even more. Moreover, the amount of external debt is obstructing any assistance from World Bank and other organizations.

Natural Resources

The land of Liberia is rich in iron ore. Until 1990, the country's resources were exploited by foreign companies. In 1944, President William Tubman opened the Liberian economy to foreign investors. American (Liberia Mining Company, National Iron Ore Company) and German (DELIMCO) companies invested in mining iron ore. Tubman's initiative increased foreign investment in Liberia and the mining industry was the main recipient. However, since 1990 all economic facets of the country have been dismantled, including the mining industry, and the production of iron ore has been halted.



Forests in Liberia cover almost fifty percent of the land. Logging activities are concentrated in the northwest and southeast of the country. According to reports from the Government of Liberia Forestry Development Authority, production for the years 1997 to 2002 amounted to 3,865,930 m³. However, organizations in charge of monitoring the timber industry claim that the production exceeds these official figures. The Oriental Timber

Corporation, a Malaysian business entity, is the largest and most modern operator. Foreign investment in Liberia has targeted the timber industry, even though logging activities have been reduced due to the war.

Rubber is another key product of the Liberian forest. In 1926, Firestone Plantations Company consummated a 99-year lease agreement and a one-million-acre plantation was established in Harbal. This agreement clearly disadvantaged Liberia, especially in that any gold, diamond, or other mineral deposits discovered on the land would belong to Firestone⁷. Iron ore, timber and rubber constitute 90% of Liberia's exports and their exploitation is mainly in the hands of multinational corporations.



⁷ Anjali Mitter Duva, PBS.org

Presently, the Canadian company Mano River Resources Inc. is exploring gold and diamond reserves in Liberia for more intensive production. The diamond and gold mining is carried out on a small scale using crude equipment. Information on diamond production is not considered to be reliable because substantial quantities from Sierra Leone are suspected to be smuggled into Liberia. However, in 1979, diamond exports reached a peak of 39.6 million USD and represented 7.4 percent of total exports. Sadly, factions implicated in the civil war found even more reasons to fight each other in their attempts to control the diamond and gold mines⁸.



Agriculture

Agriculture in Liberia is underdeveloped. The local production is not sufficient to feed the country and Liberia has to rely on imports to cover the provisional needs of the population. However, some three quarters of the population remains in the agricultural sector with more women than men working the fields, which produce coffee, rice, cassava, palm oil, sugar cane, yams and okra. While the main staple of Liberians is rice, considerable efforts to develop intensive production have been aborted because of the security situation of the country.

Foreign Investment

Liberia has relied on foreign assistance, but because of the corruption in the Liberian Government, direct foreign assistance has declined. Western countries use international aid agencies and non-governmental organizations to finance assistance to the Liberian population. Liberia imports fuels, chemicals, machinery, transportation equipment, manufactured goods, rice, and other food items for \$170 million per year(FOB⁹, 2000 est.).

Timber, rubber, cocoa beans and coffee are Liberia's main export items. However, on May 6, 2003, the United Nations imposed sanctions for a period of ten months on all round logs and timber products originating in Liberia¹⁰. The UN hopes this measure will force Monrovia to immediately cease the support of revolutionary forces in Sierra Leone and other armed groups in the region.

⁸ CIRS. org

⁹ FOB means 'freight on board'.

¹⁰ Security Council Resolution 060803



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Liberia is considered to be an incorporation haven with no infrastructure of local attorneys or accountants. Corporations seeking a simple flexible system found their sanctuary in Liberia, especially in that the registration of their companies does not require a trip to the country and is carried out by representative offices in New York, Zurich, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Rotterdam, and Piraeus. The merchant shipping fleet of Liberia is one of the largest in the world and provides a sizeable income for the country. Fifty-four countries use Liberia for a flag of convenience registry. Among these countries are ships from Germany 186, US 161, Greece 144, Norway 142, Japan 124, and Monaco 38¹¹.

Liberia is a member of two regional economic unions—the Mano River Union, which includes Sierra Leone and Guinea, as well as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The latter was established in May 1975 to promote trade, cooperation, and self-reliance in West Africa. It has the following members: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.



