

A RE-APPRAISAL OF AFRICAN ANCESTRY IN MEXICO'S ANCIENT PAST

***Festus Chibuike Onuegbu**

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how African ancestors had made important physical and cultural presence in Mexico years long before Christopher Columbus was said to have 'discovered' the Americas, the New World. The conventional but 'predominantly Western constructed' history which has continued to shape the perspectives of most African historians suggests that Africa's first contacts with the Americas were occasioned by the events of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Africa and its people were believed to have had no historical presence in the pre-Columbian America, and anything in contrary to this 'established knowledge' is unacceptably considered a hysterical speculation and not history. However, a number of archaeological and cultural evidence bearing irresistible African attributes recovered in some parts of Mexico in recent times have come to put this conventional history and its established knowledge under serious scrutiny. It is, thus, against the backdrop of these new emerging but challenging pieces of evidence that this study derives its motivation and essence. It focuses on the possible attractions of Africans to the Americas in the pre-Columbian period, and the antiquity and impact of African civilisation on Mexico's ancient past. The paper having organised its discussion thematically adopts an historical method of analysis where some cultural comparisons are interpreted and explained. The paper argues that Africans had maintained contacts with the peoples around the coast of Mexico years before the Europeans came in contact with the Americas and, in that right, made important contributions to the rise of Meso-American civilisations. Sources of information available to the study include archival material, leading intellectual conversations on the subject matter, magazine articles, special reports, journal articles, and a few texts.

*Festus Chibuike Onuegbu, PhD.

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; fc.onuegbu@unizik.edu.ng

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Introduction

Africa and its people are undoubtedly important in the consideration of the history and civilisation of black people in any part of the world where a black man is said to have had a descent. According to Norman E.W. Hodges, 'Africa is the ancestral homeland of Negro people found in any part of the world'.¹ In other words, Africa forms an important historical background to any serious study and understanding of universal Negro ancestry. Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin contend in their book *Africa and African* that Africa is obviously not only the ancestral home to mankind but, also, of human culture.² The implication is that prehistoric Africa, most probably, was where human civilisation first began, and Africans were agents or culture carriers that catalyzed some other notable ancient civilisations that thrived around the world. As a surviving anthropological evidence shows, 'the earliest known pottery was created in Africa more than 30,000 years ago during the Paleolithic Age'.³ Also, confirmed the antiquity of African civilisation and advancement vis-à-vis other known civilisations was L.S.B. Leakey whose archaeological findings have cast sensational new light on the African past. He opines that Africa was in the forefront of all world progress having played a dominant role for about 600,000 years.⁴ The implication is that Africa ancestry may have been the *cause* for the rise of other ancient civilisations, thus, proving the prehistoric antiquity of African diaspora elements and their cultural civilisation.

The Americas is one region in the world where historical reconstruction of prehistoric African ancestry has often presented itself as most intriguing and challenging. Mainstream writers especially in Europe and America often have dismissed any idea of prehistoric African presence in the Americas. Gleaning through some of the existing literature on Meso-American history one could see 'the Africa connection' has hardly featured in the discussions, even when and where tangible evidence may have suggested otherwise. In Leslie Bethell edited volume of *The Cambridge*

*History of Latin America*⁵ none of the contributors in the section that treats America before the conquest ever bothered to investigate a number of social and cultural historical elements that suggest African roots, despite the fact that Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff have earlier in *History of American Archaeology*⁶ provided a kind of catalogue of archaeological evidence sufficient enough to underscore Africanity in Meso-America. Richard A. Diehl, also, in his *Tula: the Capital of Ancient Mexico*⁷ refuses to acknowledge the contribution of ‘the coloured people’ [Negro Africans] he mentioned. This gap was further sustained by Michael D. Coe and Ignacio Bernal in their separate works *America’s First Civilisation*⁸ and *The Olmec World*⁹ respectively. Although a number of collections in Norman Hammond edited *Mesoamerican Archaeology: New Approaches*¹⁰ succeeded in observing the Negroid orientation in the artifacts recovered around the coastal belt in the central Americas they failed to acknowledge contacts from African civilisations. They rather pointed to Melanesian semi-Negroid stock. The prevailing understanding created by these mainstream writers is that Africans were backward, and only made noticeable progress when they came into active contacts with the Europeans beginning from the mid fifteenth century,¹¹ thus, could not have made such important inroad into the Americas that earlier. No gainsaying, this skewed history to advance the hegemony of the West in world knowledge apparently has fed on the appalling ignorance of many around the world, including great number of Africans themselves, about the role and contributions of Africa and Africans in prehistoric and modern world civilisations.

