

# LIBERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN RHODE ISLAND: THE TRAUMA, THE BLISS, AND THE DILEMMA

P. KHALIL SAUCIER, PH.D.  
*Rhode Island College*  
*Department of Sociology*  
*Providence, RI*

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the history of Liberian migrants in the US, and traces its genesis specifically, to the strife between the Americo-Liberians and the various indigenous groups. Exploring the enduring effects of the historical origin of the Republic of Liberia, it argues that ethnic intolerance is largely responsible for the dislocation of the Liberian state and consequently the migration of at least 15,000 of its citizens to the US, and many more to other West African states. This paper locates Rhode Island as the hub of Liberian presence in the US and explicates the basis of their concentration in that region. It recognizes the complexity of the dilemma that Liberian migrants face in the US, and silhouettes this against the backdrop of poverty and insecurity of lives and property in Liberia. The election of 2005 notwithstanding, it is not yet *Uhuru* for majority of Liberians. The Liberian migrants, this paper observes, seem undecided about returning to a country still smarting from the trauma of the civil war, and at the same time are not content with remaining in the US where threats to their Temporary Protected Status (TPS) have become persistent and ominous. It identifies the factors which could serve as basis for Liberians' return to their homelands, as kinship and communality; guaranteed security, nationalism and nationhood. It concludes that any attempt by the U.S. to deport Liberians would have devastating effects on the already traumatized State of Liberia. It would also have an impact on the possibility that other host nations could turn out Liberian refugees.

**KEYWORDS:** *Liberians, temporary protected status (tps), immigrant networks, Rhode Island.*

---

## INTRODUCTION

Freed American slaves established Liberia, the small West African country, as a modern nation in 1847, in a coastal territory in the land of the Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru and Vai peoples. In 1872, the Americo-Liberians declared their colony a free republic, and they adopted a system modeled upon the constitution of the United States. However, they replicated the same injustices as they had suffered in America against the indigenous population. Although the U.S. did not recognize independent Liberia until after the Civil War, after recognition in 1862 under the Lincoln administration, the United States soon became Liberia's leading trading partner and major aid donor. Although there was mutual resentment between the Americo-Liberians, who make up only 5 percent of the population, and the indigenous peoples of the country, Liberia remained independent and stable for well over 100 years until the dissension between the Americo-Liberians, and indigenous peoples culminated in a coup.

In the period leading to the 1980 coup, economic conditions deteriorated in the 1970s, and the Liberian population suffered from high unemployment and steadily rising inflation. Liberian commodity exports declined drastically, while the cost of imported energy rose. Liberia was barely able to maintain a positive growth rate in this period. Open opposition to the political establishment escalated, fuelled by the economic

problems. Liberians in the Diaspora were not immune from the crisis. Organizations of Liberians abroad, including student groups engaged in various kinds of activism that protested conditions at home, while suggesting solutions that were hardly heeded by the parties to the conflict at home. Back in Liberia, demonstrations broke out, initially to protest the high cost of food. As conditions became more dangerous, many Liberians began to flee, becoming internally and externally displaced. Finally, in 1980 Sergeant Samuel Doe (a member of the Krahn ethnic group) led a successful coup against President William Tolbert (an Americo-Liberian).

Liberians were optimistic. They expected substantive changes for the better. However, Sergeant Doe became dictatorial, mistreating non-Krahn indigenous ethnic groups, including the Gio and Mano. In December of 1989, Liberia was plunged into a civil war when a small group of dissidents led by Charles Taylor (an Americo-Liberian) began to campaign to overthrow Doe. Eventually, Liberia was engulfed in full-scale ethnic and armed conflict, with Doe's Krahns fighting different warring groups, including Charles Taylor's NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia) rebels, Prince Yormie Johnson's Independent National Patriotic Front, fighting Roosevelt Johnson's United Liberation Movement (ULIMO-J), and Alhaji Kromah's United Liberation Movement (ULIMO-K). The conflict raged on for seven years causing well over 150,000 deaths. Over one-half of the population was displaced. Approximately one-third of the Liberian population fled to neighboring countries including the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. Others took refuge in nearby West African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, and the Gambia. Many also fled to Europe, but a large percentage fled to the United States and specifically to the state of Rhode Island.

Although they continue to increase in number, Africans constitute a small proportion of the immigrant population in the United States. Especially, in the last two decades, the number of Africans in the U.S. has increased to the degree that at present, they constitute a significant component of the cultural and ethnic fabric of the United States. This is noticeable, especially in major metropolitan areas like Providence, Boston, New York, Newark, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis. Therefore, African migrants deserve to be studied both as an aggregated whole and as distinct ethnic or national groupings.

This study provides a baseline data (e.g. age, gender, marital status, etc.) for Liberians living in Rhode Island; reference information concerning their stay in the United States; analysis of family and country ties maintained through remittances; reasons for migration, and continued stay in Rhode Island; and possible factors that could influence their return to Liberia.