Summary

In this land endowed with so many natural resources, the continuation of economic activities heavily depends on the deployment of a strong stabilizing presence that will enforce the ceasefire and protect the conditions for sustained and safe movements of persons and goods. Meanwhile, the current situation represents an ongoing decline in living conditions. Sadly, while there is insufficient data to establish precise trends in recent years, all indicators—such as the UNDP Human Development Index, which measures achievements in human development—place Liberia among the poorest and least developed countries in the world¹².



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¹¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998 estimate, www.eb.com

¹² United Nations Security Council rapport, August 5, 2003

Liberian Society

Ethnic Groups and Languages

There are 16 major ethnic groups, 27 languages and 13 counties in the Republic of Liberia. The national language of Liberia is English. The ethnic groups within Liberia include: Bassa, Bella, Dei, Gbandi, Gio, Gola, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Kru, Lorma, Mandingo, Mano, Mende and Vai. In addition, there are Americo-Liberians, American slave descendants, and Caribbean slave descendants, who are now often referred to as “Congos” or “Congo people.” A number of Lebanese, Indians, and other West African nationals comprise a large part of the business community.



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The main language families include: 15 Kru languages – Kuwaa, Dewoin, Bassa, Gbii, Western Krahn, Klau, Tajuasohn, Sapo, Eastern Krahn, Northern Grebo, Glaro-Twabo, Glio-Oubi, Baclayville Grebo, Central Grebo and Southern Grebo; 8 Mande languages – Liberia Kpelle, Mende, Bandi, Manya, Loma, Vai, Mano and Dan; 2 Atlantic languages – Gola and Southern Kisi; and 2 Indo-European languages – English and Liberian English. It is important to note that the majority of Liberian ethnic groups and languages carry various alternate names.



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The largest ethnic group is the Kpelle. Over 487,400 Kpellas reside in Liberia. They represent 20 % of the entire population. The Liberia Kpelle language belongs to the Mande language family. They mainly live in central and western Liberia in Lofa, Bong, Bomi, Margibi, Montserrado, and Bassa counties. Roughly 16% belong to the Bassa ethnic group. The Bassa language is part of the Kru language family. It is spoken in Grand Bassa and Rivercess counties. The Dan (Gio) ethnic group represents 8% of the Liberian population. They speak the Mande language Dan (Gio) in Nimba County. The Kru (Klau) ethnic group represents 7% of the population. They speak Klau (Kru), part of the Kru language family, in Kru County. There are over 184,000 Klau speakers in Liberia. Klau is also spoken in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. The Kru tribe resides on the coast between the river Cestos on the west and Grand Sesters on the east.

There are 12 other ethnic groups comprising the remaining 49% of Liberia’s population. Among these ethnic groups are the Kisi, who share the border with Sierra Leone in the north. There are over 115,000 speakers of the Southern Kisi language. They live at the extreme northwest corner of Liberia in Lofa County. Another 120,000 live in Sierra Leone. The Gola speak Gola, a language that belongs to the Atlantic language family, in northwest Liberia in Grand Cape Mount and Lofa Counties. The Mano tribe speaks Mano, a Mande language. They share their northern border with Guinea. The Grebo reside in southeastern Liberia in the Sinoe, Grand Gedeh, Grand Kru and Maryland counties. They speak Northern Grebo, Southern Grebo, Central Grebo, and Barclayville Grebo. The Grebo languages belong to the Kru language family. The Lorma tribe is located within

Lofa County in the northern part of Liberia. The language that is spoken is a Mande language called Loma (Lorma). The Krahn live mainly in eastern Liberia in the Grand Gedeh County, which shares the border with the Ivory Coast. They speak the Kru language Eastern Krahn. The Mandingo speak Many (also called Mandingo), part of the Mande language family, and live in northwest Liberia in Lofa County, bordering with Guinea. The Mandingos came to Liberia from Western Sudan in the 17th century. The Mende speak Mende, part of the Mande language family, and reside in northwest Liberia in Lofa County, bordering with Sierra Leone. The Vai tribe speaks Vai, a Mande language.



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The tribe is located in western Liberia in Grand Cape Mount County. The Gbandi (Bandi) speak Bandi, a Mande language, in northwestern Liberia in Lofa County. The Bella (also Belle and Kwaa) speak Kuwaa, a Kru language, in Lofa County. The Dei (Dewoin, De) tribe speaks Dewoin, another Kru language, in northwestern Liberia in Bomi County.