However, the weight of archeological finds and cultural anthropology in Mexico largely rooted to Africa has continued to challenge the mainstream thesis on the history of Meso-America. Part of the ‘real’ history about Africa and its past, often denied and dismissed by avalanche of scholars in the West, suggests that Africans were in the ancient Americas and had maintained age-long contacts with that part of the world years back before the Italian Christopher Columbus was said to have made the so called ‘discovery’ of the New World in the late fifteenth century.

Nonetheless, it is of crucial interest for a real African historian to understand the trajectories of African history in the Americas way beyond the conventional knowledge. Therefore, this paper focuses on how the emerging historical and archaeological evidence have succeeded to show that Africans had established a prolonged physical and cultural presence in Mexico {Meso-America}, and have had strong influence on the rise of its ancient civilisations before the Europeans arrived in that part of the world. As matter of significance, the paper is an audacious attempt toward deconstructing the mainstream historical knowledge on African history in the Americas as part of the effort to reconstruct of wider African diaspora history. The discussion in terms of organisation is thematically divided into five coherent sections: section one is the introduction; section two discusses the mainstream perspective of the history of African ancestry in Mexico; section three analyzes pieces of evidence that challenge the take of existing history; section four attempts to build a new knowledge African ancestry history in Mexico; and in the final section, stands the conclusion.

African Descent in Mexico: Gleaning the Extant Narrative

With few exceptions, every available literature on the lives and history of black people in the Americas have created a common knowledge pattern suggesting that elements of Negro African stock first arrived and began their encounter in the Americas in the sixteenth century as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade where African men and women were bought and sold to European possessions in the New World. The African descent in Mexico, like in many other parts of the Americas and the Caribbean, is largely interpreted against the background of this obscure slave past. The European conquest of the Americas created a huge opportunity for them {Europeans} to take full control of the gold and silver mines {bullion business} and the abundant and rich plains for agrarian survival which paved way for their plantation economy. Though by the close of the 1540s there had been a number of mining experts with the required technical skills hired by some European colonial powers in the Americas, particularly the Spanish Crown, to help

exploit these precious objects bound for major markets in Europe on their behalf. But, there was still a major challenge on the part of European colonial powers in terms of procuring the amount of labour that the gold bullion mines and agricultural possessions in their colonies actually required.¹² Initially, they had to rely on the ‘colonial subjugated’ native Indians as source of labour.

However, the use of native Indians became grossly inadequate as the demand for manpower in the mines and plantations economy continued to rise exponentially. The Portuguese and the Dutch later had to find a way of procuring alternative cheap labour by transporting African men and women as slaves to the New World for their colonial possessions. The Spanish colonial authorities, also, started acquiring African slaves to offset the manpower inadequacy in their own colonial possessions. Initially, the Spaniards in the colonial Americas procured African slaves from the Portuguese slave merchants and intermediaries who sold to them until Britain became a huge slave trading nation around the African coasts with superior and commanding naval power far above Portugal, Holland, France, and Germany combined. When the number of slaves that Spain procured through supplies made to it by Portugal could still not match the increasing demand for labour in their mines and plantation estates, the Spanish Crown in 1701 accorded Britain the sole right to supply its colonies with African slaves in a trade agreement, the *asiento*.¹³

