

**This essay, published as chapter eleven of *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World* (Liverpool University Press, 2015), explores how visual artists from francophone Africa engage with the history of transatlantic slavery in contemporary practice and are thereby participating in rewriting the historical discourse of Africa's experience of slavery.**

## Imaging the Present: An Iconography of Slavery in Contemporary African Art

*Claire Griffiths*

‘Conceptually, what one refers to as contemporary African art indicates a clearly critical relationship with tradition, the nation, and the world’ (Okeke-Agulu, 2010: 80–81)

### **Introduction**

As memories of slavery re-emerge in recent historiographies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, contemporary visual culture from Francophone Africa is participating in this reassessment of the past as part of an on-going discussion of ‘development’ in present-day Africa. By engaging with the history of the slave trade and exploring its connections with the use of African labour in contemporary modes of production in West Africa, recent art works from the region that once formed the heartland of the French slave trade can be seen to offer a discursive platform on which to foreground ‘alternative memorial practices and forms of memory-making’ that are challenging national discourses and moving beyond patrimonial discourses and the nation-centredness of the abolitionist movement (Frith and Hodgson, 2014: page to add).

Two- and three-dimensional and digital work produced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by artists originating from Francophone Africa, many of whom now live and work in Europe,<sup>1</sup> are drawing on a visual imaginary that invokes the history and legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in its contemporary relevance to aspects of development in the former French-speaking colonies of Africa.

In some cases, this body of cultural production engages with European iconographies of slavery by recreating and/or subverting the visual elements that made up the original modes of representation to offer a transnational platform from which to address the economic relationship that has bound Europe, Africa and the Americas for almost four centuries. In other examples, the works draw on textual rather than visual references to the era of the slave trade. In all the various aesthetic and conceptual modes of engagement explored here, the content analysis focuses on how these works are memorializing a past, while simultaneously redefining the history of that past and developing a critical understanding of its legacy in the present.

The works looked at in this chapter are by artists from Benin, or Dahomey, and West Central Africa, both major centres of the French engagement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.<sup>2</sup> Key amongst them is arguably the best-known piece of installation art from the region, *La Bouche du roi*, by Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumé. In the UK, Hazoumé became known for this monumental work over the

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview at Princeton University in 2010, the West African art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu focused on countering what he identified as an assumption in Western art historical theory that an artist who leaves the African environment to work elsewhere ceases to speak and work from an authentically 'alternative' (speaking from a Western location) or 'subaltern' (in philosophical terms) perspective. As he pointed out, African artists who live in the US and Europe are still 'African', and 'their work derives from and speaks to their experience of home and the world. [...] So the inordinate emphasis on the African artist's place of residence, whether she lives inside or outside the continent, speaks to the misunderstanding about why [African] people (including artists) decide where to live and work, whether by choice or compulsion' (Aronson and Weber, 2012: 88).

<sup>2</sup> According to the slave voyages database at Harvard University's DuBois Institute, almost two million people were embarked from the Bight of Benin during the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, making it second only to West Central Africa in the number of enslaved Africans departing on the middle passage (The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, 2008).

course of the bicentenary year of 2007. The British Museum commissioned this edition of the work as its centrepiece to commemorate the passage of the 1807 bill through Parliament outlawing the transportation of slaves on British vessels. A discussion of four exhibitions of this installation later in this chapter focuses on the dynamic critical narrative Hazoumé has developed, which maps the role of human labour in the oil and mineral extraction industries of West Africa today onto historic forms of exogenous wealth production based on despoliation, enslavement and forced labour from the region. A second Beninese artist who is re/constructing memories of slavery within the new visual landscape of the contemporary African arts in Africa and Europe is Pélégie Gbaguidi, whose series *Code noir* evokes, rather than directly represents, the legacy of French slaving in West Africa. Since its inception in 2004, Gbaguidi's *Code noir* series has developed into a broader engagement with the legacy of colonization in Francophone Africa, involving a number of related projects including one in collaboration with the archives department of the Belgian Royal Museum of Africa in Tervuren.