### **PROFILE OF LIBERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN RHODE ISLAND**

Since the coup of 1980 led by Sergeant Doe, and the two civil wars that engulfed the whole country (1989-2003), many Liberians have sought economic opportunities, safety, political freedom, and the means for a peaceful existence elsewhere. The civil wars it is estimated had claimed over 700,000 lives, caused internal displacement of more than half a million, and made more than 300,000 refugees (ARC 2011).<sup>1</sup> In 2001, when the data used for this study were gathered from a field work that was conducted, President Charles Taylor continued to be one of the most destabilizing forces in West Africa. Under his rule, Liberia, a former, foremost modern West African nation-state,

degenerated to one of the most backward nation-states in the sub-region. Monrovia, the capital, lacked basic infrastructure like electricity, pipe-borne water, hospitals, sewers, telecommunication, and schools. They were all pillaged, and there were no efforts on the part of the Taylor government to restore such structures. Taylor and his ever growing number of supporters grew rich at the expense of the country, which was literally impoverished and the citizenry, pauperized. In short, the Republic of Liberia had practically collapsed. Respite and hope came with the historic election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in 2005, when conditions in that embattled state began to improve in Monrovia and the rest of the country. However, in spite of this remarkable turn of events, the war's devastation on infrastructure was so enormous as to continue to pose serious challenges to the state.

The unsavory psychosocial-cum economic setting made many Liberians leave Liberia for a relatively peaceful West, through legal and illegal means. Although many of them migrated to surrounding West African countries (i.e. the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, and Nigeria), many found their way to American soil since the beginning of the civil war, with an overwhelming majority located in the state of Rhode Island (LCARI 2011).<sup>2</sup> By 2003-2004, Liberians constituted the second largest group of refugees in U.S. (DHS 2006).<sup>3</sup>

### **LIBERIANS IN THE UNITED STATES**

At present, there are an estimated 200,000 Liberians legally residing in the United States, on the bases of political asylum, permanent residency, citizenship, as tourists and/or as students. Many have settled in Massachusetts, Illinois, Washington D.C., North

Carolina, Minnesota, California, New York, and Rhode Island. Many of them have integrated in all aspects of American society. Like most other Africans, Liberian migrants also contribute to the development of America. For example, several are college professors and high school teachers, while others are church ministers and community leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Liberian migration to the United States is not a new phenomenon, rather it dates back to the early and mid-twentieth century, when some of them entered the United States on student visas, and attended institutions of higher learning, earning advanced degrees in medicine, law, politics, etc. Indeed, education has been factorial of established contact of African migrants, including Liberians, in the United States. In the 1960s, Washington, D.C. witnessed an influx of migrants from Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. They joined a very visible Afro-Caribbean community in the capitol, and many Africans also had their national embassies located in Washington, D.C. As a result of the enactment of the 1965 Immigration Act, which allowed existing citizens and permanent residents to sponsor immediate relatives, the African community, including the Liberians in the U.S. Diaspora, were able to sponsor their parents, children, and spouses for U.S. residency. The population of Africans in the Diaspora also increased following the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which was designed to slow the migration of Mexicans to the U.S., but grant permanent residency to undocumented immigrants, including those from Africa, living in the U.S.

It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Liberians came into U.S. in large numbers. According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), more than 9,000 Liberians were legally admitted into the United States between 1980 and 1993.

This figure excludes those who entered illegally. Within the same period, Liberians accounted for nearly four percent of Africans admitted; the country ranked eighth out of the thirty-eight African countries recognized (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1998).<sup>5</sup> As noted above, more than 15,000 Liberians have entered the United States since 1991, under the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) something federal officials have extended on an annual basis,<sup>6</sup> and Deferred Enforced Departure (DED). Many Liberians on TPS include opposition politicians, ex-service men, student leaders, journalists, and ordinary people who also experienced oppression because of their ethnicity. Many Liberians were forced to flee their country due to civil war and widespread violence, and it is due to these difficulties that the United States has provided Liberians with TPS. Although the civil war in Liberia ended in 1996, the political and economic situation has remained fragile, and violence and extra-judicial killings are commonplace. Thus, Liberians continue to flee their country to join family and friends in the United States.

### **LIBERIAN STATUS**

Although the majority of Liberians in the U.S. are permanent residents or citizens, many of the 15,000, or so, who migrated since 1991, have often faced the possibility of deportation. In 1999, then U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno announced that she would let the TPS expire, because of official reports that the Liberian war had ended. This was in spite of a report issued by the State Department in 1999, describing the human rights abuses, and unstable conditions in Liberia as reasons why the U.S. government would not want Americans to visit the republic.