It is against this historical circumstance that the mainstream writers anchored the origin and explanation of African descent and encounters in Mexico like in every other part in the Americas. The common knowledge being that African Negro stock first arrived in Mexico and began to increase in population, probably, from the sixteenth century. Colonial records show that around 200,000 African slaves were imported into Mexico in the 16th and 17th centuries to work in silver mines, sugar plantations, and cattle ranches. The Spanish colonialists trafficked African slaves into ports on the opposite Gulf coast, and slaves were distributed further inland to serve as domestic workers, artisans, and labourers in textile mills.¹⁴ Even though this fact had gone a long way to set

aside the story passed down through generations that African ancestors arrived on a slave boat filled with Cubans and Haitians which sank off Mexico's Pacific coast, it refused to include any trace of African ancestry in Mexico before the trans-Atlantic slave trade era. History shows that by the end of 1570, African presence in Mexico had become very common in the silver mines of Zacatecas, Taxco, Guanajuato, and Pachuca in the northern and central regions; on the sugar plantations of Valle de Orizaba and Morelos in the south; in textile factories *obrajes* of Puebla and Oaxaca on the west coast; and around the port of Veracruz in Mexico City. There were, also, fugitives or slave runaways *cimarrones* who established settlements in the remote areas around mountains of Orizaba and Veracruz.¹⁵ Thus, apart from the high demand for slave labour around economic production centres {silver mines, sugar plantations, ranches, and textile factories}, constant slave revolts saw a number of 'maroons' {fugitive slaves who rebelled against their owners to gain freedom} escaped into remote places in Mexico and founded African settlements.

Most of the runaway slaves were said to have escaped from Spanish and other European colonial possessions in the Caribbean Islands and North America. Such fugitive slave settlements could be found mostly in the remote parts of central and southern Mexico. For instance, San Lorenza de los Negros, near Veracruz, was one of such settlements. The town was later named Yanga in 1936, after its founder Gaspar Yanga, a runaway slave who led a group of other slaves to a successful resistance against a special army sent by the Spanish Crown to crush their slave uprising in 1609.¹⁶ The Yangas of Mexico, today, are mostly found dispersed throughout the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Guerrero south of Acapulco. The implication is that the runaway slaves who found their way into Mexico during the colonial period {1570-1810} were taken as part of early African settlers. In addition, Veracruz as major slave port received significant number of African descendants from Haiti and Cuba during the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The African slave descendants in Mexico were seen from ethnic identity of Mandinga, Wolof, Bakongo, Igbo, Yoruba, and a host of

other tribal groups in the coastal region of Sudanic and Equatorial Africa. The understanding is that most of the Afro-Mexican ‘slave ancestors’ came from coastal kingdoms and tribes in the present West Africa. Some others were from the regions of Angola, the Congo Basin, and French Malagasy and Mescerene Islands especially those who escaped from North American colonies. Consequently, a stratum of Mexican population connected to African descent known as *Afromestizos* {Africans of mixed race} emerged and grew increasingly. According to Bobby Vaughn, as reported by Alexis Okeowo, the African-Mexicans were less than 2 per cent of Mexico’s population throughout the colonial period despite the continued increasing number of *Afromestizos*.¹⁷

In a nutshell, the sense one makes out of this analysis is that the existing conventional history unapologetically meshed the explanations of African ancestral beginnings in the Americas to the infamous trans-Atlantic slave history couched in a fist of racism. African ancestors were said to have been brought to the Americas in slave chains by European slave merchants and, thus, could not be said to have made any significant contributions to cultural and intellectual development of the Mexican past before the fifteenth century. The argument is that if there were any Negro stock in the pre-colonial Mexico, they were most probably Melanesians and not Africans, thus, appealing to a popular origin story that the native Indians ancestors migrated from Siberia on the fringe of Asiatic region about 3,000 years ago.¹⁸ That is to say, that the African traits that survived from Mexico’s ancient past were interpreted as coincidence and not a matter of physical cultural contact with Africa. However, there are substantial pieces of evidence that have come to challenge this logic.

