

**Africa: Diversity and Development**

**Gendered Reintegration in Liberia: A Civilized '(Kwi)' Failure?**

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This article examines the conspicuous absence of the civilized/native dichotomy in post-conflict Liberia. Seminal to an understanding of both status and gender relations in the West African state pre-war, the oppositional terms of civilized/native have been very much ignored in analyses post-conflict. The article draws upon the impressive body of literature analysing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) – and gendered reintegration specifically - in Liberia and fuses it with the pre-war anthropological work on the civilized/native. It argues that a lack of focus on the seminal dichotomy reflects a pattern of antipathy towards a nuanced understanding of gender in the planning and analyses in reintegration more generally and poses critical questions on the impact such neglect has played.

*Introduction*

The history of the small West African state of Liberia has hinged upon a seminal divide between settlers and the indigenous population in all facets of society, public and private, soon after its own unique experience of colonisation from the American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1822. Ever present in pre-war discourse, this 'civilized' vs 'native' divide<sup>1</sup> which many credit as being central to societal grievances pre-1980 has remained conspicuously absent from most political and gender analyses after the conflict itself. This article is centrally concerned with illuminating the fluidity of gender roles in Liberian history and the influence the civilized (*kwi*)/native divide has had on gender during the past 200 years, through settler contact and conflict, to its strange absence after war. I argue the lack of attention paid to such a divide after conflict as being emblematic of the international community's reticence to engage with local gender realities and roles existent in the unique case of West Africa's only non-colonised state. Such unwitting ignorance, I argue, was not without consequences, reflecting another moment on a continuum of 'civilizing' women throughout Liberian history. The post-conflict practice of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), in particular the reintegration of women and girls associated with fighting forces back into communities will be the prism with which to view the negligence of the international

community in recognising the seminal civilized/native divide, both in its planning and analyses.

DDR is not *just* another post-conflict process, but is more akin to a type of 'social engineering' (Muggah 2010: 4), with the reintegration component in particular representing a moment of 'regendering' societies. Yet such social engineering often goes uncritiqued for its impact on gender roles, specifically for women and girls. Indeed where gender roles have been shaped, challenged and moved by the seminal dichotomy of the 'civilized/native' over almost 200 years in the small West African state, a look towards history in both planning and analyses, should have proven prudent.<sup>ii</sup> A look towards African historical feminism to counter 'Western constructions of gender as timeless' Oyěwùmí (2011: 30) also remains important, as in Liberian history gender has been fluid and impacted upon greatly by international incursions. While analysts and scholars focusing on Liberia's reintegration efforts have entered the debate from transitional justice, post-conflict peacebuilding, quantitative analytical and UN resolution related fields, none have so far focused purely on the impact reintegration has had on gender roles, in particular with the 'historical feminist' lens that Oyěwùmí calls for.

Though a host of impressive gendered analyses of several post-conflict programmes, including DDR, have provided incisive commentary on their respective success and failures, they have so far not addressed the other major theme common in Liberian societies – 'civilization', a marker of simultaneously gender, status and prestige. An intersectional analysis of gender in post-conflict Liberia has been lacking, reflective of what Cornwell (2005: 4) highlights, that in scholarship on Africa, 'gender' often works to obscure 'more culturally salient axes of difference' – which in this instance I argue is the civilized/native dichotomy. In the process of reintegration in post-conflict Liberia, foreign notions of 'gender' have masked other concerns salient to, and intersecting with, gender – especially for women and girls.

I argue that the world's first DDR program to explicitly mainstream gender, relegated women and girls to the background via a process of civilized training and educational opportunities which would ultimately result in a large-scale dependency on males in urban, 'civilized' environments. The argument is critical of both the planning of Liberian reintegration, but also of the analyses of the program itself, viewing a reticence of scholars and officials to acknowledge the seminal divide of the civilized/native and its impact on gender in Liberian history and contemporary life. The article proceeds with an overview of the civilized/native dichotomy in Liberian history and its impact upon gender roles for women; it then moves to the problem of reintegration in Liberia; and lastly points to the paucity of focus on the

civilized/native divide post-conflict as reflective of a lack of an intersectional approach to gender after war.

