



# Influence of the Sons of Africa on the lives of Blacks in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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Humanities 3900

History ISP

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When analyzing the abolition of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade in England, Black abolitionists are overshadowed by their white allies when mentioning their contribution. This paper will decipher the impact that the Sons of Africa had on Blacks from the late 1700s to the early 1800s. The British Empire had multiple colonies in the Americas where slaves endured an immense amount of torture. Meanwhile, in England, society was improving through innovative ideas regarding society, religion, philosophy, and slavery as Englishmen entered the Enlightenment period. Abolitionist worked in parliament and churches to encourage pro-slavery thinkers and advocates that slavery was immoral. The public would not have been able to change their way of thinking and sympathize for slaves if it were not for the Black abolitionists who also fought for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. Free previously enslaved Africans used their literary skills to educate the public about the terrors of slavery, evoking emotion, sympathy, and the desire for change from their audience. Mary Prince, a woman, born into slavery in Brackish Pond, Bermuda in 1788, was the first Black female to publish a book in England.<sup>1</sup> Her autobiography *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* (1831) discussed the suffering of her brutal master in Antigua, Bermuda, and Turks Island. This book was very significant because it demonstrated that there was still slavery in the Caribbean after the 1807 Act of Parliament established to end the slave trade. This account reawakened the people of England to the horrors continuing in the Caribbean Islands and created a groundswell of support for them to push towards the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

There is a flaw in our historical memory that disables us from recognizing Black abolitionists for risking their lives by actively participating in the abolition of slavery. Many of the

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<sup>1</sup> Prince, Mary, and Moira Ferguson. *The History of Mary Prince: a West Indian Slave*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

documents that black abolitionists produced did not survive through history, making the knowledge about these abolitionists and their contribution to the overall abolition of slavery unknown. Through surviving stories, their contributions can be analyzed by letters, or documents where their white colleagues mentioned them during their effort to abolish slavery. Under the initial leadership of Olaudah Equiano, a group of Black abolitionists living in London, whom will be discussed later, formed the Sons of Africa in 1785 and worked alongside other abolitionists to emancipate slaves in British colonies.<sup>2</sup> They are very significant figures in Black history, made a significant impact on England as the drivers for the abolition of slavery, and impacted the lives of many Blacks as they abolished slavery and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. To evaluate the impact that the Sons of Africa made on Blacks living in England, it is critical to know who they are, what their main objective was, how successful they were in completing their task, and why they were significant.

### Who were the Sons of Africa?

In the late 1700s, there were very few Black abolitionists, but they realized that their mission to abolish slavery and the Atlantic slave trade would be far more successful if they worked together. These abolitionists formed the group 'The Sons of Africa' in 1785, a group of educated freed slaves who congregated in London and worked to end the slave trade and abolish slavery in the British colonies.<sup>3</sup> The group was made up of full time and part time activists including Jasper Goree, George Robert Mandeville, James Bailey, William Stevens, Joseph Almaze, Boughwa Gegansmel (also known as Jasper George), Thomas Oxford, John Adams, George Wallace, Cojoh Ammere (also known as George Williams), Thomas Cooper, Thomas Carlisle, Jorge Dent, Daniel

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<sup>2</sup> Fryer, Peter. *Staying Power - the History of Black People in Britain*. Pluto Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England: Life Before Emancipation*, London: Allison and Busby, 1999, p.172.

Christopher, John Christopher, James Foster, John Scott, and Thomas Jones.<sup>4</sup> “*The Sons of Africa were just as energetic as white abolitionist... the records of their activities are far from complete and much about them remains unknown.*”<sup>5</sup> Because there is not much information available on each of the members and the group as a whole, there is a lack in background information for all of the members except for the organization leaders - Equiano and Cugoano.