To prevent the expiration of TPS, several Liberian advocacy groups and friends of Liberia gathered on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol to stage annual Liberian National Immigration Fairness Rallies, designed to urge members of Congress and the President to grant them a reprieve by changing their immigration status to that of permanent residency. The demonstrators supported the passage of the Liberian Immigration Acts of 1999 introduced by Sen. Jack Reed (D-Rhode Island) and Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-Rhode Island). The Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island played an integral role in these rallies.

The Liberian Immigration Act of 1999 included S. 656, “the Liberian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act,” and House Resolution 919, “the Liberian Refugee Protection Act.” A similar bill was introduced in 2001. The purpose of such bills was to provide for the adjustment of status of nationals of Liberia under the Temporary Protected Status to that of lawful permanent resident. However, the bills faced major obstacles, for many feared that letting Liberians remain in the U.S. would encourage other refugees to exploit America’s generosity, and this might threaten national security. For example, Rep. Lamar Smith, the former Chairman of the Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims refused to support any new immigration to the United States. Nonetheless, the proposed legislation was not without precedence, for Chinese following the riots in Tiananmen Square were granted permanent status, as were Nicaraguans who fled the country’s civil war.

As Liberians continue to push for permanent resident status, their Temporary Protected Status has been renewed on an annual basis by the INS and, after 2003, the Department of Homeland Security. Former President George W. Bush and current



President Barack H. Obama both extended TPS for Liberians. However, TPS for Liberians is set to expire once again on September 30, 2011. Deporting Liberians also posed the risk that it might cause other West African countries (i.e. Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Guinea) to force thousands of Liberian refugees to repatriate, thus destabilizing Liberian efforts at reform, and crippling the fragile process of nation-building.

Even though the deportation of Liberians was postponed on an annual basis and many Liberians, fearing return to their war-ravaged Republic, could remain in the U.S., their sense of security was tenuous. Also, without permanent residency or citizenship, many employers loathe hiring Liberians who face deportation. At the time of the study, many Liberians were optimistic about their chances of obtaining permanent resident status and raising their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens, in the United States. Today, this optimism has seemingly waned given the unwillingness of the U.S. government to grant Liberian migrants permanent citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

The project sample consists of 105 Liberian immigrants 10 years of age and older, all resident in Rhode Island. All candidates were selected using non-probability sampling, more specifically, snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Snowball sampling is widely used in community studies, difficult-to-find populations, and urban migrants, and thus proved ideal for this project. The other method in which data was collected was through purposive sampling, more specifically key-informant sampling. The key-informant was identified in two ways; one, others may have named them as

likely sources or valuable informants; and two, they were selected as a result of preliminary data collection.<sup>8</sup>

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper will first present a detailed outline concerning Liberian emigrant characteristics in Rhode Island. Then it will analyze the complex set of factors and influences that lead to international migration. Third it will analyze the factors that are regarded as important to these Liberian emigrants in their decision to either return or remain in the United States. Finally, it will examine the data to see if there are any significant differences between Liberian emigrants who plan to resettle in Liberia or elsewhere in Africa, and those who plan to stay permanently in the United States.

## **FIELD SURVEY RESULTS<sup>9</sup>**

A demographic survey of Liberian immigrants was conducted in Providence, Pawtucket, Cranston, and Warwick. The result showed that 56 percent were female and 41 percent male. The ethnic composition of the immigrants was as follows: Kpelle 23 percent, Bassa 18%, Americo-Liberians 13% and Krahn 11%. Nearly 14 percent of the respondents chose “other”, which, given the ethnic composition of Liberia, is taken to include Loma, Gola, Dei, and Kissi.

Surprisingly, no respondents were identified as Mandingo, an ethnic group that was targeted during the conflict. This does not, mean that some Mandingo-Liberians<sup>10</sup> did not migrate to the United States and settle in Rhode Island, but that members of this

ethnic group may have feared that they may be targeted or persecuted, even away from home. Fifty percent of those surveyed were married, while 19% were widowed. Of the respondents who were married or widowed, 18% had spouses that were Bassa and 13% had Kpelle spouses. Majority of respondents were married prior to migrating to the United States, accounting for the lack of heterogeneity. At the same time, the lack of heterogeneity among married couples could be due to the Liberian-based immigrant clusters that have developed in Rhode Island and other parts of the U.S. Cross-tabulations also suggest that 85% of the respondents who were widowed were female. 58% of male respondents were married, while 73 percent of female respondents were single.

In terms of age, Liberian immigrants were fairly evenly distributed. The survey showed that nearly 19% were below 29 years old. By far the largest numbers of Liberian immigrants were between 30-39 years old (18%) and 60-69 years of age (21 %). Respondents between 40-49 years old comprised 16% and 50-59 years old formed 16%. Those in the age group of 70 and over were 10%. Further analysis revealed that 45% of Liberians ages 30-49 were married, while 40 percent of those 70 years old and older were widowed.