### *The 'Civilized' in Liberian History*

The position of the civilized has remained ever tied to Liberia's unique history. Settled in 1822 by a benevolent association from the United States, the ACS, Liberia was distinct in its colonisation by free men and women from across the Atlantic, rather than white imperial conquerors from Europe. These 'Americo-Liberians', as they were to be known, were made up of free people of colour predominantly from the east coast of the American mainland who would soon impose their own vices and virtues on the indigenous population. Liberia formally became West Africa's first state to declare independence in 1847, remaining under 'civilized' rule, particularly from the Americo-Liberian True Whig Party (TWP) for much of the 133 years until the Samuel Doe-led coup of 1980.

Just as the colonizer/colonized divide had split relations throughout the rest of the continent, so too did it prove troublesome in Liberia. However, unlike white colonists throughout the rest of the continent, the Americo-Liberian minority could not rest their authority on racial superiority, instead working within a discourse of civilization that was 'acquired rather than innate' (Moran 2006: 81). This acquired status of 'civilized' was constantly held in polar opposition with the indigenous status of 'native' in all aspects of life. Carter and Mends-Cole (1982: 157) explain *Kwiness* (or the 'civilized') as:

A Liberian expression which refers to a category of "things" and persons which share a configuration of traits regarded as "modern", "western", "civilized", and so on. The labelling of a person as "kwi" is relative, but usually includes speaking English, "knowing book", being Christian, wearing western-style clothing, being married monogamously under statutory law, holding a "modern" job, and so on.

To obtain a civilized status in Liberia therefore meant that one must be educated, take part in the wage-earning (modernized) economy, be involved in the worship of a monotheistic deity (generally Christianity), spoke at least a modicum of English, generally lived within an urban environment, and owed one's primary allegiance to the nation-state (Moran 2006: 75). In contrast, the 'native' was uneducated, worked in subsistence farming or marketing, invoked traditional religions and were tied closer to 'tribal' alliances than they were to the state. Obviously ambiguities to these firm-and-fast rules were abound, but in general these were the basis of the civilized/native (or urban/rural, modern/traditional, *kwi*/country or any other local termed) dichotomy existent in Liberian history. The Americo-Liberian population automatically held the status of civilized, however over time indigenous Liberians too could

obtain such a status. Indeed from Moran's observations in the early 1980s amongst the Glebo of the southeast, 'most Glebo seem to believe that civilized status is worth striving to attain' (Moran 1990: 3). Brown (1982: 288) went further, stating 'no one who has lived anywhere in the country could fail to be aware of the power of its [see: civilized] imagery as an agency for social differentiation, or as an index of moral worth'. Given the significance of this, the author's critique remains pertinent in lieu of its absence in post-conflict discourse.

The civilized/native divide would shape the evolution of the Liberian state. For over 133 years, no 'native' Liberian would hold the highest office in Liberia, with members of the ruling TWP always members, and descendants, of 'civilized' society. The malcontent of local populations regarding such a divide in politics has been noted previously (Ellis 2007: 117), yet such a divide also shaped several other aspects of Liberian societies.

#### *'Civilized' and Gender in pre-war Liberia*

*Kwi-ness is as much about political and economic opportunities on the national arena as it is about social markers maintained and structured by local communities (Utas 2003: 106).*

Along with the political sphere, the civilized/native dichotomy invaded all parts of social and economic life for many Liberians, as Utas alludes to above. Moran argues that generally, men's hold on the status of civilized is never revoked, however women could lose the status of civilized if they engaged in the 'wrong types' of work - marketing, subsistence farming, etcetera (Moran 1990: 4). Civilized women were therefore expected to essentially resemble a Western-style housewife, almost completely socio-economically dependent therefore on the male 'wage-earner'. In addition to the inculcation of civilizing ideals by institutions, the civilized also connoted very specific 'standards of dress, personal hygiene, and home decoration' (Moran 2006: 80). In pre-war Monrovia an individual's social position was theoretically measurable on an invisible scale of civilization (Brown 1982: 288).