The group was led by Olaudah Equiano, who also goes by the name “Gustavas Vassa”.<sup>6</sup> He was born in 1745 in Anambra State (present day Nigeria) and sold to Captain Pascal, a naval captain, for 40 pounds at the age of 11. The Guerin family<sup>7</sup> taught him arithmetic and how to read and write, and Pascal taught him how to sail and trade. He purchased his freedom and travelled around the sea before starting his own plantation with one of his peers off the coast of Central America. After working with Dr. Charles Irving to desalinate water, he sailed to London and met Granville Sharp, established the ‘Sons of Africa’, and worked as an abolitionist to end slavery and the slave trade in England. He was a jack of all trades: the writer, merchant, explorer, seafarer, campaigner, public speaker, and abolitionist. Ottobah Cugoano also known as “John Stuart” was born in Ajumako, Ghana and sold to slavery at age 13 in Grenada.<sup>8</sup> Taught to read and write by Englishmen who purchased him, ignited to an interest in British political figures. This interest made him become an abolitionist and natural rights philosopher and joined the Sons of Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> Wahab, Amar, and Cecily Jones. *Free at Last? Reflections on Freedom and the Abolition of the British Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. Pg.155

<sup>5</sup> OLUSOGA, DAVID. *BLACK AND BRITISH: a Forgotten History*. PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2018. Pg. 212

<sup>6</sup> Equiano, Olaudah, and Joanna Brooks. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Lakeside Press, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Relatives of Captain Pascale that lived Blackheath in London

<sup>8</sup> Bagues, Anthony. *Black Heretics, Black Prophets Radical Political Intellectuals*. Taylor and Francis, 2015. Pg. 25 - 46

The Sons of Africa had very strong ties with the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, a British abolitionist group of twelve wealthy white male politicians and educators formed on May 22, 1787 whom worked to educate the public about the terrors of slavery and the Middle Passage.<sup>9</sup> The Sons of Africa became an important channel of information to abolitionist in Parliament and significant societal members to convey their points of ant-slavery.<sup>10</sup> They maintained discrete meetings in the city of London out of fear for retaliation from their activism. In these meetings, they revised one another's work and worked individually to provide testimonies of their experience of the slave trade and slavery in the Americas.<sup>11</sup>

### What did the Sons of Africa do?

The Sons of Africa were able to convey their messages to the public and elites in various ways to help them accomplish their goals. All of them learned how to read and write which opened the door for them to articulate lectures and write essays, books, and letters. Writing books was an effective way for literate Blacks to tell their story of their hardships and suffering, forcing elites to comprehend the horrible treatment that slaves went through during the Middle Passage and in the American British colonies. Olaudah Equiano published his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in 1789 which described his enslavement with sensory details and vivid descriptions, painting an image of the brutalities of slavery and his travels to the

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<sup>9</sup> The twelve founding members are John Barton (1755–1789); William Dillwyn (1743–1824); George Harrison (1747–1827); Samuel Hoare Jr (1751–1825); Joseph Hooper (1732–1789); John Lloyd; Joseph Woods Sr (1738–1812); James Phillips (1745–1799); Thomas Clarkson; Granville Sharp ; Philip Sansom, and Richard Phillips.

<sup>10</sup> Leo D'Anjou (1996). *Social Movements and Cultural Change: The First Abolition Campaign*. Aldine de Gruyter. p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Fryer, Peter. *Staying Power - the History of Black People in Britain*. Pluto Press, 2010. Pg. 108

West Indies. His book was such a huge success that it became a bestseller, had nine editions and was translated into various languages.

Ottobah Cugoano was the first African to publicly demand the emancipation of all slaves and the abolition of the slave trade in his autobiography '*Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*' (1787). In his book that Equiano helped him produce, he also refutes the arguments that support the justification for why slavery should continue and declared that slaves had the natural right and "moral duty" to nonviolently demonstrate opposition to their masters by stating "if any man should buy another man... and compel him to his service without any agreement of that man... it is the duty of the man who is robbed in that manner to get out of the hands of his enslaver."<sup>12</sup> Other black abolitionist told their stories of slavery and the middle passage with the intentions that they would obtain respect and sympathy from the disgusting horrors they endured, but Cugoano also attacked enslavement and colonial conquest directly. That was a very bold act that all Blacks thought and wanted but no Black person ever publicly announced that enslavement should be abolished out of fear of retaliation and the lack of faith that their voice would be heard. Cugoano made sure that his voice was heard by sending copies of his book to King George III, Edmund Burke, and other politicians to express his disapproval of slavery and fight for its abolition.