The survey showed that approximately 32% of Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island had one to two children, while 15% had none. Nearly 36% had three to six children, however, 17% had seven or more children. The analysis indicated that 71% of those between 20-39 years old had two children, while 50% of the population between 30-39 years old had four children. Those 60 years old and over were more likely than any other age aggregate to have seven or more children (76%). Also, approximately 49%

of married couples had one to three children, whereas 42% of those who were single had none.

The demographic survey results also showed that Liberian immigrants were a relatively educated group in comparison to most other nationals, according to immigration statistics. Approximately 45% of respondents completed high school. Conversely, only 16% of all immigrants had completed high school. Only 8% of Liberian immigrants had no formal education or had elementary education while 23% had the baccalaureate degree. This is identical to the percentage of all African immigrants earning baccalaureate degrees in the United States. Those who have earned a technical degree comprised another 10%. Of all male and female respondents, 15% and 7% respectively had technical degrees. In addition, 12% of Liberians in Rhode Island had a post-baccalaureate education. Of this percentage, 16% of female respondents received a graduate education, whereas only 7% of all male respondents had post-baccalaureate training. Surprisingly, 25% of respondents with a graduate degree were either homemakers or unemployed and only 16% were considered to be professionals as defined by the researcher, that is, those who are members of a vocation founded on specialized training. It is also worth noting in this context that advanced degrees, especially from other countries do not translate into professional employment or high status.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the relatively high percentage of educated Liberians testifies to the central role that education plays in their lives. Therefore, like many other African immigrants, Liberians came to the United States with a rich tradition of, and commitment to, education.

According to the survey, Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island were distributed across various occupational categories. The percentage of Liberians employed as professionals (i.e. lawyers, teachers, professors, etc) in Rhode Island was 9%. Of the respondents, 11% were homemakers, and 11% were students. By far the largest numbers of Liberian immigrants surveyed were employed in the social service sector (23 percent), which could be attributed to the abundance of social service employment opportunities in the United States. According to a respondent, “they are easy jobs to get, for there is a great demand.” Only 7% of the immigrants in the survey held managerial or technical positions, while 6% were in manufacturing and 3% in clerical positions. The unemployed accounted for 15% of the respondents, which many Liberians attributed to the lack of recognition and respect the United States job market had for training and education received in Liberia. In other words, many diplomas, such as law degrees and certifications obtained in Liberia or elsewhere in Africa, were said not to be valid or applicable in the United States. This accounted for many underemployed Liberian migrants. Those who checked “other” made up 11%, many of these were recent retirees, and no respondents were employed in trading or farming.

Further examination of the survey data showed that job positions and description in Rhode Island differ from those previously held in Liberia, in the sense that there had been increases and/or decreases in some occupational categories. For example, 8% of respondents were professionals in Liberia; a slight increase was indicated, with nine percent so employed in the U.S. Approximately 20% held managerial or technical positions and 10% held clerical positions; a substantial decrease was indicated. Only 6% were employed in the social services and manufacturing. There were around 5% who

were homemakers. Over 20% were students, and only 3% were unemployed. There were about 22% percent that claimed to be employed in other professions, such as politics and law enforcement.

In regards to the migratory process, 56% of Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island did not leave Liberia and go to another African country. For many who came directly to the United States the common port of entry was New York. Nonetheless, 43% did migrate to one of the Republic's neighboring countries (i.e. Sierra Leone, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria, and the Ivory Coast). The majority of those who migrated to another African country prior to their arrival in the United States were said to have migrated to the Ivory Coast.

The earliest year of migration indicated by the respondents was 1970, with the most recent being 2001. Between 1970-1980 an estimated 5% of the Liberian immigrants migrated to America, whereas 20% migrated between 1981-1990. The overwhelming majority (72%), however, migrated during and after the civil war (between 1991-2000), and only 3% in 2001. Interestingly, 30% migrated from 1999-2000, a time that Liberia was supposedly recovering from the war trauma, and U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno deemed it fit to remove the immigrants' TPS, and deport them to their home country. In other words, the high number of Liberian migrants in the US and elsewhere (during the same period), could only have meant that the Republic of Liberia was still in a state of turmoil and infrastructural decay (Amnesty International 2001).

