

## “The Sons of Africa” in London

The “Sons of Africa” in London were a former slaves’ intellectual liberationist group. Three of them were West Africans who wrote books about their experiences, which were published in England. The “Letters of Ignatius Sancho”<sup>1</sup> (1729- 80) were published by Joseph Jekyll in 1782. Sancho had been born on a slave ship, which was going to the Spanish West Indies. Both his parents were on that ship where his mother died short after his birth and his father-committed suicide. When Sancho was only two years old, he was taken to England to be a servant for two sisters. In 1773, he got the freedom to marry and start a small grocery store. He recommended reading the Bible and believed that blessing follows virtue. In his letter to novelist Laurence Sterne, he asked him to support the anti-slavery campaign. Sancho composed music, appeared on the stage, and entertained many famous figures of literary and artistic in London.<sup>2</sup> He became the first African to vote in a British election and he wrote a large number of letters, which were collected and published two years after his death. In his time, he was thought of being “the extraordinary Negro”, and to eighteenth century opponents of the slave trade, he became a symbol of the humanity of Africans. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano<sup>3</sup> was born around 1757 in a Fante village. He was kidnapped by Africans around 1770 and sold to Europeans who transported him to the British West Indies. Taken to England two years later, he became the servant of the painters Richard and Maria Conway who introduced him to prominent people such as William Blake. In 1787, Cugoano paid for the printing of his own “Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species”. Cugoano argued that since God created all races, none is inferior. Further, he noted that though Christianity advocates the duty to help fellow humans, it was abused in his time to “dupe” innocent natives.<sup>4</sup> He held that those enslaving humans could not be true Christians. He lamented the villainy of chieftains who caused the common people to suffer because of their wars and feuds. He wrote that any robbery is wrong, but stealing people is the worst. Olaudah Equiano<sup>5</sup> (c. 1745- 1797) wrote that he was a Ibo from the Niger region and that when he was twelve years old, he had been abducted and taken to America. He served in the British navy during the Seven Years War. By trading and saving, Equiano bought his freedom from a sea captain in 1766. His interesting “Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano” was published in London in 1789. During the middle passage, he remembered the slaves' agonies, but he also observed a white sailor who was flogged to death and dumped overboard. He blamed European traders for causing many tribal wars between Africans. He was proud that the Ibos were hardy and intelligent with integrity and zeal. That same year, nine “Sons of Africa” signed a letter, published in “The Diary” newspaper, which

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<sup>1</sup> Markman, Ellis: *The Politics of Sensibility- Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*; p. 57

<sup>2</sup> Walvin, James: *Ignatius Sancho- The Man and His Times* in King, Reyahn: *Ignatius Sancho- an African Man of Letters*; p. 96

<sup>3</sup> Hochschild, Adam: *Bury the Chains- The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*; p. 127

<sup>4</sup> Cugoano, Quobna Ottobah: *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*; p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Gerzina, Gretchen: *Black England- Life Before Emancipation*; p. 172

stated “thanks to God the nation at large is awakened to a sense of our sufferings, except the Oran Otang philosophers” (the pro-slavery supporters). They highlighted the benefits of trading with Africa in goods instead of human beings. John Wesley (1703- 1791) liked his narrative so much that he read it, often. Shortly before his death, Wesley discussed a passage of the book about slavery in his last letter to William Wilberforce.<sup>6</sup> Many people who opposed slavery, black or white, were closely connected in their work for the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>7</sup> John Newton, the song writer of “Amazing grace”, had not only been captain of a slavery ship, but had even been a slave as a young man to an African woman called Princes Peye in Sierra Leone, himself. An English West Africa slave dealer whose name was Amos Crowe gave him to her as a gift servant.<sup>8</sup> When he turned old, Newton was recommended to be priest of the Anglican Parish Church in Olney, England. He used the authority entrusted to him to write important insider reports, which provided the anti-slavery campaigners with powerful material evidence.<sup>9</sup>