Though, it is true to concur with the label of Liberian society as generally 'patriarchal' in nature, by limiting one's analysis to this level remains a 'thought-stopper' to quote Cohn and Enloe. Digging deeper reveals a much more nuanced situation where gender and the civilized remain at the heart of the matter. For example, in the southeast of the country, though most Glebo sought to obtain the status of civilized (Moran 1990: 3), this model of gender restructuring was one almost completely alien to that practiced in pre-settler history. Women's socio-economic independence in the Glebo case was not as tied to their partner's historically, where it reflected a more common historical trend in West Africa of 'dual-sex' systems of labour and political organization (LeBeuf 1963; Okonjo 1976; Amadiume 1987).

Female leaders and chiefs, women's powers of veto, and women's protest movements, were a key component of society and indicative of women's historical strength amongst the Glebo (Moran 1990). By highlighting these few historical examples, I do not seek to 'romanticize the native', rather instead seek to disrupt mainstream oft cited descriptions of 'traditional' systems of labour – as if 'traditional gender roles' were always somehow always under the foot of patriarchal dominance. The evidence clearly points to the contrary.

With the onset of settlers and the allure of the status of 'civilized' meant an imposition of a different - 'single-sex' – system of labour, with men often taking the public roles in the market economy, whilst civilized women would stay home and remain dependent on their male patrons. In this way, traditionally, civilized has not connoted a *class* distinction whatsoever, as often a civilized woman can be far worse off socioeconomically than a native woman. Rather, civilized connotes a social status, one which often may belie the truth of an individual's socio-economic position.

The civilized is based heavily on nineteenth century ideals, transferred from America and happily propagated by missionaries, of white and black descent, particularly in coastal areas. DeLombard (1991: 333) highlights how important missionary evangelism and education was in instilling 'appropriate' modes of behaviour for women via Americanized gender roles. As education has been considered the key component of the status of civilized (Brown 1982: 288; Kollahlon 1989: 151), the further divisiveness of pre-settler gender roles compared to those post-settlement was extended by schooling. DeLombard (1991: 333) notes that the sex-based division of labour was passed on from faculty to their students, with gender identities differing greatly at times to that of their own indigenous cultures. In the timeframe of pre-war Liberia, most youth were not 'lumpens' as Abdullah and Mkandawire have asserted, rather were attending school, not particularly in order to be enriched with knowledge, but to achieve the social status of the civilized, or to emulate a lifestyle similar to that of the Americo-Liberians (Bøås and Hatløy: 42 – 43).

Though many women in Liberia were striving for the status of civilized pre-war, the makeup of Liberian societies before the conflict reflected a broad spectrum of living arrangements and independence. The status of women in pre-war Liberia reflected a wide range of households headed by single-women and those could be considered in 'civilized' and in 'native' places of abode. Though the numbers and relative strength of women in political positions prior to the Doe coup of 1980 was impressive (Fuest 2008), in general women competed for roles within a 'single-sex' system of labour, which often preferentially favoured men. It is within these bounds that pre-war gendered society was lived, however conflict soon disrupted much of this, as it did all parts of Liberian society. The impact of the conflict

played out particularly harshly on women and women's bodies, yet in Liberia women and girls were prominent on many front lines, heavily involved in various fighting forces, and indeed ending the conflict itself. Yet after war, the reintegration programs designed by the international community imposed a very strict idea of what was appropriate for men and women – repeating earlier failures on the continent, and struggling to see a definition of 'gender' outside its narrow preconceived definitions. The paucity of commentary on the civilized/native will be put forward as emblematic as this.

### *Gendering the Field of Reintegration: History Repeating*

The extraordinary focus on the civilized/native dichotomy pre-conflict in Liberia is perhaps only equalled by its equivalent conspicuous absence from post-conflict scholarly discourse. Tonkin noted in 1981 that almost every commentator in the twentieth century thought the divergent terms salient, as did several others focusing on different aspects of Liberian history (Brown 1982; Carter and Mends-Cole 1982; DeLombard 1991; Frankael 1964; Moran 1990, 2006, 2010). What is not evident, however, is how practitioners of post-conflict programs, DDR in particular, reflected upon such a divide both within society in general, but also between genders as well.