Pieces of Evidence that Challenge the ‘Established Knowledge’

It is widely posited that the first permanent human settlement around the Mexican plain was probably established around the period between 3000 and 2000 BC but the first progress of human civilisation in that part of the world actually began around 1200 BC.¹⁹ The age of the Mexican civilisation aside, one question that

has not received a clear-cut answer it requires from concerned anthropologists, archaeologists and historians alike is whether the civilisation evolved and endured independently without external influence; and if there were such influence, where did they come from? Many a mainstream scholar whose cultural and ideological biases derogate African achievements have strongly refused the possibility of African-Americas connections before the era of the Atlantic slave trade and tried to counter it in a number of occasions. For instance, Frederick Bowser dismissed the idea of pre-Columbian African presence in the Americas as 'a false claim'²⁰ while Miguel Leon-Portilla and Kenneth Mills described any sense of Africanity in Meso-America as 'a mere speculation lacking objective element of fact and history'.²¹ Nevertheless, a careful study of the emerging archaeological finds and cultural motifs that mirror Mexico's ancient past largely put the direction to Africa. The point is that what the emerging pieces of evidence reveal in respect of the Mexican past has created enough room to intellectually challenge and possibly set aside the take of conventional history on the African ancestry not only in Mexico but, also, in many other parts of the Americas.

A number of terracotta figurines and other finds of antiquity have been recovered in some parts of Mexico in the recent past affirming a prolonged presence of nonnative Indians in the Americas millennia before the arrival of European adventurers. For instance, the sheer size and physical features of the 'colossal stone-carved heads' like the thick lips and broad nose recovered from the Olmec civilisation {between 1200 BC and 400 BC} suggest everything African. In 1858, a gigantic stone-carved human head sculpture with Negro African features was discovered in the Mexican village of Tres Zapotes. The colossal stone head, carved out of a single piece of basalt, was measured 8ft by 18ft in circumference and dated back to 800-600 BC.²² Since the discovery in Tres Zapotes, similar stone head sculptures have been found in Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, Monte Alban, and Talatitico in the central and southern parts of Mexico. In 1974, Andrzej Wiercinski announced that 'African skulls' were found at the Olmec sites in

Cero de las Meassa, Monte Alban, and Talatitlco. The helmets that were fastened on the colossal heads are undoubtedly a replica of the ones found among the Nubian-Kemets in the first millennium BC.²³ Ivan van Sertima on his own, also, observes that the helmet on the stone heads is uncannily similar to the leather helmet worn by the Nubian-Kemet military in the era of Pharaoh Ramese in Egypt. He further observes that for almost 3,000 years the physical details on some of stone heads: circular earplugs, incised facial decoration, and paralleled lines matched with the ones on the colossal Nubian heads found at the Egyptian seaport of Tanis.²⁴ Thus, the physical match of the Olmec colossal heads with the African Negroid stock is obviously indisputable, and suggest some physical contacts in the past.

It is natural that a people would most probably make images of what they see or what describes more about them and their societal experiences. People hardly recreate images they never saw. That is to say, the Olmec heads in question have little to do with Indian ancestors; they obviously tell the story of African ancestors. Jose Meglar, a Mexican writer, once wrote in the Mexican Society of Geography and Statistics Bulletin, ‘as a work of art, the colossal head is without exaggeration a magnificent sculpture...its Ethiopian type representation is visibly overwhelming. There had been Negroes in this country...and it was probably in the first epoch of the world’.²⁵ Meglar’s argument offers a more direct explanation that Africans were in pre-historic Mexico. In the words of Graham Hancock, ‘the Olmec heads present us with physiologically accurate images of real individuals of Negroid stock, charismatic and powerful Africans whose presence in central America about 2700 years has not been explained by scholars’.²⁶ What this evidently suggests is that African ancestors in the ancient times found their way into the Americas and in the course of their stay exerted a significant influence on the Olmecs of Mexico.