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Social Customs

Due to the multitude of peoples native to Liberia as well as the influx of immigrants, social customs in Liberia are widely varied and rich in tradition, even though there are common threads. This shines through in one of the widely used Liberian greetings: “What is your tribe?” The question is supplemented by an unusual handshake. When shaking hands the middle finger of the other person is grasped in the right hand between thumb and third finger, then brought up quickly with an audible snap. The custom originated when freed slaves considered this greeting a sign of their liberation, as it was not uncommon for slave owners to indicate bondage by breaking slaves’ fingers.

Secret Societies

Traditionally, Liberian tribes have long subsisted on agriculture, even though hunting is still a wide-spread method of meat procurement. Life revolves mainly around the village and tribal community, and village elders or chiefs have the last say in important decisions or in quelling disputes. As a largely agrarian society, animist beliefs¹³ continue to hold strong in Liberia, and secret societies such as the *Poro* (for men) and *Sande* (for women) are prevalent. Current estimates contend that up to half of Liberia’s population is a member of one secret society or another, including past presidents such as William Tolbert. The groups, which date back at least to the 18th century, are credited with retaining some semblance of order in times of social upheaval, wielding more power than even the tribal chief. These societies are so secretive that they may well be one of the reasons Liberia was able to resist colonization attempts. The punishment for revealing society secrets to any outsider reportedly ranges from banishment to death.

¹³ Animism is the general belief that all natural objects possess spirits.



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When the youngsters in a tribe reach adolescence, they are indoctrinated into *bush schools*. These are run by the secret societies in order to initiate the teens into adulthood and to teach tribal values and traditions, as well as other skills they will need as adults. Depending upon the ethnic group, this indoctrination may take anywhere from a few months to three years. Upon graduation, the young adults often enter the outside world covered in white body paint that is thought to make them invisible to evil spirits.

Family Life and the Role of Women

Family life plays a very important role in Liberian culture. Naturally, Liberians love their children as much as other people do. Tragically, the recent civil strife and warfare has destroyed many family ties, and the number of orphaned and abandoned children is on the rise in urban centers. Many children are also drawn to join the military or other armed groups at a very early age for lack of family support. In some cases, so-called child soldiers may not even remember a life without toting a gun instead of toys.



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Women play an important role in traditional Liberian society, as they are the ones who—dressed in colorful garb—tend fields, raise children, and take care of household chores. Female secret societies raise the status of women even more as they give females a voice that even the tribal chiefs dare not ignore. Additionally, the female-only competition dances and tribal masking rituals are unique to Liberian tribes, while in other West African societies these activities are limited to men. However, female circumcision is still practiced in Liberia and is very often perpetuated by the secret societies. Women who do not join the societies often find that they encounter limited opportunities economically, so the pressure to conform is very high.

Hospitality and Cooking

Liberian cooking is a social custom unto itself and can truly be considered a labor of love. In the absence of electricity, modern kitchen utensils, and running water, preparations for a single meal may take up to three hours. Rice is one of the staple foods and is eaten twice a day in most households. Other ingredients that are often included are cassava, plantains, palm butter, peppers, onions, okra, coconut, ginger, and goat meat. In fact, goat soup is considered Liberia's "national soup" and will often be served at official functions. Often the soup is complimented by *Foo-Foo*, a special type of Liberian bread. Other foods offered, whether in the home or at the ubiquitous roadside food stands called *cook shops*, are *Bug-a-Bug* (a kind of snack mix consisting of dried, fried, and seasoned—you guessed it!—bugs and termites), *Jollof Rice*, *Beef Internal Soup*, and a meaty dish called *Country Chop*.



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Liberians are very gracious hosts, and much of the hospitality centers around cooking. In fact, being able to slaughter a goat when entertaining guests continues to be connected with a sense of pride. The resulting meal is served on a colorfully set table; however, utensils are often absent in rural areas. In that case, meals are eaten by hand. Often, such a feast is served with homemade ginger beer or palm wine, yet travelers to Liberia warn of underestimating the alcoholic potential of these home brews.

The Arts

Traditional arts still abound in Liberia; dancing, story-telling and carving are perhaps the most wide-spread and highly-developed. Carved masks, used by secret societies and tribes in traditional rituals, are also in high demand among collectors across the globe. Apart from being beautifully crafted aesthetic objects, the masks are believed to serve as a link between the human and spirit world. Both dancing and story-telling are art forms in which legends, traditions, and life lessons are passed from one generation to the next, as a large percentage of Liberians cannot read or write.



