

[Alinta Sara](#) [1]

Wednesday, July 24, 2013 - 03:00



In 2011 while conducting research on the Yoruba legacy in Cuba, I became interested in the return movement of Afro-Cubans and Afro-Brazilians who were released and had to return to their native homeland in Africa. It is estimated that some 5 million slaves were transported from the Bight of Benin to Brazil between 1500 and 1850. Amongst them were manumitted slaves who, following the last slave's rebellion in Bahia in 1835 returned to West Africa. The majority of these settled in the coast. This movement of return invites us to consider the interdependence between Africa and the Diaspora. The Trans-Atlantic world has been the subject of various studies; typically the focus of such studies has been on African legacy in the Americas. The Afro-Brazilian return movement to West Africa is part of this transnational dimension. In West Africa, the Afro-Brazilian returnees were known as the Agudas or Tabom in Ghana. There they built a new identity by asserting their Brazilian heritage. From 1835 to 1950, Afro-Brazilian architecture was a popular genre (Vlach: 1985; Kowalski: 2001; Sinou: 2011). However, decolonisation and the subsequent adoption of new modern architectural styles generated a continued decline in Afro-Brazilian houses. As a result, today many of these houses are in a state of disrepair. How does this atypical architectural genre relate to the memory, the history and the society of the coastal towns in the Bight of Benin?

FROM BRAZIL TO AFRICA

The French photographer and ethnographer Pierre Verger was the first to investigate the flows between Africa and the Diaspora. He designates four cycles in the Atlantic slave trade. The fourth cycle corresponds to the return of the Afro-Brazilians slave to West Africa. From 1770 to 1850 a considerable number of slaves were brought to Brazil and Cuba in part due to the collapse of the Oyo Empire. Moreover with the Haitian revolution Brazil and Cuba became the main point for sugar cane economy. Upon arriving in Northern Brazil they disembarked in Bahia. If sent in plantations, they mostly stayed in towns. There, they worked as domestic servants or *ecravos de ganhos* (earning slaves). This signifies that they were able to earn money from trade or as merchants. Another important dimension of slavery in Brazil was the existence of freed slaves through manumission. Slaves could buy their freedom by saving their earning or after their master death. Therefore there was the existence of a freed slave's community. However, the freed slaves were regarded with suspicion and they often faced discrimination. The return of freed slaves started earlier than the 19th century. Nevertheless, the Male revolt in 1835, the culmination of a number of slave uprisings, was a key turning point in this trend. The Male were Muslim slaves, mostly of Yoruba origin, who decided to rebel against their masters. As a consequence, the Bahian authorities deported many slaves back to Africa and a considerable number of slaves went back to the Bight of Benin, settling mainly in the Yoruba speaking regions from where they mostly came. The movement of return of Afro-Brazilian slaves is different from that of the freed Afro-Americans who settled in Liberia, as Afro-Brazilians returned to their cultural areas of origin. (Yai: 2001).

THE AGUDA COMMUNITY

In West Africa they were known as Tabom or Aguda. The Aguda community constituted a heterogeneous community. Some went back to their village of origin but mainly they settled in the coastal towns that offered greater opportunities. In cities such as Lagos, Ouidah and Porto Novo they took part to trading opportunities. Such figures as Chacha de Souza, Domingo Martinez participated in the establishment of the Brazilian communities. They became traders and one of the ambiguous aspects of this community is that they themselves took part to the slave trade. Domingos Martinez was initially prominent in the slave trade in Lagos but later established himself at Porto-Novo. Joaquim Almeida, an ex-Brazilian slave originally from Mahi, North Dahomey, spent several years as slave merchant before settling in in Agoué in the West of Ouidah (Law:2001) Therefore from 1835 the Afro-Brazilians settled in cities such as Lagos, Ouidah, Porto-Novo and had an impact on the architectural landscape of those cities.

There are several factors that explained the emergence of this new architectural style. First, amongst the Afro-Brazilians returnees a considerable were artisans .In 1897 in Lagos, there were 96 males registered with 6 cabinets makers, 11 bricklayers and builders, builders and master builders, 9 tailors and 21 carpenters, 24 traders 17 clerks. 23 per cent of the Afro-Brazilian populations were carpenters. Carpentry and bricklaying remain the main occupation of some of the Brazilian returnees. Some masons and carpenters such as Francisco Nobre that built the Holy Cross church in Lagos and the carpenter, Senhor Joa Baptist da Costa, built the Shitta Mosque in Lagos. Further, Afro-Brazilian children were trained as apprentices, who spread out across the country and favoured the florescence of the Afro-Brazilian style (Da Cunha: 1985). Moreover the Afro-Brazilian also constituted a sign of prestige. The Afro Brazilian built houses not only for themselves but for other members of the African elite such the Saros.

THE ARCHITECTURE

The Afro-Brazilian community forged an identity for themselves in West Africa by asserting their Brazilian heritage. As their ties with their families were lost, they affirmed their identity through differences such as the Portuguese language, festivities, religion and architecture. It is clear that Afro-Brazilian architecture had an impact on the coastal towns (Coquery- Vidrovitch: 2005).Thus, the architectural style encapsulates the historical and social changes of the Bight of Benin.

