

# The Introduction of Western Education in Sierra Leone and the Emergence of the Educated Elite (1787 – 1850)

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## **Abstract**

*In 1787, the Sierra Leone colony was founded as a “province of freedom” by British philanthropists and abolitionists to settle down former slaves from England, in addition to a number of African-American blacks who fought on the British side in the American War for Independence. The first settlers were joined by the 1790’s by new African-American settlers, Nova Scotians and Maroons, as well as freed slaves who had been liberated by the British navy since 1808. The Sierra Leone colony became therefore, a centre for the suppression of the slave trade. British abolitionists under the leadership of Granville Sharp regarded the introduction of western education and Christianity throughout the colony as the best means to help campaign against the business of the trade in men. On January 01, 1808, Sierra Leone was declared a crown colony. The colony which was established as a base to get rid of the unwanted blacks came to represent in the British eyes the best means for the advancement of western civilisation, Christianity, and legitimate commerce to their own benefit. To have their objectives attained, the British provided the Creoles in the Sierra Leone colony with western education and possibilities of trade in addition to other privileges. The introduction of western education in the Sierra Leone colony led to the formation of a new class of people known in the Sierra Leone society as “the educated elite” or “the westernised elite.” The Sierra Leonean educated elite were well aware of the European culture and civilisation. They adopted a European dressing style and possessed European names. Furthermore, the education they had acquired helped them to understand and cope with the changes colonial government brought about in the colony.*

**Key words:** Educated elite, Sierra Leone, education, Christianity

The presence of the Christian missionaries in West Africa is traced back to the fifteenth century with the Europeans' exploration of the West African Coasts. The Papal Bulls of 1454 gave the Portuguese exclusive rights over the discovered coasts of West Africa and the right to transport the African slaves if the latter were converted to Christianity, for this reason, Portuguese merchants transported in their ships chaplains to convert the slaves before their transportation to Europe. Portuguese claims over West Africa were strengthened through another bull in 1458 and the foundation of a company for "the Propagation of Faith" which kept control over West Africa until 1622. However, these early mission activities did not have a great influence. It was not until the late eighteenth century with the revival of the evangelical movement in Europe that mission activities in West Africa started to be seriously undertaken.

Through the introduction of Christianity in Sierra Leone, the Christian missions wanted to put an end to slavery and the slave trade. In addition, they wanted to convert and educate the blacks. Above all, the introduction of Christianity in West Africa in general, and Sierra Leone in particular, was regarded as a means by which the Europeans wanted to apologize for the harm done to the Africans through the slave trade. The Europeans claimed that the Africans had seen much of the bad side of the western civilization, so it was time to provide them with a good knowledge of the European culture.

The presence of religious missionaries in the Sierra Leone colony is traced back to its establishment. The first settlers who landed in the colony in 1787 were accompanied by a chaplain, and the Nova Scotians, the African- Americans and Maroons who joined the colony after the 1790's were already Baptists or Methodists. In 1797, Melville Horne, an Anglican pastor, followed to accomplish religious "civilising missions" in the colony. The first Christian missionaries of the London Missionary Society (1795) landed in Sierra Leone in 1797 with the aim of converting the Susu tribes, and the Protestants followed in 1800. However, these early missions were not successful due to the diseases and the societies' members were discouraged to send further missions to Africa. It was only after the organization of the Church of the England Missionary Society or the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) as the society is known in history, under the leadership of W. Wilberforce,

Thornton and T. Clarkson, that the idea of mission activities in Africa was revived. Nevertheless, after the failure of the London Missionary Society, the clergymen refused to go to Sierra Leone, for this reason, the C.M.S. appealed to the services of German missionaries like J. F. Schön, S. Wkoelle and J. L. Krapf. Between 1804 and 1816, about twenty- six German missionaries were sent to Sierra Leone by the C.M.S., the majority of whom had been trained in the Lutheran Missionary Seminary, a school for missionary training in Berlin.