Looking Forward: The Author's Opinion

Liberia faces an uphill struggle. After a decade and a half of bitter inter-ethnic animosities and bloodshed, as well as fourteen years of total economic stagnation, and deterioration of what little infrastructure had existed, the Liberian people will not find it easy to pick up the pieces. And the causes of that seemingly endless period of violence have not come to a resolution: conflicts and mistrust continue unabated among the tribes and between the descendants of African-American colonists and the heirs of the native Africans. The discovery of diamonds and other mineral wealth has tended to fuel jealousies and rivalries instead of contributing to the material progress of the nation as a whole.



It seems, however, that the worst of the violence has come to an end and hope may now be returning to the people of this troubled nation. Charles Taylor, on whom much of the recent violence is blamed, has fled the scene, and now lives as an exile in Nigeria. Furthermore, a truce committee made up of the Economic Community of West African States, along with members of rebel groups and the caretaker government, have promised that Monrovia will be free of weapons by mid-October. At that time, a new transitional

government will take office, in accordance with the agreement negotiated between the warring factions.

One other factor, which can neither be quantified nor proven scientifically, appears to be pushing the nation inexorably towards peace: the Liberian people are sick and tired and exhausted and disgusted with war. The people themselves, perhaps more than their leaders, have first-hand knowledge that war has not solved any problems in Liberia, and quite to the contrary, has brought the country to disaster. And the people's will shall prevail.



Timeline

15 th Century	The Portuguese set foot on what is now Liberia and give the names of Cape Mesurado and Cape Palmas to two prominent coastal areas.
1817	The American Colonization Society (ACS) is formed to repatriate freed African-American slaves back to Africa.
1821	Land is purchased by the ACS in Africa in the vicinity of Cape Mesurado.
1822	Liberia is founded by liberated African-American slaves.
1836	Thomas Buchanan is appointed the first governor of Liberia.
1839	The ACS draws up the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Liberia, which is based upon the U.S. Constitution.
1842	Joseph Jenkins Roberts, the first African-American to lead Liberia, is appointed to take Buchanan's place as governor.
1847	Liberia becomes the first independent African republic.
1860	Liberia expands its borders to cover 600 miles of seacoast as a result of land purchases, wars with native tribes, and treaty agreements.
1885	Border disputes come to an end with the British.
1892	Border disputes come to an end with the French.
1917	Liberia is pressured by the U.S. to enter World War I on the allied side.
1919	Liberia cedes 2000 square miles of interior territory to French Ivory Coast.
1926	Firestone Plantations Company carries out a 99-year lease agreement, and a plantation is established in Harbal.
1944	Liberia enters World War II on the side of the Allies.
1944	Democratically elected William Tubman is inaugurated president.
1944	President William Tubman opens the Liberian economy to foreign investors.
1951	Liberia and the United States sign the Mutual Defense Assistance agreement.
1957	The U.S. establishes the first of a series of Voice of America relay facilities on Liberian soil.
1962	Liberia is one of the first nations to welcome Peace Corps volunteers.
1971	President Tubman, who gradually turned from democrat to dictator, dies, and Vice President William Tolbert takes the reins of power.
1975	Liberia becomes a founding member of ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States.
1979	Liberian diamond exports reach a peak of \$39.6 million, representing 7.4% of total exports.

1980	Samuel K. Doe, a master sergeant in the Liberian Army and member of the native Krahn Tribe, engineers a coup to overthrow the government.
1980	President Tolbert is assassinated along with his cabinet ministers.
1989	Charles Taylor, an ACS descendant born in Liberia, invades Liberia from neighboring Sierra Leone.
1990	Liberian Civil War breaks out.
1997	Charles Taylor is elected president of Liberia.
6 May 2003	The United Nations imposes sanctions on Liberia for a period of ten years on logs and timber products.
4 June 2003	Liberia enters into serious peace negotiations with two rebel groups.
11 Aug. 2003	Charles Taylor steps down as president.
18 Aug. 2003	The Liberian government and the rebels sign a peace agreement, ending almost a decade and a half of bloodshed.
2004	The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), which maintains a strong presence in the country, completes a disarmament program for former combatants.
2005	First presidential elections are held in the country since the end of the 14-year old civil war.
2006	Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, first elected female African head of state, is inaugurated President of Liberia.