The Sons of Africa frequently wrote letters and sent copies of their books to the royal family, aristocrats, and other leading politicians as a way of constantly reminding them the inhumane terrors of slavery persuading them to do something about it because they have the power to make conditions better for slaves.<sup>13</sup> Newspapers were available to everyone, and strategically

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<sup>12</sup> Cugoano, Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pg. 115

<sup>13</sup> Boggles, Anthony. *Black Heretics, Black Prophets Radical Political Intellectuals*. Taylor and Francis, 2015.

written so that all socioeconomic groups could comprehend information. At the Sons of Africa meetings, they signed and reviewed statements that were published in Diary newspaper in 1789, and other newspapers from 1797-1788. Cugoano sent letters to newspapers requesting that they write a section condemning slavery as well as writing articles for them to include. This was a very effective way for the Sons of Africa to get their message to the public who could not read their books, or were unaware of the issue, stirring conversation and feelings of disgust with the treatments and urgency to abolish slavery.

On March 21, 1788, Olaudah Equiano present the Queen of England, King George III's wife Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, with a petition on behalf of the Sons of Africa for the price of 18 pounds, which was more than any freed African could afford at the time. Equiano decided that it was in the groups best interest to write the letter to the queen because he knew that King George III and his son were very hostile towards abolition. Ottobah Cugoano, Jasper Goree, and Thomas Oxford assisted him in the construction of this letter, but Equiano used the profits from his book *The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano* to pay for sending the petition. In the letter, Equiano states:

*The oppression and cruelty exercised to the unhappy negroes there, have at length reached the British legislature, and they are now deliberating on its redress; even several persons of property in slaves in the West Indies, have petitioned Parliament against its continuance, sensible that it is as impolitic as it is unjust—and what is inhuman must ever be unwise... more extended the misery is, the greater claim it has to your Majesty's compassion, and the greater must be your Majesty's pleasure in administering to its*



*relief...A period may now be put to their misery; and that they may be raised from the condition of brutes, to which they are at present degraded, to the rights and situation of freemen, and admitted to partake of the blessings of your Majesty's happy government.*<sup>14</sup>

In this letter from the Sons of Africa, they inform the queen that reformation is already in progress for the abolition of slavery, but they would greatly appreciate if she could help push the process by influencing her royal consort. It was a major accomplishment for the Sons of Africa to be able to contact the queen directly, and for her to read and respond to their request. Equiano mentioned that the letter “was received most graciously by her Majesty” and she supports his conquest abolish slavery and the slave trade. Not enough evidence has been archived to provide documents that outline the queen’s response or the extent of her influence on the abolition of slavery.

Both as individuals and as a group, the Sons of Africa and as a group, the Sons of Africa travelled around Europe advertising their books and giving lectures about the horrors of slavery. Equiano toured through Ireland, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Cambridge, Bath, Devizes, Durham, Hull, and Scotland promoting his book and giving speeches describing his experience and the cruelty of the Slave Trade. His lectures sought to persuade the public to turn against slavery and created awareness about the horrible impact that slave trading made causing more people to support the abolition of slavery or become an abolitionist themselves. The Sons of Africa also pushed efforts to educate the Black poor in London by having an apprenticeship when reading, writing, and giving speeches.<sup>15</sup> They would train and educate one Black person to go out and educate others. The use of nonviolent tactics by the Sons of Africa to convey their ideas

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<sup>14</sup> Equiano, Olaudah, and Joanna Brooks. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Lakeside Press, 2004. Pg. 231-232

<sup>15</sup> Bogues, Anthony. *Black Heretics, Black Prophets Radical Political Intellectuals*. Taylor and Francis, 2015.

and request to the publics and elites demonstrated their intellect, proved that Blacks can achieve a higher level than enslavement, understanding of Christian morality, and the worthiness of Black people's call upon a common human dignity.

