

# Book Review

By Anderson Chebanne

(Les Africains et leurs descendants en Europe avant le XXe siècle  
[Africans and their descendants in Europe before the 20th  
Century]. Conference proceedings: Edited by Dieudonné  
Gnamankou & Yao Modzinou. Published by Maison de l'Afrique à  
Toulouse (MAT), 2008)

This compilation by the Maison de l'Afrique à Toulouse (MAT) of conference proceedings on the *Africans and their descendants in Europe before the 20th Century* is very appealing by its theme and by the topics that it attracted from the contributors. It deals mainly about the history of the "named African individuals and personalities", who made their mark in Europe in the midst of the tragedy of many "unnamed Africans" who toiled for Europeans as slaves. The book's sub-themes are well-sequenced, and all in all there are twenty-two papers excluding the Preliminary Notes (which introduces the theme); the Opening Speech; the Introduction to the Conference (background processes and context); and, a Presentation of Chapters. The edition is arranged in four parts: First Part deals with the "Permanence of the African Presence in Europe". It also deals with African Diaspora themes, history of the African in Europe, and African-European relationships. The Second Part deals with "Actors of the history of Europe" and looks at some prominent Africans who made their mark in the European societies and also in some important events in Europe. The Third Part deals with, "Slavery, Racism and Religion". Part Four presents, "Identity, representation, Documentation", and deals with issues of identity of free and bonded Africans in the Diaspora and the question of their representation in the

European Society. An annex of important documents on slavery is appended. As is the wont of French historical prose writers, the texts are elegantly written and ideas have a certain philosophical and poetic touch. But the subject is momentous and grave for them and for the reader – it is the history of African individuals and personalities during the period of the monstrous slavery. Whichever way and wherever, there can never be an eulogy, a pardon, or a comprise in the narration of this history.

When putting their edition into perspective, the editors remind readers that from time immemorial, when the world had no boundaries except those imposed by geographical features – oceans, mountains and deserts, human populations migrated to all possible and habitable corners of the world. Indeed, Africans have even in prehistory migrated, voluntarily to greener pastures, and it is scientifically established that all the populations of the world have a common ancestry, in Africa. It is for this reason that Africa is even known as the *Cradle of Humanity*. The pseudo-science and the rise of avaricious capitalism has created and worsened the inhumanity among human populations. Next to these heinous crimes perpetrated by Europeans are those slave trade crimes perpetrated by Arabs in Africa, even to this present age. For Europe, the callous forced displacement of Africans for the past 500 years was motivated by sinister capitalist interests that appallingly reduced the Black African people to a commodity and their land to coveted raw materials reservoir. When all is said and done, the argument in this question of African displacement and their presence in foreign lands before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is that nothing shall wipe away this excruciating memory of scandalous slavery, monstrous abuse, grotesque exploitation of African women and men as sex pets in brothels, as efficacious tools for war, as crude comics for entertainment, and all the odious acts of hooliganism perpetrated on the African person. The crude manner of wanton abduction and the inhuman displacement into foreign lands creates a tragic human condition with consequential human history which will blotch those lands and Africa forever.

Of all the peoples of the world, African people's presence abroad their continent did not make them entirely owners of the new lands, except the cases of the West Indies which were relinquished to Black Africans to minimize their presence among the European societies in Europe and the Americas. Even in his granted freedom, after the abolition of formal slavery in Europe, an African has been viewed as a burden for Europe and other continents. Africans became inhabitants of these continents not out of their choice, but at different epochs under the blatant forms of despicable exploitation under deplorable life conditions.

My gripe in this book review is not about the theme and sub-themes of the book – they are scholarly, but perhaps a caution that we are dealing with a delicate history of people whose compatriots were taken as slaves. Certainly, the mentioned