The Olmecs, like the Kemets and the ancient Egypt, were also known for their building of ‘pyramid temples’ and use of ‘hieroglyphic writing’, traits which were later assimilated or carried

in by the Maya and the Aztecs civilisations that succeeded them. A number of ancient monuments of pyramid temple dating back to 1200 BC to 200 AD are very much visible in today's Mexico. The Temple of Kukulcan at Chichen Itza is, probably, the most famous of the Mexican ancient pyramids and is identical in orientation to that of the Kemet around the Nile Valley. Ivan van Sertima posits that if one carefully compare and contrast the Giza pyramids of Egypt with the pyramid complexes of Mexico, it would be a denial of the obvious to regard the common features as mere coincidence.²⁷ Possibilities of physical contacts and cultural influence are obviously certain. As mentioned above, one of the most distinctive features of early Mexican culture was hieroglyphic writing. This writing, first seen with the rise of civilisation in the Nile Valley millennia before any form of civilisations began in the ancient Americas, is recorded in folding-screen books of bark paper or deer hide coated with stucco as were most likely seen in ancient Egypt. The archaeological finds at Monte Alban, an important cultural site that once absorbed the legacies and surviving vestiges of the Olmec civilisation, show that ancient Mexicans practiced hieroglyphic writing. Thus, the elaborate culture of building pyramid temples for religious veneration and writing of hieroglyphs in ancient Mexico most probably did not evolve in isolation. There were most likely huge physical, cultural and religious influences from the ancient civilisation around the Nile Valley. It is instructive to note that before the rise of ancient civilisations in the Americas, African civilisation in the Nile Valley {very much pronounced, Egyptian civilisation} had become very much dominant in influence and cultural spread.²⁸

Furthermore, the Olmecs' 'sacred cross', later absorbed by the Aztecs, Toltec, and Mayans, was identical both in function and name with the African Ankh representing symbol of life. The ancient Mexico called it the 'tree of life'. It suggests some huge similarity of religious essence and worship. The Kemetic spiritual, ceremonial and sacred colours are similar to that of the ancient Mexicans who, also, used oxide dyes to evoke blackness; a colour they used mostly to paint their sculptures. The 'nine gods' in the

Kemetian religious tradition and veneration are equally found in the Americas, and recorded in the pyramid temples of Mexico as the ‘nine lords of the night’.²⁹ The implication is that it is most probable the influence of the Kemet-Nubian cultural civilisation was most profoundly felt on the rise and growth of ancient Mexican civilisations in the Americas.

Aside the archaeological finds and cultural evidence from Mexico’s past which, perhaps, tend to establish some significant cultural and physical contacts with the ancient civilisation of the Negro stock of the Nile Valley region, the Kemet-Nubia pole {Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan geo-cultural axis}, there are, also, important pieces of evidence most probably linking the ancient Mexico to Sudanic Africa {present West Africa}. For instance, the Mende Script that was unearthed in 1932 at Monte Alban dating back to 500 BC was of great significance. It was observed that when the writings on the monuments were translated it was found that the late Olmecs most likely spoke Mende which had its roots amongst the Mandinka and Bambara groups in West Africa.³⁰ Equally, the cultural traits that featured on the human basalt rock figurines which include cornrow, braids and kinky hairstyles that survived from ancient Mexico are very much common amongst the West African tribes. Alexander von Wuthenau avers that many of the facial scars seen on the terracotta figurines in Mexico’s coastal south such as ‘dot’ keloids and lined patterns are identified with a number of tribal groups in the west and south coast of West Africa.³¹ The implication is that it was not only the African Negroid stock of the Nile Valley that probably found their way into the ancient Americas. Africans from the Sudanic region, also, most likely did. What a catalogue of these overwhelming evidence succeeded in doing, despite the repeated denials from the mainstream scholarship, is to point to the fact that ancient Mexico had age-long contacts with Negro African stock from faraway lands on the other side of the Atlantic divide.