A very important feature that characterized the migratory process of Liberians in Rhode Island had been remittances especially of money to the Republic. A respondent said, "Western Union is used a lot." Nearly 82% sent money to Liberia, of which 74%

was for family members, 3% for friends, and 4% for investment. Many Liberian immigrants claimed that large portions of their weekly and monthly salaries were sent to family in West Africa. Others stated that their remittances were the only source of income their families and friends had back home. One respondent, a social service worker, said she sent over \$500 a month to her mother and brothers, which paid for their food and medical expenses. Another young Liberian immigrant, a student, stated that she worked full-time while attending college full-time to help support her family members in a refugee camp in Ghana. Others noted that such a practice was commonplace among several young migrants. In many respects it can be concluded that remittances from the United States could make a lot of difference between survival and starvation for families back home.<sup>12</sup>

As for the respondents' reasons for leaving the Republic of Liberia, over 72% claimed that the civil war was responsible. Eleven percent left their homeland to pursue a higher education. Others (13%) claimed it was the economic and political situations that were a major cause for migration. Only 4% left due to family pressure, an extremely low percentage considering that Arthur<sup>13</sup> noted that 40% of African immigrants came to the US due to pressure from family members. However, the majority of respondents (87%) chose to migrate to Rhode Island and not to New York or California, in order to reunite with family and friends, while (2%) came to Rhode Island to develop professionally. The data also revealed that (4%) migrated to Rhode Island because their spouses were from the area, and zero percent claimed economic prospects as being a sufficient cause to come to Rhode Island. A more extensive study of Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island,

however, would likely show a correlation between migrants from the 1970s and 1980s and economic reasons for migration.

Other reasons why Liberians preferred Rhode Island to other places like New York, New Jersey, or Minnesota, included the fact that it reminded them of home. That is, people were able to live in close proximity, thus making it easy to create and establish social networks that engendered kinship and strong bond. Being able to establish close-knit communities, made and still makes the adjustment process easier and more manageable. As one respondent stated, “instead of driving one to two hours to friends and family, I drive five minutes.” Equally important is that the educational system of Rhode Island is seen as exceptional in comparison to most other states. Also, churches and religious organizations such as Pond Street Baptist Church, Rhode Island United Methodist Association, and the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island have been extremely receptive.

The demographic survey also paid attention to the subjective feelings of Liberian immigrants towards the United States in general and towards Liberia. An overwhelming 95% missed Liberia. What respondents missed most were family (49%), with 3% missing friends. It also indicated that 31% missed the sense of belonging to a wider community and 13% missed the African atmosphere. For many, American culture and values were extremely different from Liberian culture and values.

Some respondents specifically lamented that they missed meals prepared from iron cooking-pots over hot coals. Other expressed feelings of alienation as well as a lack of recognition. Although more research is needed in this whole aspect, the respondent's feelings of alienation might have been the result of racism and discrimination, but more



importantly, it could be traceable to their immigrant status. In other words, their sense of alienation might have arisen from the ambiguity of their temporary protective status.

The event and phenomenon that respondents (48%) most disliked about Liberia was the civil war. Others (15%), indicated that they disliked dictatorship, and 15%, ethnic conflict. There were 14% that disliked the corruption, and only 2% disliked the economic crisis. What Liberian immigrants liked most about the United States were the opportunities available to them (48%), but many were quick to point out that access could be greater if permanent status or citizenship was granted.

The results also showed that Liberians enjoyed the political freedom (32%) and educational opportunities (17%) the U.S. offered its citizens. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents (62%) disliked the high crime and violence rates in the U.S. According to many respondents, crime and violence in Liberia before the 1980s was somewhat of an anomaly, rarely experienced or witnessed. However, following the Doe coup of 1980, crime and violence became integral Liberia's society. Around 22% disliked the ambiguity of TPS, for many were living in a state of uncertainty and anxiety. Many felt that permanent status should be granted, for it was granted the Chinese and, most recently, the Nicaraguans, people who did not have any historical ties like Liberians have always had with the United States. Such ambiguity, as a respondent elaborated, "is like a slap in the face. Many of us have paid taxes and obeyed the laws." Others expressed the idea that the U.S. cared very little about Liberians in particular, and Africans, in general. Surprisingly, (10%) of Liberians disliked racism and discrimination experienced in the United States, as opposed to 89% of African respondents in a separate study conducted by Apraku,<sup>14</sup> who condemn such discrimination. This may be attributed

to the close-knit Liberian immigrant clusters that have developed in Rhode Island, isolating them from the larger community. That is, the strong community, which Liberians have forged among themselves, ironically led to mass isolation of Liberian migrants, because it served to impede their psychosocial integration with the larger American society. Or, as Waters (1994), observed of black immigrants from the Caribbean, Liberians, aware of their “racial” identity might not be as sensitive to race as were native-born blacks. Nevertheless, it is suspected that black-white polarization and the pervasiveness of institutionalized discrimination troubled some Liberians. However, their preoccupation with immigrant issues might preclude their ability to see the deep-seated racism and discrimination in the United States. Those that expressed dislike for the alienation experienced in America accounted for four percent.