Following 14 years of conflict, in 2003, Liberia would launch one of the world's largest ever DDR programmes, with some 103,000 individuals formally enrolling – a number akin to approximately three per cent of the population. Liberia's DDR(R)<sup>iii</sup> process was unique in its world first approach to gender mainstreaming United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (hereafter UNSCR 1325), and its relative explosion of numbers of female combatants and women associated with fighting forces (WAFFs) included. Compared to neighbouring Sierra Leone, who had recently begun a DDR process just three years earlier, Liberia's inclusion of 24,967 women and girls in DDR was around five times larger. Although successes of the 'DD' phases of Liberia's DDR(R) program have been noted elsewhere (Specht 2006; Basini 2013), the reintegration phase has suffered similar setbacks as others over the past two decades on the African continent.

Though it began with a promising mandate for mainstreaming gender concerns, improving access to post-war health services and cantonment sites, Liberian DDR(R) did not have a dedicated department or gender advisor focusing on women and girls, unlike the specific branch (UNICEF) with a committed focus on children. Though Liberian women's NGOs were seminal in kick-starting the disarmament phase, none were consulted for the key area of the implementation of the reintegration process. What resulted was a transplanted design, with staff and training opportunities often copied from the earlier reintegration programme offered

in Sierra Leone (Munive & Jakobsen 2012: 366). Women and girls were not afforded micro-credit for independent business activity, rather were channelled towards specific 'gender appropriate' activities, such as tie-dyeing, soap-making and other seemingly supplementary income-generating projects. Such reintegration ideas remain firmly fixed and inflexible in their design, and planned around specific ideas of an internationally imposed 'conjugal order' (MacKenzie 2012).

In the Liberian instance, the program has been argued as being 'default male' in design (Jennings 2009: 476) and has been widely cited as failing women and girls by others (Jennings 2007, 2008; Specht and Attree 2010; Basini 2013) - in spite of the promising rhetoric surrounding its design and aspects of gender mainstreaming. These critiques reflect a broader repetitiveness in DDR and reintegration scholarship, with the echoes of many earlier feminist analyses of programmes ranging from Mozambique, to Angola, Eritrea, Uganda and Sierra Leone clearly being heard, but not acted upon (Barth 2003; Farr 2003; Veale 2003; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Bouta 2005; MacKenzie 2012).

What I view all of this repetitiveness *not* addressing, is the social dynamics that constrain and mould gender roles in many Liberian societies – and by this, I refer to the unique dichotomy in the West African state of the civilized/native. Here, 'gender' however it may have been defined or assumed to exist, seems to have masked other seminal concerns important to women within Liberian society – the typification of a lack of focus on *intersectionality* in this context.

In a country where the social and economic indicators of an individual relate closely to their social status, it remains an astonishing fact that no planning or analyses have focused on issues of the *kwi*/native dichotomy and its intersectional relationship with gender in such a setting. Ex-combatants, and WAFFs especially, are consistently *the* most ostracized members of communities post-conflict, and by extension in the Liberian sense could be viewed as being the least 'civilized' and also holding the least amount of power (Utas 2003). The ability therefore of the reintegration programs to improve an individual's status in their respective communities could be seen as paramount for them - but problematic in a number of ways.

### *'Kwi' Reintegration?*

I argue via an in-depth reading of Liberian history can help to explain the consistent 'failures' to women and girls from the reintegration phase. Reintegration appears to have been merely

an extension of the 'civilizing' continuum in Liberian history, 'kwi reintegration', and it can be viewed as occurring in several different but very specific means.