Africans in the Ancient Mexico: Constructing a ‘New Historical Knowledge’

One salient fact has so far been established in the course of this discussion is that the Negro African ancestors in Mexico had

endured long history probably millennia before the European duo Columbus and Vespucci were said to have 'discovered' the New World. There were physical human movements from Africa across the Atlantic into the Pacific and Gulf coasts of Mexico in pre-historic times. Even though the existing history in its records of the past is very limited on this, and has largely denied it, available material evidence from the Mexican ancient past apparently have shown that African ancestors were in the ancient Americas. From the discovery of colossal stone heads of African representation to Mende Script, and the replication of ancient Egyptian pyramids to hieroglyphic writing culture African descent in Mexico's prehistoric times is no longer a thing of conjecture. It is simply a proven historical fact that henceforth should engage the attention of historians, particularly African historians in their reconstruction of wider African history.

However, one would be very anxious to know how these African ancestors came into contact with pre-historic America, and what attracted them. Surviving evidence showed that the ancient Nubians and Kemets were powerful seafarers and with the presence of the Nile River traveled to a number of distant lands across the ocean. It is most probable that these African Negro stock sailed to the Americas in the ancient times through the Nile. They built ancient canoes and were assisted in their movements by the 'monsoon wind' that took them to far away distant lands that could never be imagined. It does mean that these ancient people of the Nile Valley region naturally navigated to faraway places any time the monsoon wind sets in. In this way, many ancient Egyptians, Kemets and Nubians were swept ashore in different faraway places where they came in contact with people of other cultures and race whom they influenced or became influenced themselves. The ancient people of the Nile Valley were not the only African groups to share this prehistoric sailing experience to the Americas. Some tribes in the ancient West Africa, also, did.

Cheikh Anta notes that around 500 to 200 BC, the Dogon and Mandinka including the Ono people on the fringe of West African coastline probably learnt the skills of building local canoe

for waterways movement; and these traditional sailors were said to have made important travels across the Atlantic Ocean in the later part of the ancient period.³² He, also, noted that the Dogon and Mandinka seafarers mostly made their journey on the Atlantic towards the western directions off the West Africa coastline.³³ It is, thus, most certain that the ancient Dogon and Mandinka took past through the coasts of Cape Verde, Sao Tome and Principe, and Antigua in their long sail to the Americas. Therefore, it is not out of place that the Portuguese later found that same waterway most convenient in transporting their African slave merchandise to the New World. It was recorded by Dogon astrologers in one of the ancient manuscripts housed in the Museum of African Antiquities in Paris, that it took the Dogon adventure seeking travelers about one lunar calendar cycle to get to the final destination if the great sea winds did not sweep them ashore half way which probably made the journey more difficult and longer.³⁴ By the calculation of time in respect of the distance these ancient tribes in West Africa traveled, and in the direction they did, it is most probable that they sailed to the Pacific and Gulf coasts of the Americas where the coast of Mexico was strategically important. On the other hand, there is a common story in one of the oral traditions amongst the natives in the Mexican cities of Veracruz, Orizaba and Guerrero acknowledging the presence of African Negroes in Mexico in the ancient times. The locals often tell a story of Mandingos who visited their coasts in paddled canoes in prehistoric times. This goes further to lay credence to the fact that Africans lived in the ancient Mexico. Looking at the movement of Africans to the Americas in pre-historic period, the fact remains that traditional ocean navigation offered the basic and the only means to get there. Thus, long before the European adventurers were said to have 'discovered' and explored the wide world around them, Africans had traveled thousands of miles across oceans and continents.

