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‘Africa can chiefly be benefited by her own Children’: Sierra Leonean Participation in Imperial Anti-Slavery, 1830-1885

Increasingly throughout the 19th century, the enslavement of people in Africa, America, or British territories was perceived as a threat to liberty everywhere. In the British abolition movement this contributed to an expansionist, interventionist, and increasingly imperial approach. This was justified by the evangelical Christian emphasis on a personal relationship with God and the liberal belief in the universality of human freedom. By the 1830s and 40s, settlers in the British colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone had begun to expand into the West African interior, working together with the British humanitarians in the attempt to convert local leaders to the anti-slavery cause. Both original settlers and those rescued from the slave trade (‘Liberated Africans’) used the humanitarian anti-slavery movement to help define their new Sierra Leonean, British identities. The adoption of recognized memes of culture – referred to here by abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton’s appellation, ‘Civilisation, Commerce and Christianity’ – gave Sierra Leoneans shorthand with which to identify as British subjects. This paper explores the internalization and embodiment of the humanitarians’ universal anti-slavery campaign by the Sierra Leonean settlers and the conflicts and contradictions that arose from their pursuit of ‘universal liberty’ in West Africa. Ironically, the attempts to suppress the slave trade and slavery outside of Freetown often led to the subjugation of the indigenous leader to British power – commercial, military, or political – particularly as the century progressed. What role did Sierra Leoneans play in spreading anti-slavery ideology? Did their identification with this ideology alter the anti-slavery message at all? How did their experiences in West Africa influence perceptions of humanitarian intervention in Britain? Investigating the role played by Sierra Leonean settlers in expansionist anti-slavery will hopefully improve understanding of the connections between the seemingly contradictory forces of abolitionism and African imperialism.