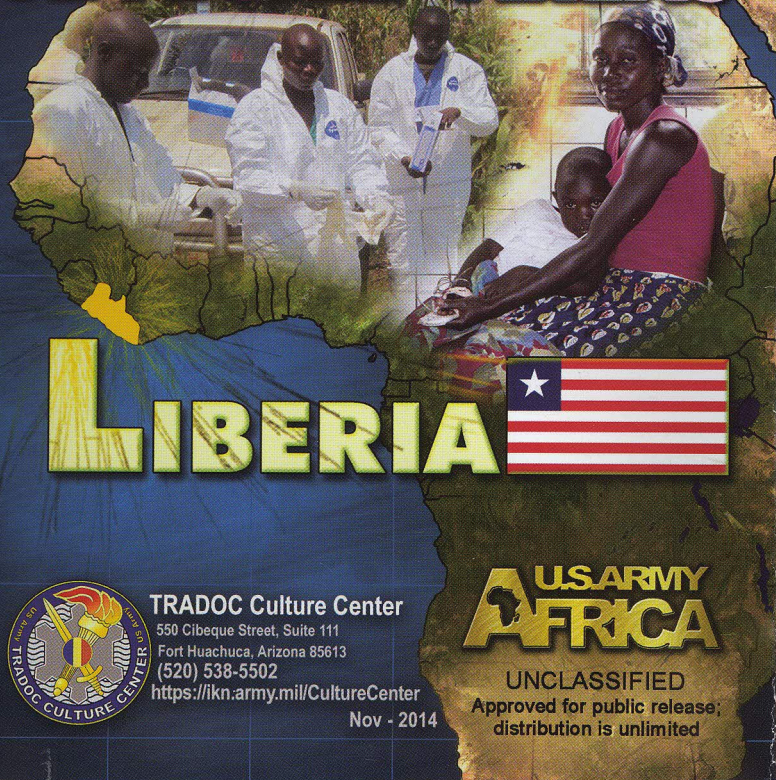


# SOLDIERS' CULTURE GUIDE TO EBOLA AFFECTED AREAS



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Nov - 2014

**U.S. ARMY  
AFRICA**

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## Facts & Figures



**Population:** 4.5 million approx. (2014)

One doctor per 100k people (US: 242 doctors per 100k)

**Capital:** Monrovia, home to about 25% of the population, is the center of political and economic activities. However, most of the natural resources are located in the countryside.

**Languages:** English (official and heavily influenced by American English), Liberian English is a popular *lingua franca* and about 30 indigenous languages are spoken by the Mande, Kru and Mel core linguistic groups.

**Ethnicity:** Largest groups include: Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Kru, Grebo, Mano, Krahn, Gola, Gbandi, Loma, Kissi, Vai, Bella, Dei, Mandingo and Mende.

- About 2.5% of the population is *Americo-Liberians*. There is also a large population of immigrant Lebanese natives and their descendants, most of them traders, in the country.

## Early History

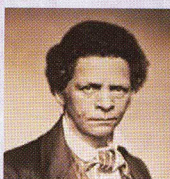
Liberia, which means "land of the free," was created in 1822 by freed slaves supported by the American Colonization Society. The freed slaves first settled in Liberia's present national capital, Monrovia, named in honor of then U.S. President James Monroe. Years later, more freed slaves arrived from both the U.S. and the West Indies, culminating in the proclamation by the settlers of independence on July 26, 1847. Calling themselves *Americo-Liberians*, the settlers dominated the political and economic activities of the country, resulting in resentment among the indigenous African population and, eventually, to two bloody civil wars. The *Americo-Liberians* developed and promoted a cultural tradition infused with American values which are still evident in the country today. Together with Ethiopia, Liberia is the only other sub-Saharan African country that was never subjected to colonial rule.



