

# Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade And The Phenomenon Of The Migration Of Visual And Performing Arts

Morenike Folabalogun,  
*Phd. (History Of Art).*  
Faculty Of Arts,  
Fine And Applied Arts Department  
Kwara State University, Maleté.

---

## **Abstract**

*The Trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted for over 360 years with over 11million Africans traded across the Atlantic over years. The methodology adopted for this write up is qualitative which includes internet resources, historical, literary materials, and relics. This paper examines specifically the medieval contributions of Africa in art history and art that emerged from the descendants of Trans-Atlantic slave trade like the festivals, capoeira martial art dance, foods, use of nsibidi symbols, dance styles, languages amongst others. The author also examined and looked into the importance and the possibility of reparation to African Trans-Atlantic slave trade descendants and the need for tendered apology to African Trans-Atlantic slave descendants in diaspora by Africans first and then the colonial slave masters for the inhuman injustice done and for the wrong committed. Recommendations were also given for possible adaptations in the write up.*

**Keywords:** Africa, Ancestors, Slavery, Trans-Atlantic, visual arts

---

Date of Submission: 21-01-2024

Date of Acceptance: 31-01-2024

---

## **I. Introduction**

Africa covers an area of 30.37million sq.km. About 9 to 12 million people were taken into slavery through the Trans-Atlantic slave route and it lasted for about 360 years (British involvementwith transatlantic slave trade, undated).There are no easy discussions when it comes to the trans-Atlantic slave trade that lasted for the longest period in the history of man. Some schools of thought are of the opinion that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade did not take place; there are relics in history like monuments to disapprove of these types of statements or theories. The residual negative effects of Trans-Atlantic slavery and colonization affected the authentic cultural settings, artistic trends and expressions in Nigeria and Africa in general. African art is one of the key factors that established history and African art cannot be separated from history. The cultural artistic expression and signature of the foundation of Africa art was eroded. Africans have the notion that most of the African art works were fetish and represents idolatry, art works were looted, burnt and discarded during various invasions. Africa generally has a rich language, heritage and secret writings coded for cult's information.

Due to the contradictions and the inconsistencies of oral African traditions passed down from generation to generation, important and genuine information's have been lost and distorted with the passage of time. Mambolo (2014) asserts that, "he disagrees with the accounts of Runoko Rashidi, Louis Gates, Louis Farrakhan or Mustafa Ansari with Caucasian minor historians that blacks sold blacks into slavery, he calls it the lies of the Caucasians to cover up their atrocities of injustice to man". British slave Trade reveals the shameful truth behind the liberal façade, showing how the economic, social and cultural life of Britain would have been unrecognizable without slavery (Documentaries, 2017). The United Nations General Assembly declared the year 2011 as International Year of African Descent, the year also marked the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Conference Against Racism (International Year for People of African Descent, 2011).The assembly also approved a resolution stating that slavery along with colonization that sustained it were crimes against humanity (International Year for People of African Descent, 2011).

The slave castles serve the purpose of accommodating and transferring slaves after crossing the gate of no return into ships for onward transportation and sales to the Americas. Africa has about forty slave castles, or large commercial fortes built on the gold Coast of West Africa now Ghana by European traders, castles like the Swedish Carlsberg, Elmina Castle, Forte Christiansborg (Cape Coast Castle-W, 2020).

Due to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade outside Africa there are seven countries with the largest African descendants population, the first is Brazil with 83 million, which is 40% of their population, second is United

States of America with 46 million, which is 14% of the country's population, third is Haiti with 11million making 95% of the population, Colombia comes fourth with 5.5 million making 11% of their population, fifth is France with 5 million, which is 8% of French population, sixth Venezuela 3.5million making 5% of the population, the seventh is Jamaica with 2.9 million making it 92% of their population (African, 2020).The evidence of African descent in diaspora is another strong evidence that can never be erased that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade happened in history.

According to Steve Harvey, an African American 62 years old humorist, in a video clip interview by (Africa,2020) he described his visit to the slave castle in Ghana as “emotional and the second of the worst days of his life, where they stripped his ancestors and descendants of their lands, titles, families, heritage, and lineage”. He further stressed that, “African Americans need to visit the place to understand the atrocities colonial masters did to their forefathers” (Africa,2020). Harvey concluded that, the “slaves-built America and the proceeds of millions of dollars are still seen today in their Tobacco, Ketchup, dealership companies”. In an oral interview with an African American Pamela Robinson via phone on the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 2020, she states that, “it is painful, unbelievable and disturbing to actually think of what their ancestors actually went through and to date with all their labor and contributions, racism is still on in different dimensions against people of African descent since about 400 years ago in history”

## **II. Methodology**

Information for the study was obtained using qualitative research method: exploring analysis, internet resources and internet video clips, literary materials, oral history, and oral interviews. The paper also highlighted some of the arts transported to the diaspora through the Trans-Atlantic slavery.