Nonetheless, the movement of Negro Africans to the Americas during the time under review interestingly did not lack its points of attraction and sustenance. First, there was the allure of 'gold' in the Americas for these African travelers. With what were

practicably obtainable in those times, it was most possible that most Africans were in the pre-Columbian Mexico to mine gold as important engagement. It is, thus, safe to say that the ancient African travelers mostly made their journey to the Americas in prospection of gold. The gold attraction probably necessitated a system of trading where these early Africans obtained pure and raw gold from the Americas for the decoration of their {Africans} royal courts, godly temples and household ornamentations. For instance, the ancient Nubians, Kemets and Egyptians were known for their accumulation of raw gold and golden ornaments as luxuries; and as their ancient maritime prowess was not in doubt, it is most probable that some of those gold luxuries in their possession were obtained from distant lands. Also, it is possible that the ancient Africans in their movement to the Americas were partly prompted by 'maritime adventure' that invariably resulted into extending the reach of African cultural civilisation beyond its continental shores in prehistoric times. A good number of these early African maritime travelers to the coast of Mexico who survived the adventurous sail could not return. These early African survivors in the course of time became the harbingers of African cultural civilisation in the ancient Mexico.

Furthermore, the sail of the Dogon people from the West African coastline to the Mexico in the pre-historic times was most probably occasioned by astrological adventure, though that is not to rule out any possibility of a rudimentary maritime trade on gold or other items of exchange occasioned by the period. The ancient Dogon were known for their knowledge of lunar calendar and science of astronomy. Their quest to understand and predict celestial bodies, and follow them in their self and vain imagination that one would get to the actual point of physical location of those bodies was unquestionably great. There was the belief amongst them that following the directional position and movement of such celestial bodies like the moon and the sun in a lunar calendar year often directs one to place of fortunes. With this kind of quest for adventure backed by rudimentary science of astrology, the Dogon were most probably prompted to sail through the Atlantic

traditional maritime capacity to the Americas in the ancient times. In other words, the attraction of gold as a luxury and the quest for adventure aided by maritime prowess largely informed African movements to the Americas in the ancient past. The point is that early African travelers did not lack motivating factors.

On the other hand, one would, also, be curious to know if there were African descendants in Mexico at the eve of Spanish conquest, and what probably became of their fate. The fact remains that there were a number of African descendants in Mexico at the period Spanish conquistadores arrived therein. The only thing is that many of them were exterminated by Spanish conquerors; thence, the history constructed afterwards was deliberately designed in a way to erase such African inspired glorious history of Mexico's ancient past. Though many amongst those Afro-descendants did not appear totally Negro {mostly *Afromestizos*} probably due to continuous miscegenation with the Indians as long years passed by and hence their de-pigmentation, there was no controversy that they descended from the lineage of ancient African ancestors, thus, proving long years of African foothold in the Americas. J. B. Glass in Robert Wauchope edited work recalled the Spanish Friars in their encounter with Negro descendants in Costa Chica area in the southern part of Mexico affirmed that African stock had reached there from the other side of the Atlantic in the times before the Medieval Europe.³⁵ The Spaniards being the same people who burnt down the libraries of the African Moors in Spain would hardly accept the fact that Africans were knowledgeable enough to penetrate the Atlantic and ventured into the shores of America, and exert one of the important influences on the Indians and their history before Europe could ever think of sailing to the wide world. For them, it would be unheard of to say that Africans first arrived in the America's and established a kind of elite presence years long before the Europeans. Thus, anything that would be a reminder of such history should be destroyed be it race, relics or/and records to give way for the dominance and 'superiority' of Europe and its civilisation in the affairs of peoples and societies around the world.