President James Monroe

2015.2.6.2

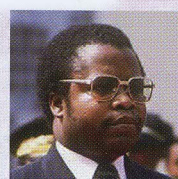
## Politics



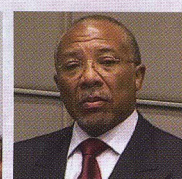
Pres. J. Roberts  
(1848-1856)



Pres. W. Tolbert  
(1971-1980)



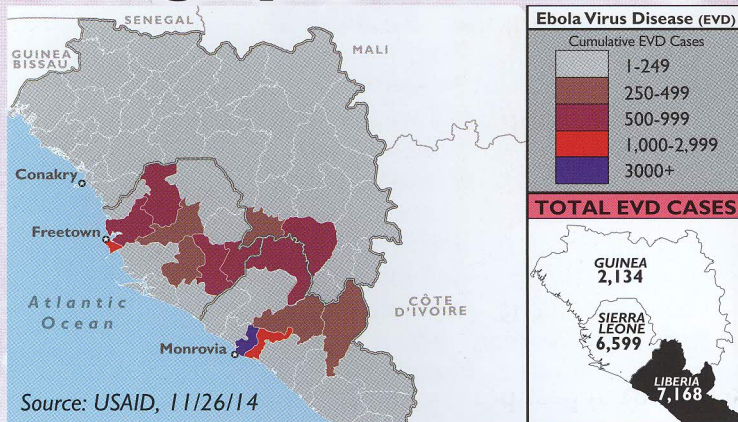
Pres. S. Doe  
(1980-1990)



Pres. C. Taylor  
(1997-2003)

Joseph Jenkins Roberts, born in Virginia, USA was Liberia's first President even before the creation of the all-pervasive True Whig Party (TWP) in 1869. For over a century, Liberia was a one-party state ruled by the TWP. The TWP dominated Liberian political space until 1980 when Master Sgt. Samuel Doe assassinated President William Tolbert in a bloody coup. The coup ended 132 years of *Americo-Liberian* political dominance. Charles Taylor, a warlord now convicted for war crimes in Sierra Leone by the Special Court for Sierra Leone, led a rebel insurgency, overthrowing Doe. Doe was captured and tortured to death by Prince Johnson's rebel forces. Johnson was once an ally, later a rival of Taylor. Following a truce between Taylor's and Johnson's forces, Taylor won the 1997 elections to become president. Taylor resigned in 2003, following domestic and international pressures, creating room for a transitional government. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president in 2005, becoming Africa's first ever female president.

# Geography & Economy



**Name:** Republic of Liberia

**Location:** West Africa, bordered by Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and the Atlantic Ocean

**Size:** 43,000 sq. miles, slightly larger than Tennessee; mostly flat terrain with rolling hills.

**Climate:** Tropical and humid, distinct dry (December-March) and wet (April-November) seasons.

**Main resources:** Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for most Liberians; and timber, rubber, gold, diamond and iron ore are the main export resources.

**Economic challenges:** Shortage of good infrastructure (roads), limited access to clean water, education, electricity, healthcare and high level of unemployment partly because of civil war and mismanagement.

# Political Geography & Government



President Ellen Sirleaf, first elected female Head of State in Africa

**Gov't:** Republic and a Representative Democracy

**President:** Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President is both head of state and of government

**Defense Minister:** Brownie Samukai

**Health Minister:** George Warner

**Admin. Units:** 15 Counties, equivalent of U.S. states Counties are administered by superintendents appointed by the President; each county has its own flag. Counties are sub-divided into districts, then paramount chiefdoms, clans, and town chiefdoms.

Traditional leaders, such as paramount chiefs, wield many powers and influence at the grassroots level. They are often trusted more than national and county level authorities by local populations, and could be very helpful in emergencies.

## Customs and

*\* Working in Liberia and interacting with the local population requires great care and respect for cultural and traditional norms, a balancing act which could be challenging in and of itself.*

**Family:** Liberians have large extended and closely knit families, with frequent daily interactions between family members, sometimes facilitating the spread of diseases. They place emphasis on group achievement rather than on personal achievement. It is an "us" and not a "me" society.

**Greeting:** Verbal greetings are common and, in Monrovia, were sometimes accompanied by a double-cheek kiss or handshake and snap of the middle fingers. However, these customs are much reduced in the wake of the Ebola virus.

**Communication:** Liberians tend to talk frankly, informally, but are often uncomfortable to admit or display a lack of knowledge in certain situations. Consequently, a "yes" should not always be taken for a "yes" as it can sometimes mean a "no." The person is simply being polite or avoiding embarrassing himself, a guest or someone of higher status.



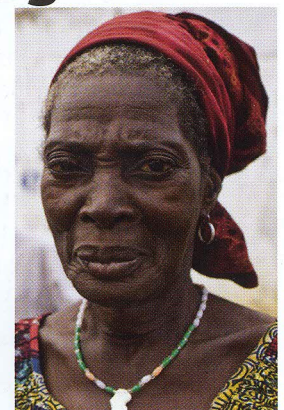
## Rapport Building

**Personal Space:** Liberians may appear to be physical, but on the contrary they are just being nice and friendly. They will touch you several times over or hold your hand during a conversation. The manner of touching also depends on the level of a relationship. Personal space as most Americans understand it, is therefore virtually non-existent, but even this is changing now because of Ebola.