On such decisions as return or repatriation to Liberia, the respondents were almost evenly divided, 43% wished to return and resettle in Liberia and 44% wished to remain in the US. The analysis further indicated that 45% of immigrants between the ages of 40-59 wished to return to Liberia, whereas 40% between the ages of 20-39 did not anticipate returning to Liberia. However, several Liberians in their twenties expressed a desire to return to West Africa, preferably, Ghana, some, the Ivory Coast. This was due to the countries’ relative political and economic stability. Those who were 60 years or above who did not want to return accounted for 35%, while 32% anticipated a return. Fatigue both mental and physical were said to have informed the reason for their lack of desire to return. Their desire was to retire and, eventually, die in peace. Many, however, wished to be buried in Liberia.

The tabulations also showed that nearly half of immigrants (45%) with a secondary education wanted to return, as opposed to 47% who wished not to repatriate. Immigrants who had completed post-secondary education and wished to return comprised 36%. Numerous migrants cited the desire to help Liberia develop as the impetus for return. Other tabulations suggested Bassa and Kpelle, that 45% were more likely to return, whereas the ethnic groups central to the conflict (i.e. Americo-Liberians and Krahn) were least inclined to return. As for the latter, only 16% wished to repatriate. The survey results also showed that roughly a quarter of the respondents (21%) planned to resettle in Liberia within the next ten years. Those planning to resettle in 11 or more years comprised 12%, while those not sure accounted for 12%.

From the available data, three observable variables emerge as major factors that could inform a Liberian's decision to return: family ties in Liberia, restoration of political freedom in Liberia, and the desire to help Liberia develop. For example, the factor cited as most common was family ties in the republic, an estimated 46% felt this to be very important. Conversely, racism and lack of opportunities in the U.S. ranked lowest of the variables. The data suggests that racism and discrimination, as stated above, may not be a factor because of the manner in which Liberian communities are established.

Further, the data suggests that personal freedom in Rhode Island and political instability in Liberia are the most important factors in the decision to stay. Seventy-two percent felt the personal freedom experienced in Rhode Island was very important in their decision to stay, while 62 percent felt the latter as being very important. Almost equally important were economic prospects and professional development in Rhode Island. At the same time, many of the respondents who planned to continue living in the state of

Rhode Island and the United States said they hoped their stay was temporary, and that they would like to return. A few others would like to stay long enough to take advantage of educational opportunities for themselves, and, especially, their children. It seems as if the dynamics of repatriation is a bit more complex when children are involved, especially those born in the United States.

It is evident, although some of the field results may contradict such a statement, that the majority of Liberian immigrants surveyed wished to return to Liberia. One observes a genuine interest on the part of many Liberians regardless of age, or level of education, to return. Many reminisced on how things used to be, the “good old days.” And if a return to those days was or is possible the question concerning repatriation would not be an issue, for the overwhelming majority would return happily. The African way of life, more precisely the Liberian way of life, was more desirable than what obtained in America. In other words, the desire to repatriate was often punctuated with feelings of nostalgia about home. Nonetheless, the economic and political problems that led to the initial flight from Liberia persist. As one respondent indicated, “Liberians know how to live a good life, whereas Americans all they do is work. When do they take the time to enjoy what the world has to offer?” Many would simply like to obtain a good education and a secured lifestyle, not a life of anxiety and uncertainty, while their beloved country redevelops. For numerous Liberian migrants, migration was temporary; that is, they are better regarded as sojourners and not migrants.

## **LIBERIAN IMMIGRANT NETWORKS IN RHODE ISLAND**

For the Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island, the establishment of mutual aid associations has been important (this also includes some religious institutions). The associations serve a number of functions by providing cultural, political, psychological, and economic support. They have assisted during periods of emergency, while creating an outlet for socialization. They also serve as avenues for disseminating information on available job opportunities as well as health care issues. Furthermore, these associations affirm group solidarity by creating a distinct cultural community that, among other things, engenders interpersonal bonds. For some, these immigrant associations are what sustained them while their stay in the United States lasted. In short, the Liberian immigrant networks in Rhode Island foster unity and provide support for members. As Haines<sup>15</sup> observed, immigrant associations are like a family, giving assistance and guidance on such issues as economic, psychological, social, or cultural.

The largest and most influential Liberian immigrant association in Rhode Island- (other groups are of less importance), is the Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island (LACRI), a non-profit and community-based organization located on Broad Street in Providence. Formerly known as the Liberian Students' Association of Rhode Island (LSARI), the LACRI was founded in the 1970s. Initially, it served as a support group for members who pursued degrees in higher education. It also served as an advocacy group for Liberians in Rhode Island and was, especially, concerned with social justice issues. Meanwhile, as the number of Liberian immigrants increased in the state of Rhode Island, the LACRI expanded its mission and sought to cater more for the social, political, and economic needs of the Liberian community.

Today, the LACRI's duty and purpose is to seek and advance the general well being of all, while promoting Liberian culture. The objectives of LACRI are:

- To assist Liberians in the adjustment to life in the United States.
- Promote Liberian culture.
- Help Liberians at home and in the United States to become self-sustained.
- To ensure that Liberians in the United States appropriately tap into available opportunities and sensitize them on their civic and legal responsibilities to the country.