To begin, the Afro-Brazilian architecture inspired by the Brazilian baroque architecture and therefore by Portuguese Brazilian architecture offered a new conception of space. Indeed it differs from the indigenous architecture. For instance the Yoruba compound with its series of courtyards reflected the hierarchal organisation of the Yoruba society. Conversely, the Afro- Brazilian houses enable more privacy. Therefore it provided a new residential pattern. Finally, The Brazilian house was a sign of prestige for the new elite as it provided a way of being ostentatious, proud and modern that was independent from the colonial dictates.

Although this new architectural style was based on Brazilian Baroque architecture, the style of the house varied along the coast and was the subject to change. Several scholars have tried to classify and defines the architecture. Kowalski's analysis (2001) enables us to consider the influences of Brazilian architecture in towns such as Ouidah, Lagos and Porto-Novo. It demonstrates that the coastal towns were a place of exchange with the hinterland and the Atlantic. For instance, The Water house and the Campos House in Lagos are characteristic of the 19th century. Both reflect the commercial links between the Slave Coast and Brazil (Kowalski 2001:2006).The Water house owned by Esan da Rocha is one of the finest example.Esan Da Rocha who was sent as a slave when he was 8 years old, later came back to Lagos at 30 years old .His dream was to produce a replica of his house in Bahia. The name of the house comes from the fact that it was the only house available with drinking water. Da Rocha became wealthy by selling drinking water.

In a similar fashion to the Bahian house, those houses are characterised by frieze on the windows, pilasters, fine decorations and a particular attention made to the capital. A second style of houses reflects the link between Lagos and the hinterland and was prevalent in the 20th century. These houses are mostly represented in Lagos and Bagdary. This style implements features from the

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Yoruba speaking areas (Kowalski: 2001). Finally some houses are influenced by European stylistic elements. The Ajavon house in Ouidah is one example. The facade of the house and the decoration replicate that of French theatre. The house belonged to the Ajavon a close friend of the Chacha Da Souza that possessed several properties in Ouidah. It attests of the colonial presence as well as commercial exchange with Europe.

Moreover the Aguda communities participated in the diffusion of Christianity and Islam. In fact Afro-Brazilians were perceived as torch bearer of Christianity and Islam. Both Catholic and Muslims mason h helped built the first mosques and churches. The Holy Cross church in Lagos was built in 1878 by renowned mason and carpenter Francisco Nobre and Balthazar do Reis. Similarly, Afro Brazilian mosques were influenced by Brazilian churches. The Central Mosque in Lagos, the Shitta Bey Mosque and the Great Mosque of Porto Novo are examples of the Brazilian influences. The facade of those mosques recalls the Bahian churches. The masons used polychromic and vegetal motifs. The Afro Brazilian architecture enables us to reconstitute the society of the Bight of Benin and to identify the economic actors in the coastal towns such as the Brazilians and their descendants. It constitutes an important source of information to identify the names of the prestigious family such as Da Rocha in Lagos. It reflects the incorporation into elite society and their contribution to wider cultural exchange. Moreover through reading the architecture reveals the importance of trade routes.

AFRO-BRAZILIAN IN THE PRESENT DAY?

If the Afro-Brazilian house was a symbol of prestige in the past, contemporary developments would suggest it is now a neglected heritage. This demonstrates the difficulty of cultural heritage and conservation in West Africa. In Nigeria, although recognised as important in terms of aesthetic and historical value, most of the Afro- Brazilian houses are in a state of disrepair and suffer from government neglect. The necessity for conservation and the salience of cultural heritage is mainly advocated by architects. A sad reflection of this neglect is the Branco house that was pulled down in 1955, the only trace left of it is a water colour painting in Richard-Vaughan's "Building Lagos". Moreover with the rapid growth of Lagos, modern buildings are favoured.

However, in the Republic of Benin there are more initiatives to preserve the Afro-Brazilian heritage. The houses benefit from initiatives funded by global organisations such as UNESCO whose Slave Trade Route project is part of the global discourse on the memory of slavery. Similarly the EPA (the School of African Heritage) recently organised an exhibition advocating the contribution of the Aguda community to the Atlantic world. However such initiatives are still minimal and the historical omission is reflected in the fact that very few everyday Nigerians are even aware of this heritage, and so the buildings continue in decay. One wonders why such a rich cultural heritage remains largely neglected. Is it due to the local preference for modern buildings? the financial burden that renovation represents for Aguda descendants?; or could it reflect a difficulty in dealing with the memory of slavery, a memory encapsulated in these physical structures. Notwithstanding, today Brazilians and Afro-Americans are still visiting these coastal cities and their Afro-Brazilian architecture, this attesting to the continued interconnection of the peoples of the Atlantic.

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The Water House (Source : Eko landmarks of Lagos:1999)

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Villa Ajavon (Source: rives coloniales 1993)

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fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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Article-Summary:

If one were to consider the cultural links between Brazil and Africa, Yoruba legacy in the North of Brazil could be the object of focus. However, this exchange was not just in one direction; the Brazilians also has a cultural impact on Africa

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