As the Liberian Civil War drew huge numbers of people in to the capital Monrovia for various reasons, the urbanisation and anonymity associated with post-conflict Monrovia life was further alluring. In 1974, 29 per cent of the Liberian population lived in urban areas, whereas in 1999 it had risen to 46 per cent (Africa Women and Peace Support Group: 6). Sirleaf claims the abandonment of rural life in war and pre-war Liberia related to the loss of the very 'moral fibre of the nation' (Sirleaf in African Women and Peace Support Group: 6). After war, in combination with security factors, the ease of monetising the concept of being civilized can be seen as individuals could buy new clothes, women could be dressed in t-shirts and jeans and not 'tie lappa' as native women do. Yet, those settling in urban areas found reintegration generally more difficult than those in peri-urban or rural locations (Utas 2003; Pugel 2007), choosing schooling (the *eminent* civilized option) or training opportunities (often civilized pursuits), both with minimal successful outcomes available to them following their conclusion. With a rushed demobilization period (Basini 2013: 543), and a reticence on the part of ex-combatants and WAFFs to return to a rural setting, only approximately four per cent of the 103,019 individuals chose agricultural training as their reintegration option (Pugel 2007). As previous authors have noted the relative success of rural reintegration, compared to that in urban areas (Utas 2003; Kingma 2000), this may be seen as a *civilized* missed opportunity. This missed opportunity may have been as related to the social status of individuals just as it was for economic reasons and personal security.

It remains obvious that individuals from a rural background may not want to return to their home village or county where they may be known for atrocities previously committed in the conflict, however a mass settlement of individuals in the capital city has not resulted in productive reintegration or security outcomes, particularly for women. Complementary with agricultural training, diversifying the amount of land available for ex-combatants and WAFFs is one common option trumpeted as important in a post-conflict setting, however one which should have been communicated far better at the time of demobilization. Further investment and research into schooling opportunities outside of Monrovia and the outcomes of education and training placements in rural settings, is needed for a more critical insight into urban vs. rural settlement choices.

While Farr (2003: 7), postulates the option for women to move to urban or semi-urban areas to escape the strictures of 'traditional gender roles', urban reintegration in the Liberian instance has been largely ineffective for females and has essentially homogenized the concept of 'traditional gender roles' as if they always existed under the foot of patriarchal

dominance and thus remains unhelpful in disaggregating differences at the local level. The differences that the civilized/native dichotomy highlights, however, brings about a far greater nuance in localised conceptions of gender and is fused now with previous analyses of reintegration in Liberia.

Relatedly, when contrasted with the earlier socio-economic analysis of the civilized by Moran, critically evaluating reintegration opportunities as essentially dependency in a post-conflict single-sex system of labour is obvious. Though training provided to men was often just as insufficiently designed, and at times even at odds with experts' advice (Utas 2003; 239), opportunities afforded to males post-conflict were never designed as being supplementary in nature – whereas those for women were. Women and girls could easily be forgiven for wanting to rise in their social status within a country where they remained subjugated and potentially viewed as 'uncivilized' for a lengthy period of time, however on choosing *civilized* options for reintegration, they may inadvertently have exposed themselves to further reliance on male patrons. A lack of critique on female dependency here remains at odds with an often touted key focus of DDR programmes – the delinking of rebel structures and systems of command.

Importantly, no micro-credit programs were offered during the reintegration phase of Liberia's DDR(R), thus largely cancelling out independent socio-economic advancement for women involved in fighting forces during the war. Further, the economic dimension of Liberian DDR(R) seems to have followed the tract of MacKenzie's (2012) hypothesis of 'conjugal ordering' communities, rather than taking a gender central approach and avoiding perpetuating misguided gender stereotypes. This conjugal ordering reflects neither the historical strength of Liberian women in different societies, but rather looks towards a nuclear-model designed and reproduced by Western feminists, reifying 'civilizing' discourses both from above and below in the case of Liberia.

Such a line of attack mirrors closely some of the headlines in newspapers in America after World War II was coming to a close, such as "'16,000,000 Women: What Will Happen After?'; 'Getting Rid of the Women'; 'Give Back the Jobs'".<sup>iv</sup> As Fitzsimmons (2005; 187) surmises in that setting, 'the postwar focus was clearly on creating opportunities for returning soldiers and not on maintaining the ground that women had gained'. The parity of the situation in Liberia over *half a century* after that of America lies apparent and the conjugally ordered and civilizing depiction of women again in a post-conflict setting is evident. Men given public roles, women given private duties.