The third body of work examined in detail is *L'Union des états de 1848 à nos jours* by Moridja Kitenge Banza from the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose work is of particular significance in the reclaiming of the iconography of the slave trade. In 2010, Moridja Kitenge received the Leopold Sedar Senghor Prize, effectively the *Grand Prix*, at the ninth *Dak'Art* African art biennial for a piece entitled *De 1848 à nos jours*. His winning installation of video and mixed media included a large mural constructed from sugar spoons (image X, page XXX). This mural evokes, as does Hazoumé's installation, the famous image produced by William Elford of the scandalous 'close packing' of slaves in the Liverpool slave ship the *Brookes*, duplicated and distributed in the British parliament by the Society for Effecting the

Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST) in the spring of 1789. A reproduction of the original print (image X, page XXX) formed part of Kitenge's installation reinforcing the visual reference to the slave trade in the arrangement of the sugar spoons' mural and the textual reference to legal abolition in the title *De 1848 à nos jours*.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, this chapter sets out to examine how this body of work contributes to a new transnational iconography of slavery that simultaneously engages critically with both the past and the dynamics of development in West Africa today. It considers how these contemporary works contribute to an on-going political analysis of the making of post-colonial Africa, which seeks to uncover the multiple dimensions of economic marginalization and exploitation that characterize African development today.

### **Francophone African Art in the Post-Colonial Period**

In a bid to locate the emergence of this trope in Francophone African art both historically and culturally, the analysis will begin by briefly contextualizing the works in terms of the development of continental and principally Francophone African art in the post-colonial period. Here, they are viewed in relation to the structural landscape of production that has emerged and evolved during the period since Independence.

The historical and cultural analysis of Francophone African art production draws from the dominant characteristics of the schools and movements that have formed over the past half century, and looks at the relationship that has evolved between the product,

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<sup>3</sup> As it transpired, the explicit reference to the legal abolition of slavery in the French colonies (27 April 1848) in the title, as well as the explicit use of Atlantic slave trade images in the installation, was not mentioned in the review of the biennale's *Grand Prix* winner in *Biennale* magazine, *Dak'art actu — le Quotidien de la Biennale des Arts de Dakar*. The review focused on the theme of the work as 'une représentation diplomatique' [a diplomatic representation] where the 'artiste invite à l'unité des Etats africains' [the artist proposes the unity of African States] (2010: 5).

the producer and the political context of production in Francophone Africa since the mid-twentieth century. In this way the role of the artist as interpreter and communicator of contemporary social preoccupations (cultural, religious, social, political and economic) is framed within the broader critical discourse surrounding the related concepts of modernity and development in post-colonial Africa.

It should be noted that, in the context of contemporary African art, the practitioner is ‘almost automatically recognised as a critic or at least a social commentator by virtue of his or her profession’ (Asgarad, 2010), a role that marks a period of significant development following the constraints on artistic expression imposed by the colonial project. At the height of the colonial venture in Africa, local artistic production was viewed through a primarily anthropological lens, conflating artist with artisan, minimizing the role of individual creativity and maximizing the importance of tradition and inherited practice. As the occupying forces started to withdraw in the mid-twentieth century, colonial Francophone Africa witnessed the emergence of art schools and movements fed by alternative, if still exogenous, philosophical narratives. Drawing on notions of Jungian ‘collective consciousness’, formal art institutions were founded that promoted the production of an ‘authentic’ African art, which meant art uncontaminated by European art history.<sup>4</sup> The legacy of this flowering of so-called untutored or intuitive and ‘authentic’ African art integrated into the structural landscape of art production in the final decades of colonial rule, and, not surprising, has persisted into the post-colonial era. As Clementine Deliss has argued, such ‘colonial’ configurations endured, as ‘African art exhibitions in Europe

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<sup>4</sup> There were many examples of such schools across French, Belgian and British Africa. They were hailed in many respects as anti-colonial bastions of African artistic production in the sense that they rejected European aesthetic norms and practices. One of the more famous and enduring examples being the *Hangar* run by ex-pat Frenchman Pierre Romain-Defossés in the Belgian Congo. The phenomenon was not restricted to Francophone Africa as evidenced by the history of African art schools from the 1930s to 1960s in South Africa, Rhodesia and Nigeria (see Littlefield Kasfir, 1999).

and America continued to swing unsatisfactorily between the anachronisms of “ethnographic” models and market-inspired [...] “tribal art” (1995: 4).

