



Centre for Democracy & Development

Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

## 25<sup>th</sup> May Discussion: Legacy of the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone and Liberia

In light of the 2007 bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade, an event addressing the legacy of the slave trade in Sierra Leone and Liberia was held by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) on 24 May 2007. The event was chaired by Stephen Chan, professor of International Relations at SOAS, and presented by Tunde Zack-Williams, professor of Sociology at the University of Central Lancashire and Professor Debey Sayndee, Director of the Kofi Annan Institute for Conflict Transformation (KAICT) from the University of Liberia.

Tunde Zack-Williams began his discussion of the legacy of the slave trade with the definition of the term Creole or Krio. ‘Creole’, he stated, is a status group or a reference group within in the state population. Furthermore, one’s ‘Creoleness’ is not necessarily inherited or determined at birth, but instead may be assumed by delinquent individuals within the society. With this foundation, Zack-Williams explored the role of Creoles in Sierra Leonean and Liberian societies. From colonial times, Creoles never had political autonomy; though Zack-Williams did not support the claim that political autonomy by a majority would have been trouble free. It is for this reason that the Liberian experience was more severe than that of Sierra Leone. Yet, he acknowledged that in Sierra Leone, members of the *Province of Freedom* continued to enslave their own until the early twentieth century. He also recognized that former slaves assumed the role of slave dealers while a number of returnees were resold as slaves.

Zack-Williams discussed the development of Sierra Leone, and specifically Freetown, as part of the British *Project of Modernity*. Many came to view Freetown as the Athens of West Africa, while the colony materialised with a notable degree of hybridity. Combining African and European cultures, a Creole society emerged with direct ties to the colonial hinterland. , “Creoles played a major [role] in the development of many West African countries.” Indeed, many Creoles assumed prominent positions as educators, missionaries, and bureaucratic officials, which solidified their influence throughout the West African region.

Turning his remarks to the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, Zack-Williams looked at the relationship between “Creoleness” and violent conflict. While acknowledging “intra-racial discrimination...and resentment,” he challenged the belief that the presence of returnees was a “time bomb” in Sierra Leone. Citing popular franchise and a pivotal decision in the House of Lords soon after independence, he stated that these tensions had

long died down. Although some combatants believed they were fighting along cultural lines, culture was functioned more as a mobilising technique rather than a root cause. Indeed, actual root causes included peripheral capitalism, mismanagement of structural adjustment programmes within kleptocratic infrastructure, social exclusion, and economic decline. In contrast, Zack-Williams stated that ethnicity was an important variable in the violence in Liberia. He cited the ethnically based violence against the Krahn and Mandigos supplemented by years of social exclusion as two causal factors of the war.

Zack-Williams also evaluated popular theories regarding the impact of “modernity” in both states. For example, he addressed the “Curse of Nationhood” put forward by Basil Davidson and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, as well as “open door policy” and the dual structure of governance, which led to over-dependence on traditional chiefs proved detrimental to Liberian society.

In conclusion, Zack-Williams stated that Creole chauvinism and Creole-driven ethnocentrism generated strong cultural opposition to “modernity.” Indeed, objects and discourse that were deemed modern were swiftly dismissed as Western or even branded as taboo. As a result, rational legal structures that could have potentially challenged the patrimonial system, despotism, gerontocracy, and chieftaincy have been brushed aside.

Professor Debey Sayndee continued the discussion on Sierra Leone and Liberia. He began his remarks by describing both states as severely impoverished with no functional infrastructure and almost entirely reliant on foreign aid for reconstruction. He recognised the unfortunate paradox that these same countries have some of the highest natural endowments in the world.

While evaluating the reconstruction process, Sayndee listed several important factors responsible for undermining development efforts. First, he cited continuous mistrust between settlers and natives as ethnic groups have been traumatized by years of brutality, for which each group blames the other. Second, foreign investors and companies dominate an unacceptable level of the business sector, which means high levels of capital flight and unemployment (as both Sierra Leone and Liberia have an 80% unemployment rate). Third, corruption has been ingrained in the system for years.

Sayndee continued with a discussion of the legacies left from the slave trade. First, he stated that the colonial experience led to forced expansion and acquisition of land, which greatly altered regional and local dynamics. Indeed, American President James Monroe ordered settlers to fight the natives to acquire land, while during the pre-colonial era, land has always been considered communal. Second, colonialism and the slave trade left legacies of economic and social injustice. The fact that boundaries were superimposed provided for weak nation-states and micro-management by external powers. Indeed, contemporary governments still seek outside approval and recognition of authorization. Superficial boundaries also meant the division of kinsmen, which attributed to the fracture of economic, social, and cultural ties that had long influenced regional dynamics.

In his conclusion, Sayndee stated that division and discrimination at the hands of a minority settler ethnic population led to consolidated resentment and ultimately the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. He emphasised that what is most needed today is the creation of a common sense of nationhood. Such solidarity would help to overcome lingering issues of racial superiority and the commonplace preference of life in Europe and America over the 'new found freed land'.