

IBRAHIM SUNDIATA. *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914–1940*. Paperback edition. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 2003, Pp. xiii, 442.

Liberia, the West African republic with 3.4 million inhabitants, has a special place in the colonial and postcolonial history of Africa because it was established by freed slaves who emigrated, inspired by the millenarian vision of resettling in the motherland. They perceived their return as an exodus, with the aim not only of finding a refuge from white racism and the hardships of life in the United States but also of rehabilitating and reviving the “authentic personality” of the black man. Hence, Liberia is an intriguing case of the encounter of a vision with reality, and its history plays a central role in what is known as black Atlantic history, owing to the close link between it and the black American diaspora and the nature of the relationship between the emigrants and the African natives. This relationship was not regarded as one between colonizers and the indigenous population but as a translation into reality of the belief that there is such a thing as a “collective African personality” despite the disparate origins and traditions of the Africans.

A great deal has been written about the history of the Back-to-Africa movement, of pan-Africanism as a world view and ideology, and of Liberia. This new book by Ibrahim Sundiata is a valuable addition to the literature. It deals with several aspects of the movement’s multifold history. First is the development of the Back-to-Africa idea in America, its reflection in African-American literature, and the activity undertaken to realize the idea with the support of the black community, the U.S. government, and the international community (the League of Nations). Also examined is the attitude of the Back-to-Africa movement’s adherents toward the veteran Americo-Liberians and the local inhabitants and the attitude of the veteran settlers, who were imbued with many of the values of Old Dixie, toward the new immigration. In reality, the idea of “mother Africa” as a single entity, and of Atlantic partnership, were products of diasporic creation and intended for it. The Liberian oligarchy had interests of its own and believed it represented an independent entity outside that diaspora. There were also those in Liberia who described the American Africans as “black white men.” The Liberian government preferred America to send money, not people.

Finally, Sundiata considers the relations between the emigrants and the local population. The former

settled in a region from which their forefathers had not been forcibly led to America; they did not know its languages, nor did they behave toward the native Africans as “brethren in race and fate.” To a great extent, they were colonialists who exploited the locals as forced laborers, and even as slaves. And although the local inhabitants were accepted by the emigrants, they had to undergo a process of acculturation into the culture the latter had brought with them from America.

The book deals with the years between the outbreak of World War I and the beginning of World War II (1914–1940) and opens with the years during which the Back-to-Africa movement became a mass movement in the “diaspora” that enlisted in its ranks about a million supporters from 1920–1924, but did not succeed in encouraging and organizing a mass emigration of millions back to the ancestral land. “Liberia, a movement long touted as the black Zion, proved to be a ‘bitter Canaan’” (p. 2). Despite the efforts to arouse a mass exodus to Liberia, only about 25,000 persons actually immigrated. Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which were active in the 1920s, did not succeed. In Sundiata’s view, “the Garvey plan in Liberia failed not because it was illogical or unfeasible, but because key members of the Liberian political class opposed it from the start” (p. 35), and it is difficult to argue with this claim, because it is hard to prove that if Garvey had been realistic and had managed to delimit his Negro world, he would have been more successful. It seems to me that Garvey’s movement was doomed to failure from the outset.

Much space is devoted to a description of the relations that developed between the settlers and the indigenous Liberians. The former regarded themselves as the bearers of the black man’s burden—namely, as those who had a cultural mission to African barbarism—and they described the former, with a sense of superiority, as semicivilized people. The author is correct in arguing that the abuse of the local population through forced labor and even slavery appears puny in comparison to the wrongs of colonial rule, and that Liberia is harshly judged because these wrongs were caused by blacks to other blacks. However, this severe judgment stems from an understandable expectation of different patterns of behavior.

In the development of Liberia, the special attitude of the American administration toward the republic and American investments in it filled an important role. First and foremost, there was the activity of the Firestone Plantation Company, which owned the country’s rubber plantations. The book describes at length the policy and actions of this industrial giant and its relations with the American administration, on the one hand, and with the local oligarchy on the other, as well as the attempts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to influence American policy toward Liberia. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that from the outset Liberia

was incapable of becoming the promised land of the African diaspora and fulfilling the role of embodying the mythical or symbolic Africa that was invented overseas.

The author often draws a comparison between the return to the Liberian homeland and the return of the Jews, from the end of the nineteenth century and thereafter, to the land of Israel. The comparison is expressed in his designation of Liberia as the “black Zion,” as well as in the inspiration and example that the activists of the Back-to-Africa movement found in the Zionist movement (and hence in the name they gave it, “Negro Zionism”) and in several similarities that can be found in the ideology, patterns of political action, and relations between the diaspora and the motherland in both cases. These similarities are indeed intriguing, but they are, in my view, rather tenuous and exist mainly in the rhetorical dimension. By contrast, the differences between the two cases are very great: the idea of the return to Africa referred to the entire continent as the motherland, and not to a specific region of it, where a connection could be found between a living religious and national tradition and rich literature and the idea itself. The relations between the state of Israel and the Jewish diaspora differ from those between the African-American diaspora and the African continent. One basic, but very significant difference lies in the fact that in the former case these were relations with one state and not with many states, at times at conflict with one another (the idea of passing a law similar to the Law of Return enacted in Israel in 1950, namely to recognize every black person “returning home” as a citizen, was raised in the Kenyan Parliament in October 1967, and rejected).

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