## What was the outcome?

Many Blacks sought refuge and hopes for freedom in England. Although all members of the Sons of Africa were slaves, they obtained their freedom in London and received support from politicians to assist them in abolishing slavery and the slave trade. The enlightenment period benefited blacks in a large way because during that time, politicians and elites opened their minds to the possibility of equality and more rights for women, society, and Blacks. Many enlightenment thinkers soon became abolitionist once they realized the cruelty of slavery and the slave trade, and desired to help enslaved Africans and Black abolitionist in whatever way they could.

With the support from abolitionist colleagues like Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, the Sons of Africa were able to receive support in improving the lives for Blacks in England, in terms of legislation and social justice. On December 15, 1787, The Sons of Africa wrote a letter to thank Sharp for his hard work as an abolitionist. They stated: "We are peculiarly and greatly indebted to you, for the many good and friendly services that you have done towards us, and which are now out of our power to enumerate."<sup>16</sup> At the end of the letter, twelve of the members signed their names. This letter exemplifies the gratitude and appreciation that the Sons of Africa had for their white colleagues who assisted them in the abolishment of slavery, the slave trade, and keeping endangered freed and enslaved Blacks safe. Many blacks gained the opportunity to a fair trial in their fight for freedom, prove that they were free, avail themselves of legal means of defense if

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<sup>16</sup> Equiano, Olaudah, and Joanna Brooks. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano: The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. Lakeside Press, 2004. Pg. 328

they were sued by a white man. In the case of Henry Demane, a free Black man who was kidnapped and nearly sent to the West Indies as a slave, Cugoano helped him greatly by reporting the kidnapping to Granville Sharp. He was able to testify for him as a free man and get him off the ship before it sailed to the West Indies. Mary Price had two libel actions because of her book. She was sued by her previous owner, John Wood, for damaging the character of his family name and she sued his lawyers James MacQueen and James Curtin. Price won both trials.

Granville Sharp, an early English campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade and social injustice, was informed about the Zong massacre by Olaudah Equiano in 1783.<sup>17</sup> On November 29, 1781, the *Zong*, an overloaded British slave ship sailing from the coast of Africa to Black River, Jamaica, got stuck in the mid-Atlantic Ocean doldrums. As captives and some crew began to get sick and die from disease and malnourishment, Captain Luke Collingwood ordered his crew to mercilessly throw living Africans overboard to their deaths. This criminal act was then compounded by fraud, as Collingwood falsified the water rationing records and requested that the ship's insurance carrier pay to recover the cost of what amounted to 133 murdered Africans, which he called a property loss.<sup>18</sup> The massacre was tried in London as litigations against the insurance company for not repaying them for their "lost" slaves for insurance claims. Sharp sought after the crew to be prosecuted for murder. The lengthy court case became prominent in the newspapers as it described the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, stimulated the abolitionist movement, and incentive to regulate conditions on slave ships.

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<sup>17</sup> Brennan, Fernne. *Race Rights Reparations. Institutional Racism and the Law*. Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2017. Pg. 17

<sup>18</sup> Lovejoy (2006), pp.337, 344.

In 1788, Olaudah Equiano commissioned and delegated the House of Commons to support William Dolben's bill to improve slave ship conditions by creating a limit for the number of enslaved Africans could be transported on the ship. Suzanne Schwarz, a professor at the University of Worcester and the author of *Slave Captain: The Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade* (1995), pointed out: "*The Dolben Act specified that the master of a slave ship should have served on one previous voyage in that capacity, as chief mate or surgeon during two whole previous voyages or as chief or other mate in three voyages.... Ships could carry five slaves for every three tons burthen up to 201 tons max, and one slave for each remaining ton... The crew should be paid a bonus if less than 3% of the slaves died on the voyage.*"<sup>19</sup>

The British Empire officially abolished slavery on August 1, 1838 after protests were widespread in the Caribbean and abolitionist fought the British slavery and slave trade system. The freed slaves didn't receive anything for their torment, but the slave owners received 20 pounds in compensation.