### **Medieval Africa contributions to civilization before Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade**

Medieval Africa was under looked as if it has not contributed to development of the world in any manner, but the under mentioned are amongst some of the contributions made by Africans even before the invasion of Africa, these contributions are amazing;

- Mummification was introduced from South Western Libya and was quite unique in 5600B.C and also in Egypt.
- Agricultural technology of *Engaruka* in Tanzania and Ethiopia marked the technology of iron age in Africa
- The Oromo of Ethiopia who first discover and recognize the energizing effect of the coffee bean plant
- African contribution to Architecture, the stone structures in Zimbabwe South of the Sahara are one of the largest stone structures with unique method of construction
- African contribution to Astronomy by the Dogon people of Mali, Dogon cosmology has been studied by scholars and scientists, and they are baffled on how the Dogon people acquire the knowledge of the stars, they attributed their knowledge to African astronomical ingenuity, religion, and the star system knowledge.
- Iron technology contributed by Africa in warfare, agricultural tools, creation of magnificent art works like Ife art, Igbo *Ukwu* and Benin amongst others.
- African contribution of mathematics, the oldest known mathematical tool in human history in form of the *Ishango* bone dated 8500B.C was discovered in Africa, it is considered an important and delicate contribution to human civilization and history, that it can only be seen by special arrangement at the Royal Institute for National Sciences in Brussels Belgium. Found in the region of Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo in 1960, named after the *Ishango* people, showing addition, multiplication and prime numbers.
- African contribution to medicine, specifically caesarian procedure in Uganda by the *Bunyoro* people. Dr. Robert Falcon an English medical missionary in Uganda in 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the *Bunyoro* caesarian section first hand and wrote a very detailed account about what he saw.
- African contribution to writing, the hieroglyphics greatly influenced other foreign culture outside Africa like Greece and Rome (Patreon, 2020).

### **Apologies Tendered**

It is not out of place if reparation is given to Africa and African Trans-Atlantic slave descendant for the inhumane treatment done through trans-Atlantic slave trade. Recently Marianne Williamson a democratic nominee for 2020 United States of America president, got a big applause when she defended her plan to give reparation to the tune of \$200 to \$500 billion to the descendants of African Americans slaves (Avins, 2019), Representative Steve Cohen with 120 co-sponsors introduces United States Apology for slavery, he further asserts that the capitol building they were in was built by slave labour (Cohen, 2008).Officials from Benin in West Africa apologized during a ceremony in the United States for their country's role in once selling fellow Africans by millions to white slave traders, the group made several stops in Virginia, Washington, D.C., to publicized Mathew Kerekou's apologies (Virginia, 2000) Luc Gnacadja, minister of environment and housing

for Benin said, “The slave trade is a shame, and we do repent for it” (Virginia, 2000). The author is of the opinion that there is need for other African countries and ethnic leaders, chiefs and ward heads to follow suit by apologizing to African descendants of Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

### Visual and Performing Arts Transported to Diaspora

The Yoruba of Western Nigerian have an adage that says *inu koko dudu ni eko fufu ti jade wa*. This translates to mean “It is from inside the black pot that the white pap comes out from”. The Yoruba adage emphasizes the importance of good, important and fantastic things coming out from an unimportant, unexpected, overlooked or underrated source. African Trans-Atlantic slaves trade descendants contributed immensely to the creative expressions and performing artistic and cultural expressions of countries of their habitat in diaspora, the importance of their contributions cannot be underplayed.

### Masquerade and Voodooos Transferred from Africa

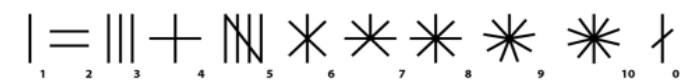
It is believed that the art of voodooos was transported to the Caribbean’s through the Republic of Togo in West Africa and has its origin from Togo; Togo is regarded as the cradle of voodoo (Culler, 2013). History records that entire Efik leader and his entire village of *Obutong* were captured by the British slave traders and taken to their final destination, Havana in Cuba. The Efik chief founded the *Abakua* group society in Havana in 1830s. The first *Abakua* group is named after *Obutong* an Efik town in Calabar. (Trip down memory lane, 2016). The Ekpe (fig. I) festival is also celebrated amongst the Cubans *Abakua* society, derived from Efik *Ekpe* and *Ajagham Ngbe* societies of South Eastern Nigeria and South Western Cameroon, founded in Havana in the 1830s by captured leaders of Cross River villages (<https://afrocubaweb.com/at>, 2016).