During Independence, the importance of the visual arts in the construction of national identities had led to a flourishing of ‘national’ as well as pan-African art movements, exemplified by the Negritude-inspired *Ecole de Dakar* sponsored by Senghor, and *Avant-gardisme* promoted by Mobutu in Zaire. The dreams of economic and cultural renaissance born of Independence faltered as the commodity crises of the 1970s hit and economic depression spread across West and central Africa. The international ‘recovery’ programme (known as structural adjustment programmes or SAPs) that followed in the 1980s decimated state spending, laying bare the minimal human and social development of the first decades of independent rule in the former Francophone colonies. As the political landscape changed, a new visual language emerged. The rural idyll of the Negritude imagination and the modernist urban-inspired *avant-gardisme* that had characterized a first optimistic wave of post-colonial art production in the former Francophone colonies, lost ground to competing visual narratives. New and recovered techniques, materials and modes of art production were put to the service of alternative critical discourses emerging in the Francophone ex-colonies: ‘We find them [artists] re-imagining the formal parameters of traditional artistic media [...] to mediate, comment on and examine real or imagined personal and collective histories’ (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009: 30).

Since 1990 and the belated ‘arrival’ of African art on the global scene,<sup>5</sup> ‘the discursive landscape of contemporary African art has been shaped according to the struggle between two fields of knowledge [...] and played out in two principal arenas:

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘arrival’ is often signaled as starting with the inclusion at the 1990 Venice Biennale of Ghanaian artist and former art teacher, Brahim el Anatsui (now referred to as ‘El’), the first African artist to be invited to participate.

the ethnographic museum and the museum of art' (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009: 12). It is within this increasingly globalized and transnational arena provided by art museums and exhibition space that the works explored in the next section can be located, all of them being firmly anchored in an intellectual terrain where perspectives on contemporary African development are being worked out through a renewed engagement with the past and a critical understanding of its legacies in the present.

### **Imaging Slavery in Francophone African Art: Manifestations of a Historic Present?**

The flourishing of an intellectual and critical aesthetic in the second wave of post-colonial visual culture in Africa emerged out of the multi-directional influences and cultural traffic that have flowed between and among artists located in countries in Africa, Europe and North America since 1990. It is from within these cross-continental networks and exchanges that a visual engagement and transnational iconography of the legacy of slavery in Africa has been evolving in contemporary African art. Artists working independently in former French and Belgian colonies have taken historical iconography and texts from the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to engage in a discussion about the state of economic and human development in modern-day Africa. The following discussion focuses on three of these bodies of works which have all been constructed around recognisable European textual and visual representations of the slave trade, and which consciously relocate these reference points into a contemporary African economic and geographic space. The works included — Romuald Hazoumé's *La Bouche du roi*, Moridja Kitenge's *L'Union des états africains de 1848 à nos jours* and Pélégie Gbaguidi's *Le Code noir*

— are far from being an exhaustive review of African art engaging with the European slave trade and its connections to contemporary development issues in Francophone Africa. The works here exemplify the various conceptual narratives in which the legacy and reproduction of historic slavery in contemporary society is emerging as a trope. While each work displays a fundamentally individual creative engagement with this common trope, the two elements that unite them are an emerging iconology of the enslaved body and a narrative that conflates historical and contemporary time in referencing the history of the slave trade.

Romuald Hazoumé, *La Bouche du roi*



*Romuald Hazoumé, La Bouche du Roi. Image courtesy of the October Gallery (permission to be confirmed).*

In the work *La Bouche du roi* by Romuald Hazoumé, the word *roi* is both a topographical reference, being a deformation of the Portuguese for river, and a reference to the French involvement in the slave trade. As Romuald Hazoumé explained in an interview for the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (2005), ‘La bouche du roi [...] vient du nom de l’estuaire du fleuve [...] que les Portugais ont appelé “a boca do rio” (embouchure du fleuve), que les Français ont plus tard transformé en “bouche du roi” par ignorance.’<sup>7</sup>