The Afro-descendants were at the major receiving end of Spanish conquerors' systematic extermination of the natives. Wauchope further told a story of how Middle Indian communities {Afro-descendants} in the southern parts of Mexico were continuously infected with European disease(s) and killed as inferior native race. According to him, 'by the time the Spanish conquest of the Central America was completed, the original population of the Middle Indians had been reduced by more than 60 per cent, and those who managed to survive were not existentially acknowledged as part of pre-colonial America'.³⁶ Not only that they were almost wiped out of existence, history about them were destroyed. Many of the written records left by the Olmecs were destroyed by the Spanish conquerors. According to Inacio Aspas, a Spanish historian, 'many historical books of the ancient Yucatan which told of its beginning and history were burned in course of the Spanish conquest in the Americas'.³⁷ He recalled Diago de Laanda, the Spanish bishop of Yucatan admitted in his writing that the natives were a mixture of Indians and semi Negroes, and the people made use of certain characters which they wrote their books, ancient matter and their science. 'We found a large number of books. They contained superstition and we burned them all'.³⁸ Thus, the Spaniards regarded the ancient records of the Olmecs and what were contained in them as mere superstition, and by burning them, the things that could have told the world about Africans and their descendants in the Americas before Columbus were totally destroyed. It is, therefore, against these historical antecedents that African ancestry and encounters in Mexico before Europe was said to have 'discovered' the New World were aptly situated.

Conclusion

From the weight of evidence analysed, the study concludes there were Africans in the ancient Mexico with significant imprints of historical achievements; and the non-acknowledgement of this fact in the existing history does not in any way vitiate its importance. First, the Olmec colossal stone heads were real images of African ancestors. The people who made those stone head sculptures in the course of history did it to remember who their ancestors were,

Africans. Second, the linguistic component of African civilisation particularly the ancient Egyptian form of hieroglyphic writings and Mende Script of the Mandinka and Bambara in West Africa could not have survived in the ancient Mexico without physical cultural presence of Africans therein in those times. The early Africans in Mexico transmitted these important elements of African civilisation to the Olmecs, and which were subsequently absorbed by other cultural groups that succeeded them particularly the Maya and the Aztecs. There was a great sense of Africanity in the historical process of Mexico's ancient past. Our take, therefore, is not that there were no possibilities of external cultural influence from other distant climes on the ancient Mexicans but, that those evidence that bore everything irresistibly African were 'real historical cultural imprints from Africa' and not 'coincidental independent cultural similarity and physical resemblance' as variously dubbed by Western apologetic scholars which qualifies a serious disdain on Africa's achievements, history, and its people.

African ancestry in the Americas like any other similar African historical encounters around the world is largely constructed in a way that has denied important African achievements in a true sense of societal advancement. It would be a wrong history, or to say the least an incomplete history, to continue to learn, teach and write that first African encounters across the Atlantic to the Americas only became possible from the 1500 AD due to the European orchestrated trans-Atlantic slave trade. That the existing history says so does not make it right. After all, it is proven that such history is largely written with little or no traces of important African achievements; it is yet to explain Africa's past and its people in relation to their rightful place and immense contributions to world civilisation. Our take is that African ancestry in Mexico far too long predates 1500 AD as largely recorded in the existing history. The lived experiences of African ancestors in the ancient Mexico were an important indication that Africa had made advanced human and societal progress before many other known ancient human societies including Europe ever began their march to civilisation. They were already a civilised stock who the ancient

Mexicans could learn from, and in that capacity most probably influenced the material and cultural advancement of pre-Columbian Mexican society in significant ways.

The first Africans in Mexico did not arrive as slaves in chains as they were so represented by mainstream writers due to inability to see or, perhaps, a deliberate choice to obliterate 'the real history'. The first African ancestors in Mexico were civilised and dignified men of honour, courage and knowledge. That the Europeans chained and bundled large number of Africans to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade does not obviate the fact that Africans had been in the Americas millennia before the Italian Christopher Columbus was said to have made his so called 'discovery' of that part of the world. Our goal is not to shy away or deny the huge historical implications of African encounters in the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade that lasted for centuries but, to show that such historical encounters were not the first African encounters in the Americas, particularly in Mexico, and should not be made so. There were already some age long noble African historical experiences in the Americas before the dawn of the Atlantic slave era. This study, therefore, enjoins African historians to seriously revisit the contents of African-American historical experiences in their wider reconstruction of African history.

Endnotes

1. Norman E. Hodges, *Black History from Its Origin in Africa to the Present*, New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1972, ii-iv.
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