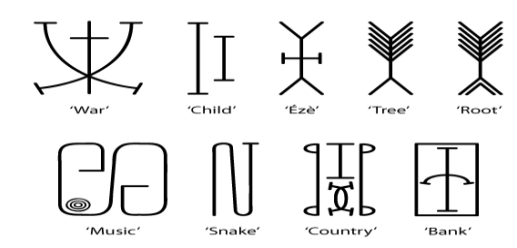
**Fig I: Ekpe Masquerade (Cross River State).**  
(FolaBalogun, September1,2018)

### Language Transferred from Africa to Cuba

These hidden codes or languages are used purposely within traditional and modern cults which are known to the groups of ethnic relationship. *Nsibidi* is one of such ethnic symbols used by the *Ekpe* secret or leopard society as a means of secret exchanging of data or information (Fig.2 and 3). The sixth most deadly cult is *Abakua*, a Cuban rendition of *Ekpe* cult of Cross River State of Nigeria, known also as the leopard society, transported from Africa to Cuba; secrecy is the trait of the cult (Onuh, 2017). The writing is only one amongst the pre-colonial indigenous writing systems of South East Nigeria. Europeans discovered the secret society writing in 1905 (Chinenye, 2017). The pictographic and ideographic symbols are in fact a language rather than mere systems of motifs. *Nsibidi* includes a whole range of verbal expression. *Nsibidi* was transferred via slave trade to Cuba, where it was developed into the *Anaforuana* and *Veve* symbols (<https://kwekudee-tripdownmemor.>, undated). It is a visual artistic expression of symbols, made up of unit motifs designs to form a language expression (motifs) for communication within the initiates and devotees (Fig. 2 and 3).



**Fig. 2: Ancient Nigerian Numbers Nsibidi**  
(FolaBalogun, September1,2018)



**Fig. 3: Nsibidi Symbols**  
(FolaBalogun, September1,2018)

Capoeira in (fig.4) was introduced by black slaves in Brazil mainly from Angola and it was invented around the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Basominger, 2012). Capoeira (fig.4) is about 500 year old art form and thought to have originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> –century A.D by enslaved people (Kingsford-Smith, 2021).Capoeira (fig.4)developed in Brazil, derived from traditions brought across the Atlantic Ocean by enslaved Africans and fueled by the burning desire for freedom (Goncalves-Borrega, 2017). Conclaves-Burther stressed that, “it soon became widely practiced on plantations as a means of breaking the bonds of slavery, both physically and mentally.’Conclaves-Borrega concluded that, the art was considered a social infirmity and prohibited officially by Brazilian penal code, the word became a synonym for ‘bandit’, ‘thief’ but the capoeiristas did not stop practicing, they move to marginal places and camouflaged as the martial art as dance. Capoeira borrows from African traditional wrestling and blends with song dance and fighting. Now all nationalities can learn the Capoeira martial art dance due to trans-Atlantic African slave trade. Capoeira Angola is a slower movement close to the ground, while Capoeira Regional is fast movement standing up tall and capoeira means ‘short grass’ (Capoeira History, undated)



**Fig.4. Capoeira Martial Art Dance**  
Source: (<https://www.google.com/search?q=capoeira>)



**Fig.5: Rio de Janeiro Carnival**  
Source: (<https://www.news18.com/photogallery/world/brazil-carnival>)

Some of the best carnival festivals amongst others were introduced by African slaves descendants like the world's largest and famous Rio de Janeiro in Brazil (fig.5) which has been running since 1723 (theculturetrip.com., undated).

### **Dance Styles**

African Americans introduced the Cakewalk dance steps in 1891, later the Charleston, Lindy Hop, and the Jitterbug (Brown, 2013). African Americans also introduced pidgin language that became fully developed languages like Creole, common to Louisiana and Gullah, common to Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia (African American Culture, 2020). The input of African descent on the aspect of art expression and development in diaspora art culture cannot be underplayed.

### **III. Conclusion**

The implication of this write up is to redirect our consciousness that despite the negative impact and effect of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, it brought about the development of new forms of visual and performing arts practices to communities which did not know them. These same art forms today are open to various disciplines today with examples being African-American studies which are dedicated to studying what brings these continents together and what left from there to be practiced here and vice-versa. The contributions of African Trans-Atlantic slave descendants in all spheres of life from Arts to the Sciences cannot be underplayed. It is necessary and importance for African leaders and colonizers to formally apologize for the injustice of man to man in the world history to African slave descendants. Some aspects of adapted African development and culture can also be attributed to the positive effects of colonization on Africa. In many ways modernization has changed the face of Africa, positively and negatively in equal measure (Taremba, 2016).