The association has also been the recipient of grant funding, which has led to the development of a community learning center and elderly and youth programs aimed at educating fellow Liberians on current social, cultural, health, political, and economic issues concerning the community. For example, health clinics for the elderly are held monthly, to inform members about diabetes, heart disease, medical service, and other issues. LCARI has also been fundamental in the push for legislation to grant permanent residency to eligible Liberians living in the United States, and has supported immigration rallies in Providence and Washington, D.C.

Other associations that do not transcend ethnicity like the LCARI include the Sons and Daughters of Liberia, the Kru Association, Bomi County Association, Maryland County Association, Grand Bassa Association, Nimba County Association, Kissi Association, and the Gentlemen's Association. Each of these associations which, by no means, compare to scale and scope of the LCARI, represents either village, ethnic or

religious affiliations. Again these groups are parochial and do little to serve the greater Liberian community of Rhode Island; their purposes are more social in nature.

Religious organizations, however, do play an important role in the Liberian community of Rhode Island, because many Liberians are extremely religious and tend to incorporate prayer and sermons in most public and private events or gatherings. Like most mutual aid organizations, churches and other places of worship foster unity and cultural identity among Liberians. While most churches in the Greater Providence area have some type of Liberian contingent, those with a majority are the Grain Coast Fellowship (strictly Liberian), Pond Street Baptist Church, St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Trinity United Methodist Church, and Tabernacle Baptist Church West Side. Other churches that have substantial Liberian membership are the Cathedral of St. John, Calvary Baptist Church, Mathewson Street United Methodist Church, and St. Matthew Trinity Lutheran Church.

## **DISCUSSION**

The field survey results in this essay have focused on demographic characteristics and subjective feelings of Liberian immigrants towards the U.S. and Liberia. They also emphasize the question of possible repatriation, and the factors considered as important in their decision to either return or stay. No doubt, the present study on Liberian immigrants in Rhode Island has revealed some interesting results.

First, we have learned that a fairly large portion of the respondents identified as being Bassa or Kpelle. I have been informed, however, that there is a substantial Gio population in Rhode Island which further research might reveal. The results also show

nearly half of the respondents are married, while a low percentage is married to African-Americans and non-Liberian Africans. It can thus be assumed that the Liberian community of Rhode Island is rather insular and close-knit. Also the majority of respondents were between the ages of 30-39 and 60-69, and over a quarter have one to two children. Those 60 years old and older tended to have seven or more children.

Second, it appears that the Liberian immigrants surveyed are an educated group. An overwhelming majority had a secondary education or beyond. However, we have come to learn that an advanced degree (i.e. graduate degree) does not mean the respondent is professionally employed in the United States, although we did see a slight increase in professional positions held in the United States as opposed to those held in Liberia. Future research may reveal that such a slight increase is due to age and training. That is, many of the respondents may not have been of age or educated enough to have obtained professional jobs in Liberia. The data also shows that technical and managerial positions were much more common amongst respondents in Liberia than here in America. Furthermore, respondents are much more inclined to hold social services positions in the U.S. than in Liberia, and they are also more likely to be unemployed. Approximately 90 percent of respondents send remittances to family members, who would suffer otherwise. As mentioned above, remittances are, for most, the only steady income, serving as the difference between survival and starvation.

Third, nearly half of the Liberian immigrants surveyed are transnational, many of whom came from refugee camps in the Ivory Coast and Ghana. The earliest migrant among the respondents came to America in 1970, while some have come as recently as 2001. Of the majority, we learned that civil war was largely factorial of their migration.



However, it is possible that subsequent study may like to explore a fairly large population of Liberian migrants who came to America due to economic crisis, especially those who migrated in the 1970s and early 1980s. Such migrants were not included in the current study, and would have made for interesting comparisons. The handicap could be due to the manner and period in which the data was collected, because the majority of the data were collected at immigration rallies, and monthly meetings and programs. It is likely that those Liberian immigrants who came to the U.S. in the 1970s and early 1980s, have socially integrated with the wider American community, and might not consider it necessary to participate in such events that help latter immigrants with the adjustment process.

Fourth, the results show that most of all the respondents missed the Republic of Liberia, and the “African atmosphere.” However, many deplored the civil war and dictatorship that have become part of Liberia’s recent history. In contrast, several of the respondents enjoyed the political freedom experienced in the United States. And many take pleasure from the opportunities available here in America (e.g. educational opportunities). Furthermore, many of the respondents wish to repatriate and resettle in Liberia, although many are pessimistic and believe that a return is unlikely. Their return to Liberia is predicated upon economic, social, and political forces at home. Of those who wish to return, family ties and the desire to help the country modernize and redevelop are the motivating factors for a return.