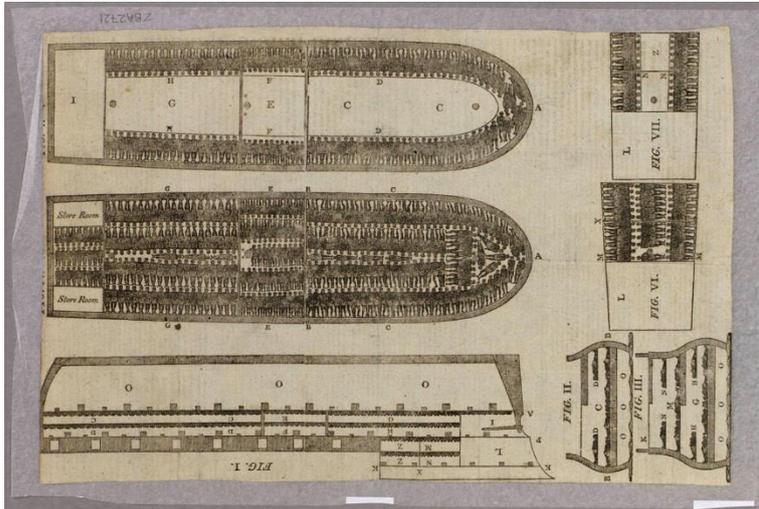
The ‘Bouche du Roy’, as the estuary is also referred to locally, is part of a delta system that provided several embarkation points serving local slave ports (notably Agbodrafo, known to the Portuguese as Porto Seguro) along this stretch of the Atlantic seaboard that the Europeans would name the ‘Slave Coast’.

In this first example of contemporary works engaging with historic and modern slavery, the artist depicts the historically enslaved body as an absence, a disembodiment and ultimately a vanishing. In *La Bouche du roi*, the body, as the substance of individuated identity, is represented by a manufactured material plastic. This representation of enslaved people enclosed in the hold of a ship is viewed from a distance ideally above the work (as in the British Museum), enabling the onlooker to absorb the diagrammatic visual references of this massive low-level horizontal installation. From this perspective, the memory of the image of Elford’s 1789 representation of close-packing on the Brookes slave ship (image X, page XXX) combines with the work.

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<sup>7</sup> Translation: ‘The *Bouche du roi* [...] comes from the name of the estuary of a river named by the Portuguese “a boca do rio” (at the river’s mouth) that the French later unwittingly mistranslated as the “King’s mouth”’

Viewed from a distance, Hazoumé's plastic containers representing the individual bodies of enslaved people merge into an undifferentiated mass, bringing to the fore the historical and creative challenge of reclaiming the history of the individual enslaved and re-examining the historiography of their disappearance.



The Brookes Slave Ship (1789). Image courtesy of the National Maritime Museum (permission to be confirmed).

*La Bouche du roi* has been retelling the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Dahomey through a series of four installations that have acquired new narrative dimensions with each display. Work began on *La Bouche du roi* in 1997 in Hazoumé's studio in Porto-Novo, Benin, and it was first exhibited in 1999 at the *Institut français* in Cotonou. The initial audience of ex-pats, diplomats and local elites were engaged through the piece to reflect upon France's trading history in this part of the world, as the viewer's gaze was drawn to two larger jerry-can masks positioned prominently side by side in the prow of the vessel. A yellow mask, representing the French King, and metaphorically Europe's involvement in the Slave Trade, lies alongside a large black mask representing the involvement of African rulers. The role

of African traders in the trans-Atlantic slave trade is thus made explicit in the installation. As the artist stated in an interview in 2007, ‘I made it for my own people’ (White, 2007: n.p.).



*Romuald Hazoumé, La Bouche du Roi, detail. Image courtesy of NML (permission to be confirmed).*

By focusing on the agents of the trade, the artist adds a dimension to the narrative that is not present within the original *Brookes* diagram. Elford’s 1789 image contains no explicit visual reference to the slavers themselves. The inhumanity of the slave system is felt rather than seen. It exists in the pity generated by the gaze of the sympathetic viewer confronted with the implications of the ‘close-packing’ of slaves in the ship’s hold. In the original image the African body is a cipher: it is inert and any potential for agency disappears into victimhood. As Marcus Wood has aptly described it, the African bodies of the Elford print are ‘supine in perpetuity’ (Wood, 2012: 263).

Encountering the original image, it is the viewer who becomes the dynamic force of the piece, bringing, through his or her outrage, a moral conscience to the narrative. In

contrast, the viewer of Hazoumé's work has a role both outside and within the piece. The spectator is confronted by the monstrosity and is part of it.

The three hundred and four re-used jerry-cans that make up the structure of *La Bouche du roi* carry a significant textual load; not only are they connecting the viewer to a collective historical memory of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, but they are also bringing the audience into contact with a contemporary human disaster originating in the same part of the world and implicating, once again, an international financial system in an era of economic globalization. Subsequent versions would gradually see this contemporary narrative coming to the fore.