The first missionaries of the C.M.S. reached Sierra Leone in 1804 followed by the Wesleyans in 1811. Both missions established schools and churches in which their task of converting and educating the Africans could operate. In fact, educational institutions had been established in the colony since its beginnings by the Sierra Leone Company according to its charter. In addition, upon his arrival in England, Zachary Macaulay, a former governor who governed the Sierra Leone colony for a period extending from 1794 to 1799, founded *the African Academy*, a school directed by W. Wilberforce, G. Sharp, as well as Rev. J. Venn, for the education of a number of Sierra Leonean children, brought by Z. Macaulay

When Sierra Leone was declared a crown colony in 1808 and villages were being established between 1809 and 1819 to re-settle the liberated Africans who were captured by the British navy, schools were set up in almost all the rural villages, especially during MacCarthy's governorship between 1814 and 1824. As a governor, MacCarthy worked for a co-operation between the government and the Church. For his plans to be effective, he set up schools, churches, as well as other government constructions in which his plans could operate. In Leicester, one of the receptive villages, the Christian Institution, a school for practical training of the African children was built in 1816. The Christian Institution was then transferred to Regent, another rural village in which it operated until 1823. In 1827, the Institution was finally moved to Fourah Bay where it became known as Fourah Bay College, a secondary school for boys only, founded to train the Africans in theology. The students in Fourah Bay College studied to become priests and catechists, and played a prominent role in spreading Christianity throughout West Africa.

Fourah Bay College was historically referred to as the “Athens of West Africa.” It was called as such because of the strong emphasis on the instruction of Greek and Latin, and particularly thanks to the successes of its graduates at national and international levels. Being a European institution, the teaching in Fourah Bay College focused mainly on Western traditional principles and Christian beliefs. Therefore, the students became more aware of Western civilisations and cultures rather than the history and traditions of the indigenous ethnic groups in Sierra Leone or elsewhere in West Africa.

The college did not receive Sierra Leoneans only, but students from different areas in West Africa. The majority of the students came from the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and the Gambia. Statistics show that about 353 students were admitted to Fourah Bay College from its beginnings in 1827 until about the end of the nineteenth century.

Other secondary schools were also built during the following years, the most important of which were the C.M.S. Grammar School, for boys and the Female Institution for girls, set up in Freetown in 1845 and 1849 respectively. Like Fourah Bay College, the C.M.S. Grammar school was attended by students from different horizons including Sierra Leone. The students came from Liberia, the Gambia, Fernando Po, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, East and South Africa, the Cameroon, Zanzibar and the West Indies.

After finishing their studies in the C.M.S Grammar school or Fourah Bay College, the sons of wealthy men were sent to Durham or another English University to further their studies and to obtain English degrees. By 1876, however, the C.M.S associated with Durham University in England and the students did not need to travel abroad since the English University degrees could be awarded in Sierra Leone. Among the prominent Sierra Leoneans who were awarded degrees there were Samuel Ajayi Crowder (1806 – 1891), the first graduate of Fourah Bay College who became the first African bishop; Samuel Lewis (1843 – 1903), a barrister; and Isaac Benjamin Pratt who became a member of the Legislative Council.

Not all the liberated Africans responded positively to the Christian faith and western civilization. Some believed in Islam and others preserved

their rites. Those who favoured the Christian religion did not adopt Christianity in its purest sense but tried to adapt it to their own beliefs and traditions. This was clearly seen through the preservation of the use of talismans and libations to protect people from evil and bad luck, and the practice of wakes and mourning celebrations known as “*awujo*,” at a person’s death. In addition, Krio, a mixture of Vernacular, English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese languages, was used by the Creoles as a means of communication.

To provide the blacks of the other parts of the continent with Christianity and the western civilization they had themselves acquired, many liberated Africans, the majority of whom were Yoruba people taken as victims of the 1820’s civil wars, wanted by the 1830’s to go back to their homelands. In 1839, they asked the government for help. When their claims were denied, the recaptives acted on their own. They bought ships and sailed to Nigeria, mainly to Lagos, Ibadan, Ilorin, Abeokuta, and Badagry.

Upon their arrival, the Sierra Leonean emigrants, or “the Saros” as the recaptives who went back home were called, appealed to the C.M.S. missionaries for the conversion and the education of the people. Rev. T. B Freeman was the first Christian missionary to land in Badagry and Abeokuta in 1842. In Abeokuta, he found the Saros very interested in the conversion of the people. As he puts it, “After a long absence from their fatherland, they had returned, bringing the grace of God in their hearts, and had for some time been anxiously looking for a visit from a Christian missionary.” (Geiss, 1974: 54)

The Saros themselves participated in the conversion and the education of the Nigerians as pastors, teachers and catechists. Among the best known Sierra Leonean figures that played a prominent role in Christianizing Nigeria there were Samuel Crowder who worked as a C.M.S missionary in Abeokuta in 1846 and as a bishop of the Niger mission in 1864 and James Johnson (1836 – 1917). Together with the C.M.S. missionaries, the Sierra Leoneans in Nigeria not only provided the natives with Christianity, but also modernized them through the establishment of new architectural building styles. In addition, they also set up a printing press and provided the Nigerians with medical knowledge.