As mentioned above, the present study is only a beginning. There is yet a lot to be done in this area of research. It would be interesting for future research to build upon what has been done, that is, creating a larger sample to compare and contrast results.

Also, it would be interesting for future research to examine Liberian immigrant business formation and self-employment, gender roles, political participation and social activism, as well as, Liberian immigrant relations with native-born blacks. Other research may include a comparative analysis between different African populations and Liberians.

---

## REFERENCES

- Adincola, Anthony. "Violence in Ivory Coast Strikes Fear Among Liberians Here." *New American Media*. Accessed May 21, 2011.  
<http://newamericamedia.org/2011/03/violence-in-ivory-coast-strikes-fear-among-liberians-here.php>
- African Profiles International. *Africa Alive in America*. (New York: TPA Communications, 1996).
- American Refugee Committee (ARC). Accessed May 24, 2011.  
[http://www.arcrelief.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs\\_liberia](http://www.arcrelief.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs_liberia).
- Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2001 – Liberia*. (June 1, 2001). Accessed May 25, 2011  
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b1de37b7.html>
- Apraku, Kofi. *African Emigres in the United States*. (New York: Praeger, 1991).
- Arthur, John. *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000).
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS). *Handbook of Immigration Statistics*. (Washington D.C.: Department of Homeland Security, 2006).
- Haines, D., Ed. "Toward Integration into American Society." *Refugees in the United States: A Reference Handbook*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985).
- Immigration and Naturalization Service. *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*. (1998).
- Konneh, Ansu. "Liberian's Foreign Remittances, Trade Increases in First

quarter.” *Bloomberg Businessweek*. 2010. (Accessed May 21, 2011).  
<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-07-06/liberia-s-foreign-remittances-trade-increase-in-first-quarter.html>

Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island (LCARI). Accessed May 24, 2011.  
<http://www.lcari.org/>

Swigart, Leigh. *Extended Lives: The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 2001).

United States Department of State, *U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 1998 – Liberia*. (February 26, 1999). Accessed May 24, 2011.  
<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6aa5fc.html>

Waters, M.C. “Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City.” *International Migration Review*, 28. (1994). 795-820.

## BIOGRAPHY

P. Khalil Saucier is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of the Program in Africana Studies at Rhode Island College. His publications are featured in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture, and Society*, *American Communication Journal*, and *Fashion Theory*. He is editor of *Native Tongues: An African Hip-Hop Reader* (Africa World Press, 2011) and is also co-author of *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Cape Verde*, 4th edition with Richard A. Lobban Jr. (Scarecrow Press, 2007). He is currently completing a book length manuscript entitled *We Eat Cachupa, Not Clam Chowder: A Critical Mapping of Cape Verdean Youth Identity in America* (Michigan State Press).

---

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> American Refugee Committee (ARC). Accessed May 24, 2011.

[http://www.arcrelief.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs\\_liberia](http://www.arcrelief.org/site/PageServer?pagename=programs_liberia).

<sup>2</sup> Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island (LCARI). Accessed May 24, 2011.  
<http://www.lcari.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Department of Homeland Security (DHS). *Handbook of Immigration Statistics*. (Washington D.C.: Department of Homeland Security, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Arthur, John. *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000); African Profiles International. *Africa Alive in America*. (New York: TPA Communications, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> According to INS statistics Egyptians accounted for 17 percent, Nigerians 16 percent, and Ethiopians 16 percent.

<sup>6</sup> According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 14 other nationalities have received temporary protected status in the last decade, but only Liberians have had their status revoked and then extended conditionally for a year.

<sup>7</sup> Adincola, Anthony. “Violence in Ivory Coast Strikes Fear Among Liberians Here.” *New American Media*. Accessed May 21, 2011. <http://newamericamedia.org/2011/03/violence-in-ivory-coast-strikes-fear-among-liberians-here.php>

---

<sup>8</sup> The author is aware that data compiled by key-informant sampling may be biased in some way. Therefore, it was important to check for bias by contrasting what was said with comments obtained from other key-informants. On the other hand, it is imperative that insider knowledge was compiled, supplying the kind of data, which is unlikely that others would be able to provide.

<sup>9</sup> The author conducted all field survey research between April-July 2001.

<sup>10</sup> The hyphenation is used to draw a distinction between Mandingo populations that live in neighboring countries.

<sup>11</sup> Swigart, Leigh. *Extended Lives: The African Immigrant Experience in Philadelphia*. (Philadelphia: Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Konneh, Ansu. "Liberian's Foreign Remittances, Trade Increases in First quarter." *Bloomberg Businessweek*. 2010. (Accessed May 21, 2011). <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-07-06/liberia-s-foreign-remittances-trade-increase-in-first-quarter.html>

<sup>13</sup> Arthur, John. 21

<sup>14</sup> Apraku, Kofi. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Haines, D., Ed. "Toward Integration into American Society." *Refugees in the United States: A Reference Handbook*. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985).