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Introduction

Amanda Warnock, Toyin Falola, and Alusine Jalloh

Today, communities of Nigerians flourish in major American cities such as Houston and Dallas. Sierra Leoneans attend college in the United States working part time jobs in order to send remittances back to their families in West Africa. This year hundreds of African American tourists will visit Gorée Island, drawn by the weight of history and memory to uncover their African pasts. These scenarios speak to the larger narrative of modern U.S.–West African relations; the social, cultural, political, and economic bonds that date back for centuries and that have, in recent years, drawn these two world regions into increasingly closer contact. It is this complex, often contradictory, relationship that is the subject of this volume.

A Brief History of U.S.–West African Relations

U.S.–West African relations can be traced back to the era of the transatlantic slave trade, which saw between nine and thirteen million Africans transported to the American continent. Although the majority went to Brazil and the Caribbean, an estimated 400,000 slaves, or roughly 4 percent of the total, were carried to British North America. This group of Africans and their African American descendents established the basis for the relationship between the United States and West Africa.

While these early contacts brought enslaved laborers from West African shores to American plantations and left the enduring legacy of the African diaspora in the American continent, modern relations can be traced to the early-nineteenth-century development of the so-called “legitimate trade” on the West African coast and the establishment of the colony of Liberia in 1822. In the early nineteenth century, the American Colonization Society (ACS) formulated a political project that sought to repatriate Africans and African Americans to West Africa. Debates exist as to the motivations of the ACS, with scholars arguing over the extent to which the project was in favor

of or against slavery. Nevertheless, the emigrationist movement represented a singular moment in the history of U.S.–West African relations, and one that reverberates to the present day.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the expansion of trade between the United States and West Africa, with the deployment of consular officials aiding the expansion of relations between these two localities. An active commerce in strategic commodities such as kerosene and petroleum developed between the United States and Nigeria, in spite of the disapproval of colonizing power Great Britain.

From the late nineteenth century through the 1940s, the colonial presence in West Africa provided a backdrop to contacts with the United States. While economic exchange was relatively limited during this period, the revival of emigrationist sentiment provided the basis for African Americans to forge sociocultural contacts with the continent. The Garveyist and Pan-Africanist movements of the early twentieth century brought African Americans in touch, literally and figuratively, with Africa. Although the movements failed to generate a mass migration to West Africa, they did serve to raise awareness of the joint histories of African Americans and West Africans.

The coming of World War II drastically altered the political and economic relations between the United States and West Africa. With the Pacific effectively blockaded, the United States increased its imports of strategic minerals, such as tin and manganese, from West Africa. In the case of Liberia, a historic ally, the United States established a substantial military presence, constructing an airfield and a port and even convincing the Liberian government to declare war on Germany.¹

But it was not exclusively in the political and economic realms that contacts between West Africa and the United States increased. African students educated in the United States became some of the earliest proponents of African independence. Prominent personalities such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria spent their formative years living and studying in the United States. The Pan-Africanist writings of W. E. B. DuBois, among others, influenced the development of their political ideology.

With the coming of the Cold War, African decolonization served to increase ties between West Africa and the United States. The departure of the colonial powers provided an opportunity for the United States to step in and exert its power in the region. In the battle over political and economic doctrines that occupied the East and the West, the United States and the USSR viewed the nascent African republics as pawns to be won over to one or the other camp. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the United States provided economic aid to the nations of West Africa while promoting its sociocultural agenda through organizations such as the Peace Corps and the U.S. Information Service.

While some of these programs, such as the Peace Corps, have continued to maintain a presence in West Africa, the 1980s and 1990s saw a significant

shift in policy toward the region. During the political-military conflicts that raged in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, the United States assumed a stance of nonintervention. Largely inspired by the failed military mission in Somalia in 1992 and 1993, the government has been extremely reluctant to intervene in conflicts where its interests are not directly at stake. U.S. policy, particularly since the attacks of September 11, 2001, has been aimed at identifying potential terrorist threats and securing energy resources (especially in Nigeria) rather than at averting humanitarian disasters.

More recently, the United States has received criticism for downplaying the conflict and genocide in the Sudan and failing to come to the aid of its victims. Despite a denunciation of the belligerents and the imposition of sanctions against the Sudanese government, the United States has granted little in the way of material aid to alleviate the crisis plaguing the region of Darfur.

Organization and Structure of the Book

Over the last several decades, historians have conducted extensive research into U.S.–West African contacts during the era of the transatlantic trade. Yet we still understand relatively little about the more recent relations between the United States and West Africa. The reasons for this are at least threefold. First, scholars frequently employ nation states as their primary units of analysis. Thus, much of the research on U.S. relations with or policies toward Africa focuses on relationships between the United States and specific countries. While this constitutes an important effort in its own right, it fails to provide a broader picture of the U.S. role in the region. Second, studies of contemporary U.S.–West African relations that treat particular African national or ethnic groups in the United States often neglect to explore the broader context for African migrants as a whole. Many see the African migration to the United States as a discrete historical phenomenon, ignoring the linkages that Africans in the diaspora have forged with continental Africans and vice versa. The third reason speaks to the way most Americans conceptualize the African continent. As Curtis Keim has pointed out in his book, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, the media and the educational system in the United States have socialized Americans to view Africa as a homogenous entity, lacking in ethnic diversity and individual political units.² Even news commentators will frequently refer to U.S. policies in Africa without the caveat that policy toward Egypt, for example, will differ drastically from policy toward Botswana.