**Respect:** Liberia is an honor-sensitive society and any sign of disrespect, real or perceived, is taken seriously. For example, Liberians are proud of their age and personal titles, making them sensitive to actions that may undermine these personal achievements. Disrespect could therefore be the final straw to sever a relationship.

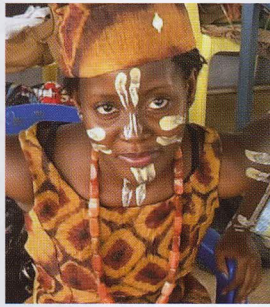
**Relationships:** Liberians focus on building and maintaining relationships as personal connections are considered the road to success. Family status and personal connections are often more important than formal, e.g., academic qualifications.

**Saving Face:** Many Liberians would shape the truth in order to save face and maintain a harmonious relationship. It is therefore important to read the meaning behind some of the words being used.



## Beliefs About Health

- Liberians view good health as a balancing act between the physical and supernatural worlds
- Some of them do not believe in the “germ theory of disease” or that the human body is a machine that must be “tuned up” every so often through exercises.
- Liberians believe that both supernatural forces and human beings with special powers cause illnesses in retaliation for violation of a social norm, a religious taboo or out of jealousy.



## Death & Burial Customs

- For Liberians as for many African people, life does not end with death. Death is seen as a journey into another realm, a journey for which the individual needs personal belongings that will be useful to him or to others in the spiritual realm. Death and burial customs in Liberia are very ritualistic, though there is evidence of shorter and more hygienic burials because of Ebola. Liberians normally do not cremate the dead, though even this has gained wider acceptance lately. Liberians prefer earth burials in the belief that this preserves their ancestors. Ancestors are believed to live in the spirit world and still have powers over the living. They are honored and appeased by naming newly born babies after them and through afterlife cultural ceremonies.
- Burial customs involve washing, clothing and exposing a corpse for hours on end for public viewing and traditional rites. The belief, notably in the villages, is that if the “correct” death and burial rites are not performed, the diseased person will come back to trouble the living. The continuation of life after death is therefore a strong Liberian worldview which dictates how corpses must be handled and buried. However, the Ebola epidemic has exposed the risks of some of these beliefs and practices, and the Liberian government and NGOs are working to stop the practice or to combine traditional with safe burial practices.



## and Illness Causation

- Some Liberians consider illnesses as punishment for disrespecting and not organizing proper rituals in honor of ancestors.
- Diseased persons are expected to be given proper burials and funeral rites as it is believed that a relative who is not buried properly becomes a wandering ghost and danger to living relatives.
- Traditional doctors hold sway on medical matters in most of Liberia’s villages. They are trusted because in a majority of cases, they are relatives to the sick.
- Many villagers are scared of modern medication for fear that they will be used as guinea pigs to test the efficacy of a medication.
- Liberian customs entail close physical interaction with the sick. This involves frequent bedside visits by friends and family to sympathize with the sick. Friends and family will care for the sick without protective equipment.
- Quarantining the sick is not a norm.



## Survival Liberian English

| English           | Liberian English |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Afternoon         | san tem          |
| Night             | net              |
| Goodbye           | a de go          |
| Excuse me         | komot na rod     |
| Be careful        | tek tem          |
| How are you?      | aw yu du         |
| How old are you?  | omos yu ol?      |
| I am fine         | a wel            |
| I am full         | abelful          |
| Medicine          | merecin          |
| Money             | kopo             |
| Food              | it               |
| Girl              | titi             |
| What’s your name? | weti yu nem?     |
| When?             | ustem?           |
| Water             | wata             |
| Walk              | waka             |

## Religion & Spiritual View

- About 86% of Liberia's population is Christian and 12% Muslim. However, traditional beliefs and practices (animism) remain deeply entrenched in the country. Many Liberians practice both elements of scriptural religions (Christianity and Islam) together with traditional religious practices.
- Liberians see the world as a complex system of relationships between the living, the dead, and supernatural forces. They believe that these forces intervene in human affairs. Consequently, ancestors are venerated and their presence in the community is frequently acknowledged and honored through afterlife rituals and cultural festivities.
- Beliefs in destiny are equally popular. Liberians believe that the past, present and future are controlled by divine forces. As a result, fatalities are often seen as having been willed by God. *God's will* along with superstition are the ways Liberians would explain or cope with an unfortunate event or situation.