### **Humanitarian efforts in Europe and America**

In the late eighteenth century, attempts that are more serious were made to put a stop to slave trade. Groups were organized in America and Europe to persuade governments to abolish it. The members of such groups were known as “humanitarians”. They included Granville Sharp, a lawyer who fought for the rights of slaves in the courts of England, and Thomas Clarkson<sup>10</sup>, a very determined man, who did more than anyone else to win the support of the British public. William Wilberforce was a member of the British Parliament who took charge of persuading the government to pass a bill making the trade illegal. This was accomplished early in 1807. In France, the opponents were the same people who had carried out the French Revolution, based on the idea that all men are equal and have a right to be free. Denmark was the first European country to tell its citizens to give up the slave trade in 1802, but not owning slaves. The Danish West Indian colonies needed only a couple of thousand slaves every year, and the government thought it better to carry enough female slaves to the plantations so that the population would increase by natural means.<sup>11</sup> Over a period of nearly twenty years, there followed similar abolition laws in the United America, Sweden, Holland, France and Brazil. Portugal and Spain, at first, refused to pass legislation, but at least in 1815 and 1817, they agreed to restrict the slave trade to the area south of the Equator. Once laws had been passed by so many nations, it became illegal to carry on slave trading. The problem was how to put the laws into practice. During this period, Britain was the only state, which made serious effort to stop the ships. They

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<sup>6</sup> Hyde, A.B.: *The Story of Methodism throughout the World*; p. 237

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, Caryl: *Director's Forward* in King, Reyahn: *Ignatius Sancho- an African Man of Letters*; p. 12

<sup>8</sup> Newton, John: *Thoughts upon the Slave Trade*; p. 24

<sup>9</sup> Turner, Steve: *Amazing Grace*; pp. 94ff

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; p. 173

<sup>11</sup> Ulf-Møller, Paul: *Torstensson-krigen* in *Gads Historieleksikon*, 3rd Ed.; pp. 658.659

used their navy to patrol at the coast of West Africa. When a ship was seized off, they took the Africans on board to bring them to Sierra Leone where they were given their freedom.

### **A new birth of freedom for all Americans**

In America, too, many white people tried to cope with the burden of racism by participating in black and white coalitions. Nevertheless, as anywhere else, they had to face difficulties. The abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century, led by middle-class whites, proved to be so paternalistic that black activists, like Sojourner Truth<sup>12</sup> (1798- 1883), Frederick Douglass<sup>13</sup> (1817- 1895), Harriet Tubman<sup>14</sup> (1822- 1913), and Dr. James W.C. Pennington<sup>15</sup> (1809- 1870) were forced to withdraw for lack of participation in the decision making process. Dr. Pennington's influence reached Europe. He wrote "The Origin and History of the Coloured People" in 1841, which then was called the "first history of African Americans", as well as an autobiographic slave narrative in 1850, "The Fugitive Blacksmith". In 1849, the University of Heidelberg awarded him an honorary doctorate of divinity. This came because the theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Carové, who was a democratic activist and a leader in the international peace movement, was very impressed by Pennington and his message. He saw potential in him to not only help his cause, but also further the democratic liberal movement in Germany. The first breakthrough of blacks organizing themselves in America was the black mass movement led by Marcus Garvey from Jamaica. His influence motivated more separate black institutions like the NAACP and the Urban League. Martin Luther King Jr. brought the all-black coalition with sympathetic whites who, this time, were not involved in leadership roles. Nevertheless, the black and white coalition, during particular historical periods, did contribute toward a creeping progress, laying the foundation of the "Emancipation Proclamation" and other milestones in the black man's search for equality. During the civil rights movement of the 1950ies and 1960ies, black churches were a deep reservoir of a drive for equality that embodied the purest principles of the American Constitution. Martin Luther King Jr. was a symbol of this black Christian Community. There would have been no civil rights in the United States without them. Further, it became evident to many that black churches were calling on Americans to live up to their true identity. This was a new birth of freedom for all Americans.

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard, Jacqueline: *Journey Toward Freedom- The Story of Sojourner Truth*; p. 34

<sup>13</sup> Douglass, Frederick: *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*; pp. 205ff

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Larson, Kate: *Bound for the Promised Land- Harriet Tubman- Portrait of an American Hero*; pp. 311ff

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Herman E.: *James W.C. Pennington- African American Churchman and Abolitionist*; p. 184