personalities Abraham Petrov, Ivan Hannibal, Peter Schenk, Wilhelm Sambo, Alexander Pushkin, the Duke Alexander of Medicis, Anton Wilhelm Amo, Juan Latino, and many others, were great people, and accomplished great exploits. But this was not for African, but for themselves, during the epoch that their kinsmen were bondmen in slavery. The consequences of slavery are still manifest in the lives of Black Africans in the Diaspora, even in the home continent. Contacts and relationship of Blacks and Europeans in foreign lands and even in Africa within the colonial context of that time were characterized by racial and pejorative attitudes. The intense missionary societies' religious exportation of Christianity and Islam to the African continent did very little to change the way a Black African was viewed by Europeans and Arabs. The de-culturalising religions also minimised the role of Black African languages, and made them strangers in their own land. Even for those that felt they were accepted as citizens; the relationship was condescending and implying some European "White" superiority over the "Black race". The European esteemed his colour noble and that of the Black cursed. In all these historical and social situations, an African even in the best of social ranks was a subaltern if not a contrivance for European exploits. If he was admired, it has the sort that is comparable to pets or cherished tools. Eurocentricism and its definition of beauty became entrenched in the African mentality and conscience, and this has regrettably persisted even to this age. Nothing can therefore allow us to speak decoratively of any aspect of the experiences of Africans in Europe. Europeans came to Africa, plundered and returned to their native lands as conquerors of the native Africans and exploiters of their land and resources – human and natural. Africans even those who went to Europe as "free" made a pitiful contribution which now requires us to glean in the paragraphs of history to bring them to the fore. It must be recalled in passing that even at the time the USA was racing to the moon, Black Afro-Americans were not yet granted full citizen rights to vote – hundred years after the "abolition of slavery". Outward liberties in foreign lands is not what a Black African should be content to pursue; but Africa should deploy its sons and daughters' ingenuity to strive to make the continent "a home, sweet home". It will be when Africa feeds itself, invents technologies, and amasses powerful armies and engages in sophisticated economies, and runs countries with powerful and democratic socio-political institutions that they will be respected and treated as equals. When that happens, Black people's freedom will be complete.

Notwithstanding, the opportune collection of these richly researched and eloquently written histories of individuals and personalities provide an interesting aspect of the presence of Africans and their descendents in Europe. It is a worthwhile reminder, that even in the most heinous and brutal system that humans can viciously afflict others with, they can still be exceptions that humans are capable of

harmoniously accepting each other and cohabiting in peace. Yet these exceptions should not start painting the odious slavery history with a blotting paint. The tragedy was of such magnitudes that all critical pens should continue to expose it for what it was – an evil on the face of the human world. As time goes by and we as Africans are transported far from the catastrophic era of slavery, we should in pursuing pardon, not seek to disregard all these tribulations in our history.

I may just as an aside regret that these proceedings, as yet, have no English translation, which would, to a great extent, expand the horizons of this important social and historical documentation of the African people in Africa and in all countries of the world. The corollary of publishing in more international languages cannot be under-estimated. It does not just make good sense in terms of the book market, but importantly, it facilitates the engagements of academics to critically analyse the issues the book raises. The history of Africans in Europe before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has all the symbolism and significance for Africans. They should know this history, and understand the pains that Africans suffered under the yoke of slavery, and subsequently under the subjugation of colonialism. The exceptions of marriages, civil service and scholarship do not redeem the opprobrium afflicted by Europe on the African. Whether they were free or enslaved, Africans were racially degraded, dehumanized, and dispersed. Africans either directly taken to Europe or their descendents or mixed with Europeans have had social and political exploits in many countries of Europe. And this occurred under some very exceptional and extraordinary circumstances at the height of European enslavement of Africans.

This historical compilation by the Maison de l'Afrique à Toulouse conference (MAT) on the *Africans and their descendants in Europe before the 20th Century* pertinently tackles the themes of the permanence of the African presence in Europe; the actors of the history of Europe; the slavery, racism and religion; and the identity, representation, and documentation of African individuals and personalities in Europe before the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These illustrious themes are intellectually active in the main historical accounts of the European ghastly deeds in Africa. The initiative of the Maison de l'Afrique à Toulouse conference (MAT) on the *Africans and their descendants in Europe before the 20th Century* is praiseworthy in that it contributes another dimension in the history of African, perhaps seen from different vantage points, but a worthwhile documentation nonetheless. This edition will therefore provide a vivid yet necessary critical reading of the social history of the slave trade period. It is perhaps good as an appendix to the history of slavery in Europe, because it should not be used to mitigate the opprobrium afflicted on Africans by Europeans, or to rehabilitate the curse of Europe with regards to the evils of slavery, which indeed will remain a dominant aspect of any history chronicling the Afro-Europe relationships before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For researchers and students in history and

other social scientists in diverse disciplines in African society, this book raises many interrogations which should provide sustained socio-historical debates here in Africa and in the African Diaspora.