Catholic Church in Monrovia

## Healthcare Challenges & Ebola

- Liberia's poor healthcare infrastructure was worsened by the 1999-2003 civil war. It suffers from an acute shortage of hospitals, trained medical staff and supplies.
- Providing good healthcare could also be a major challenge for a population that has a high illiteracy rate, a limited knowledge of disease and modern medicine, and where many in the population believe strongly in traditional medicine.
- Education now completely disrupted due to Ebola, with all schools shut down.
- Stopping the cultural practice of consuming "bushmeat" (wild game) is a big challenge. Many Liberians, especially those living in the villages, depend on bush meat as a source of protein despite warnings that it may be the source of the deadly Ebola virus.
- Daily human interactions in Liberia often involve close contacts as personal space is not a norm. In villages or in cities, Liberians generally live in close quarters, with many family members or friends sharing a single room. The cramped conditions along with limited sanitation can facilitate the spread of diseases.

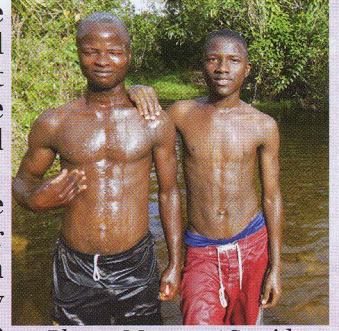


Photo: Margaret Sowid

## Ebola in the Media and Rumor Mill

- Some skeptical Liberians see the Ebola virus as an invention by the government, intended to leach funding from unsuspecting foreign governments. Others believe that Ebola is a curse by the gods for the moral and socio-economic corruption in the country.
- Commenting on the spread of the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) Liberia Country Representative, Dr. Nestor Ndayimirije notes, "...we have the problem of denial, from the population and also traditional burial practices and funeral rites, which expose people to contaminate themselves and get the Ebola virus disease. And you know when you are talking about traditions; it is not easy to control... The last point is that in Africa, when we have something killing people quickly, suddenly,

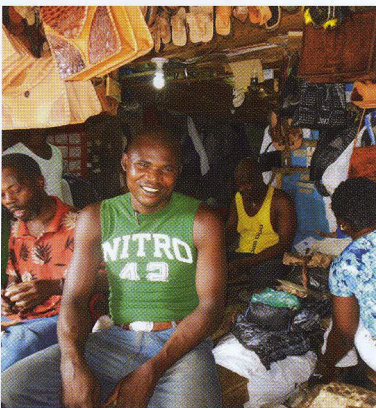
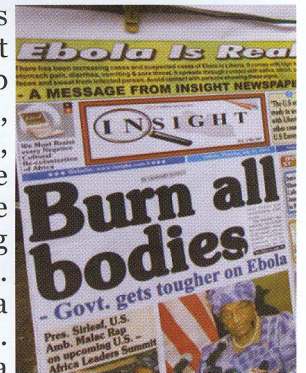


Photo: Margaret Sowid

people believe that it is about witchcraft, about spiritual issues. In West Africa we talk about juju and it does make the situation not easy..." **Front Page Africa, Sept. 11, 2014, WHO Struggling with Liberia: Traditions Worsen Ebola Spread**

- Reporting from Guinea, another Ebola affected country, the New York Times notes, "The wariness about outside intervention has deep roots. This part of Guinea, known as the Forest Region, where more than 200 people have already died of the disease, is known for its strong belief in traditional religion. The dictator who ruled Guinea with an iron fist for decades,.... was only partly successful in a 1960s campaign to stamp out these beliefs, despite mass burnings of fetishes." **New York Times, July 27, 2014, Fear of Ebola Breeds a Terror of Physicians**



- In a statement, International Crisis Group urges "Religious leaders, traditional rulers and popular public figures [should] be involved in teaching people how to avoid Ebola, including by stopping (if temporarily) traditional practices that contribute to the virus's spread, such as burial rituals or eating wild animals; they should also help raise awareness on the far greater risks faced by women, who traditionally tend to the sick...." **International Crisis Group, Sept. 23, 2014, Statement on Ebola and Conflict in West Africa**