### Why are the Sons of Africa significant in history?

The Sons of Africa had some of the most inspirational and figures in British history, especially for Afro-English people. They were the first people to produce works of literature condemning slavery and telling of their horrific experiences. This not only allowed elites and politicians to attempt to comprehend the inhumanity of slavery and persuade them to help abolish it, it also inspired more freed slaves to come forward about the hardships they endured while enslaved because their voices want to be heard. The Sons of Africa were very courageous for speaking negatively of their masters and going into pro-slavery areas full of people who owned

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<sup>19</sup> Schwarz, Suzanne. *Slave Captain: the Career of James Irving in the Liverpool Slave Trade*. Liverpool University Press, 2008.

plantations condemning slavery and convincing them to abolish it. Any of these members could have been assassinated for attempting to abolish slavery. Equiano understood these dangers and continued to promote his book and his reasoning that slavery should be abolished as he toured in Liverpool, Britain's permanent slave trading port and pro-slave trade corporation. Gilbert Wakefield supported Equiano and went to Liverpool to preach against the slave trade during his sermon that "championed the equality of mankind in the eyes of God". Although the sermon offended multiple congregation members, the slave owners who attended left rethinking how they operate their plantations.

The Sons of Africa were thought of very highly and well respected by their abolitionist colleagues. Thomas Clarkson, an abolitionist that formed the Committee for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade<sup>20</sup>, recommended Olaudah Equiano's book to others for purchase and wrote introductions for him as he toured giving speeches. In an intro written in 1789 for Equiano's visit to Camden, he writes "Liberty of introducing... a very honest, ingenious, and industrious African... Would you be so good as to recommend the Sale of a few and you will confer a favour on your already obliged and obedient".<sup>21</sup> For Thomas to use kind and powerful adjectives to describe an Afro-English man during this time is astounding because Black people were still looked at as lesser of a man than whites. Thomas is respectfully considering Equiano a prominent man as well as promoting his book for him, showing a social shift in the Enlightenment period. They also gained respect from politicians and the public. People paid to attend lectures to learn more about the cruelty of slavery and what they could do to help end it. The Sons of Africa were

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<sup>20</sup> A committee that collected information that helped to persuade the members of Parliament and the public to abolish slavery.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, Thomas. "Letter from Thomas Clarkson." Received by Sir, 9 July 1789.

also allowed to send letters and their books to Parliament and the king. For information to go through the political ladder that high, it must be significant information from credible individuals.

## Conclusion

Although the Sons of Africa were not responsible for the complete abolition of slavery by the Slave Trade Act of 1807 in the British Empire colonies, they did impact the lives of Afro-Britains in multiple ways and became significant figures in Black history. The Sons of Africa is one Black abolitionist organization out of many individual Black abolitionist who worked extremely hard and risked their lives to end slavery and the slave trade for British colonies. Many of their activism were not completed, documents were not archived, and a lot is unknown about many Black abolitionist. Because they were overshadowed by their white counterparts and did not solely pass any of the bills to end slavery and the slave trade their push towards the abolition of slavery was not seen as significant enough to include in most of the history viewed today. Africans were looked down upon as illiterate and had no power, so for them to receive respect from the public and purchases for their books demonstrates how important the Sons of Africa were. They inspired free Blacks who were previously enslaved to testify against slavery by documenting the hardships they endured, allowing their voice to be heard. Blacks in England benefitted greatly from the hard works of the Sons of Africa. If it were not for the contribution of the Sons of Africa and other Black abolitionist, slavery could have taken much longer to abolish. Because these people produced books and articles spreading the terrors of slavery across Europe and preached about anti-slavery, slaves were emancipated in 1838, and for that, Black abolitionist should receive more respect and representation in our historical memory.

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