The essays contained in this work represent the first effort to provide a comprehensive treatment of U.S.–West African relations. We have divided them into four parts, each treating one facet of the U.S.–West African relationship.

Part 1, “Trade and Politics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” examines the linkages that brought the United States and West Africa together during the era of European colonial rule of Africa. Six chapters treat the political and economic relations between the United States and West Africa, arguing that, despite the structures of colonialism, a relationship had begun to develop that would lay the groundwork for closer ties as the twentieth century progressed.

Adebayo Oyeade and Toyin Falola begin part 1 with a review of U.S.–West African relations from the West African voyages of Columbus until the present. They open with a discussion of the transatlantic slave trade, which brought to the Americas millions of Africans, who, through their labor and their culture, contributed significantly to the formation of the United States. While early contacts were largely unidirectional, bringing Africans to the Americas, the African colonization project, in establishing the colony of Liberia in 1822, represented the first effort to repatriate large numbers of Africans and African Americans to West Africa. Oyeade and Falola then compare the African colonization attempts of the nineteenth century with the Garveyism of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that, in spite of their limited successes in promoting cooperation between African Americans and West Africans, these movements failed to win widespread support in either the United States or West Africa. The chapter continues by providing a review of the social, political, and economic linkages that have developed over the course of the twentieth century, demonstrating how, even in light of the profound historical bonds that they share, Africa has never featured high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The chapter closes with a summary of contemporary U.S. policy with regard to the region.

In chapter 2, Ibrahim Kargbo looks at the complex nexus of trading arrangements in Sierra Leone during the late nineteenth century. Following the lead of the European powers, which established consular posts in Sierra Leone during the 1840s, in 1858 the United States sent a representative to Freetown with the express mission of promoting U.S. commercial interests. The establishment of a consulate in Freetown altered the trade arrangements between U.S. traders and African middlemen as the former gained leverage in their negotiations with the latter. The 1860s and 1870s saw the United States extend its commercial activities in Sierra Leone, frustrating British attempts to control the region’s foreign trade and leaving the consular officials and the U.S. Department of State to navigate this contested terrain.

Turning to the Liberian settlement project of the American Colonization Society (ACS), chapter 3, by John Wess Grant, discusses the obstacles to emigration faced by black families in Richmond, Virginia. Attempting to shift the discussion of the ACS’s activities away from debate over whether the organization was proslavery or antislavery, Grant opts to look at the social

and economic challenges faced by potential émigrés. He highlights the part played by the process of manumission in the decision to emigrate to Liberia. For, as the frequency of manumissions declined in the early nineteenth century, the number of families who counted both free coloreds and slaves among their members rose. Not wanting to leave enslaved relatives behind, free coloreds invested their limited resources in the purchase of family members rather than in the passage back to Africa.

Like Grant, Ibrahim Sundiata explores the possibilities and challenges facing African American emigration movements. In chapter 4, Sundiata situates Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) within the broader tradition of Pan-Africanism. Although many works have focused on the rise and fall of Garveyism, this chapter argues that one must understand the social and political conditions in post-World War I Liberia in order to fully understand the defeat of the Garveyist program. For Garvey's plan to promote the mass migration of African Americans to Liberia was met with trepidation, and at times open hostility, by the Liberian political elite. As a conservative, ingrown caste composed of the descendants of nineteenth-century émigrés, Liberian leaders overwhelmingly rejected Garvey's overtures. Ultimately, Sundiata explains, Liberia was a state divided between a small elite and the largely disenfranchised masses. This division, based on class rather than color, prevented the Garveyist project from achieving its aims.

While Sundiata explores the powerful legacies of the American Colonization Society in Liberia, Ayodeji Olukoju in chapter 5 exposes the fractured nature of British colonialism in West Africa. Olukoju discusses the increasing trade between the United States and Nigeria from 1900 to 1950. He contextualizes Nigerian-U.S. trade within the framework of the United States' post-World War I emergence as a global political and economic superpower. The chapter argues that, although the volume of trade was low, the strategic importance of U.S. imports to Nigeria, particularly kerosene and petroleum, made the relationship crucial for Nigerian development. In Nigeria, U.S. firms frequently found themselves at odds with British colonial policy. Yet, even amidst this conflict, the development of trade between the United States and Nigeria accelerated through the early twentieth century, propelling Nigeria's integration into the global economy even as it remained a British colony.

While the authors discussed above treat individual countries, in chapter 6 Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani takes a regional view, treating U.S. political and economic activities in West Africa during the late colonial period. Tijani identifies anti-Communism and mineral exploitation as the two motives driving American interests in the region. As early as 1950, the United States recognized West Africa's strategic position and sought to develop further ties to the region. Throughout the 1950s, U.S. policy furthered the joint aims of

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