Until about the middle of the nineteenth century, western education in Sierra Leone was largely undertaken by the Christian missions; then for administrative needs, the colonial government decided to take some control on education from the missionaries. In fact, the colonial authorities in Sierra Leone had a dual aim in developing education in the colony. On the one hand, the British strove to fill clerical needs for the different colonial posts and the training provided by the missionaries did not fit their demands. In addition, the European staff turned out to be very expensive and hard to obtain. Above all, the British were afraid of the non-controlled education provided by the missionaries, which might have an influence on the natives' mind. The colonial authorities wished to form efficient and obedient people to maintain law and order in the colony. Their ultimate goal was the formation of literate Africans that would be able to work in low-level clerical positions. They insisted on the instruction of Christianity and western-oriented education as the basis for the colonial administration's survival. They feared the formation of an educated elite that would challenge colonial authorities.

Initially, colonial education was restricted to the area of Freetown and its surroundings. However, after the expansion of the British influence over the interior, administrative needs increased and the colonial government was compelled to expand his educational policies over the protectorate as well.

For the maintenance of the British administration in the protectorate, colonial education was not afforded to all people in the first stages of the colonial education's development. By and large, the pupils were selected by the chiefs and included primarily sons of local dignitaries. In fact, colonial authorities intended to form future chiefs that would serve for the preservation of colonial development programs in the protectorate. To keep them in a position of ignorance, the pupils were instructed in their rural villages and were dressed in an African traditional style. The kind of instruction they received was a mix of academic subjects and practical skills that would later form future literate and qualified candidates who would serve as interpreters, clerks, supervisors, teachers, and support staff for the different clerical needs. Po School and Koyeima School in the Bo District of Sierra Leone were among the best known schools set up for the colonial intended goals.

The introduction of Christianity and western education in Sierra Leone paved the way for the emergence of a new class of the educated people by the end of the nineteenth century known in the history of the colony as the educated elite or the Westernised elite. The term elite is used to describe a group of people whose attainments are the best in society. These people claim their superiority over the masses and tend to have their principles accepted by the society's other members. Subsequently, the word elite can be defined as "a stratum of population which for whatever reason can claim a position of superiority and hence a corresponding measure of influence over the fate of a community." (Crowder, 1968: 384).

In Sierra Leone, "westernised elite" was used to describe European oriented young Africans who acquired modern western education and the principles of the European culture and values, and came to claim their superiority over the rest of the Africans. At this level, however, a distinction must be made between those who were highly educated mainly in Fourah Bay College or British universities, and those whose education had been restricted to primary trainings in the different local institutions. Historian M. Kilson referred to the first group of the educated elite, namely the highly educated ones, as the upper-echelon elite and higher middle class. These people, Kilson claimed, were to become professional men. Among the elite, one can distinguish the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and the churchmen. On the other hand, the second group of the educated elite included primary school teachers, the clerks, and the skilled workers and were referred to as the sub-elite or lower middle class.

Through the development of western education in the Sierra Leone colony, the British strove to exploit the westernised educated elite in opening the African interior for European trade. The British early moral campaign to end the slave trade through the Christianisation and the education of the Africans found support in emerging economic interests that offered greater profitability of legitimate labour over slave labour. The British saw in the Creoles potentially valuable allies and middlemen making possible the trade between the coast and the African interior. Hence, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British did their best to develop the Sierra Leone colony as a base for the advancement of the British civilisation, Christianity, western education,

trade and commerce for their own benefit. The introduction of western cultural and religious principles in the colony did not represent merely the spread of Christianity, but rather a weapon by which the British could further their influence throughout the African interior. Sierra Leone, therefore, was regarded as a suitable settlement from which western principles and Christianity would be preached throughout West Africa. Its early settlers were already Christians and the liberated Africans who were brought to Sierra Leone from 1808 onwards were exposed to a western milieu and were ready to acquire the principles of the Christian faith. Therefore, Christianity, western education, and possibilities of trade were all offered to the Sierra Leonean Creoles who also enjoyed the protection of Britain against local attacks.

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