As education has previously been put forward as *sine qua non* for the civilized, the inevitable choice of it by large numbers of individuals in reintegration rather than that of agriculture, lies

apparent. Yet what is not known of those who chose not to partake in educational training? How have they reintegrated compared with those undertaking schooling? And is it possible to achieve upward social mobility - civilized status - and remain socioeconomically independent as a woman passing through reintegration *without* participating in the sexualised post-conflict economy? All of these questions remained unanswered, but also unexamined, due to the lack of focus on the civilized/native divide.

The themes of urbanisation, civilized dependency and educational attainment in a post-conflict setting all reveal the civilized/native dichotomy that has divided a nation far more so than any ethnic differences in Liberian history. Reflecting upon such differences supports the hypothesis that reintegration exists for women in Liberia as just another instance on the continuum of the civilized throughout history, neither reflecting historical realities of gender relations, nor of forwarding progressive ideas towards true gender equality.

### *Conclusion*

The civilized/native dichotomy has been central to social relations and status within Liberian history. However, social status – as typified by the civilized/native divide – has been almost completely ignored post-conflict. A lack of analysis from this perspective may have resulted in many women and girls seeking out training and educational opportunities they deemed as ‘civilized’, and indeed may have left them closer to such a status, yet consistently left them with a dependency on male figures. Damagingly, this dependency results in the possibility of women and girls being reliant on the same captors who held them hostage throughout various times in the conflict itself.

More research is needed on those few individuals, especially women and girls, who partook in the official DDRR programme, but who decided to settle in rural areas and chose agricultural training. For, though they may not have achieved the status of ‘civilized’ via such training immediately, a comparison of their own socio-economic independence and well-being and ultimately their successful reintegration into society may have benefited far greater than those in the ‘*kwi*’ urban environment.

If reintegration is consistently so far removed from localised conceptions of gender and devoid of socioeconomic routes of independence for women, how likely is it to be ‘successful’ in future? Though feminist scholars, amongst others, constantly espouse the importance of the post-conflict moment in creating the possibility for new gender relations, I have argued here that it is foreign impositions – as much as hyper-masculinized post-conflict societies – that appear to consistently quash such possibilities.

Post-conflict scholars would do well in future to consult further with pre-war anthropological and ethnographic studies, both contemporary, but also historic, to gain a better appreciation for local considerations of gender and status within societies – and to approach the issue of ‘gender’ from a clearer intersectional perspective. An intersectional perspective that takes into account women’s historical position both within war, but also throughout history. For if reintegration is to be the transformative moment for women that is often espoused, a further nuanced direction is needed, than what is currently offered. At the theoretical level, in an almost theory-less field, it is believed that this study has implications in the future for similar contexts and ongoing research into gendered reintegration not only in the West African region, but also in the broader context. As Oyěwùmí advised, a look towards African feminism(s) is pertinent.

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<sup>i</sup> This divide is also known more colloquially in Liberia as 'Congo vs. Country'.

<sup>ii</sup> Indeed one should point out, that notions of the civilized have inevitably shifted since the seminal publications of anthropologists pre-war - however a lack of historical reflection remains the central point here.

<sup>iii</sup> The second (R) in Liberia's DDRR, rehabilitation, was essentially a non-event, with men and women only ever being availed to very brief psychosocial rehabilitation sessions within cantonment camps. Thus is not discussed much at length within this paper.

<sup>iv</sup> Headings from *New York Times*, 1943; *Atlantic*, 1944; and *Women's Home Companion*, 1943; cited in Tracy Fitzsimmons, 'The postconflict postscript: Gender and policing in peace operations', in (eds.) Dyan Mazurana, Angela Raven-Roberts and Jane Parpart, *Gender, Conflict, and Peacekeeping*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 187.