A second showing of the piece took place in 2004 in Houston, Texas, in the landmark modern art museum designed by Renzo Piano to house the Menil Collection. The installation of an African work of art in an American museum founded by two French emigrés, Jean and Dominique de Menil, echoes something of the transcontinental relevance of the work. In Houston, the contemporary narrative of the piece was underscored by an accompanying video of a scene played out across the Niger Delta on a daily basis, with a particular resonance in the capital of America's oil state. The video, entitled *La Roulette beninoise* [Beninese roulette], follows the hazardous journey of a local oil smuggler as he transports jerry cans dangerously overfilled with crude oil that have been strapped to his motorbike on illicit runs over the border between Benin and Nigeria. Illegal trading of oil between countries in the Niger Delta region constitutes a significant 'parallel' market operating outside the control of the American and European multinationals that otherwise dominate the regional oil industry. While the Niger Delta is endowed with around a quarter of the production capacity of the whole of Saudi Arabia, some 2.5 million barrels a day, barely 1% of the six million people living in the area benefits directly from the wealth

generated from this resource, while an estimated three quarters of the population of this region, some 4.5 million, live in poverty on less than \$30 a month.<sup>8</sup> Oil spills have caused land, air and water pollution, decreasing fish stocks, contaminating water supplies and destroying arable land. The United Nations Environment Program estimates that the environmental damage from over fifty years of oil production in the region could take a quarter of a century to repair (UNEP, 2011: n.p.). The video draws the attention of the viewer to such issues associated with the export economy of West Africa and reminds us of its transcontinental dimensions. In the region where human beings were once subordinated to the exigencies of the transcontinental trade in sugar, European and American-led oil production has created what has been described as a new form of ‘enslavement’ of the local workforce.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on the human suffering being experienced in workforces holding up global industries was underlined in a third major exhibition of the work at the Musée du Quai Branly in 2005, this time through a soundtrack:

L’objet rejoint la parole dans cette installation par la restitution d’un fond sonore qui semble émaner des masques eux-mêmes: une litanie de noms d’esclaves et une improvisation de chants alternés, des “Lamentations” ou implorations aux divinités yoruba afin que cesse la souffrance de ces hommes qui ‘ne savent pas où ils vont’.

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<sup>8</sup> As the UNDP Human Development Report 2013 indicates, Nigeria, the biggest country in the area has 68% of its population living under the poverty line as reported from surveys undertaken between 2007 and 2011 (UNDP: 160). The other countries in the Delta, including Benin, do not have sufficiently regular and robust statistical accounting procedures to provide equivalent national data.

<sup>9</sup> See Karen Kellogg’s (2012) analysis of the impact of oil production in the Niger Delta on the local workforce.

Objects and voices are united in this installation through a soundtrack which seems to emanate from the masks themselves, producing a litany of names of slaves alternating with lamentations and exhortations to the Yoruba gods to relieve the suffering of these men [*sic*] who ‘know not where they go’.

This physical bodily dimension comes to the fore in a fourth international exhibition when *La Bouche du roi* came to the British Museum to mark the bicentenary of the 1807 Slave Trade act. ‘Liquor bottles, beads and cowrie shells are included [...], as are tobacco and spices, their aroma mixing disturbingly with the terrible sounds and smells of a slave ship’ (The British Museum, 2007: n.p.). With this ultimate sensory assault on the viewer, the dehumanization that characterized the original 1789 diptych has been replaced by both metaphysical and physical forms of reincarnation. It is precisely this reclaiming and reconstruction that becomes the key element in the dynamic visual narrative as it is being experienced by viewers engaging with Hazoumé’s visual historiography of the slave trade.

Through multiple layers of references, the installation conveys the transnational character and the travelling potential of Francophone African art. The structure Hazoumé has created is endowed with a historical load that pulls together three continents that are articulated around a shared historical narrative of slavery, but constructed outside of historical time lines. Hazoumé describes his approach scientifically: ‘my work is like a modern day archaeology’ (Spring, 2008: 126). In practice, he engages in *La Bouche du roi* in cross-disciplinary techniques and succeeds in relocating a transcontinental visual iconology of slavery within an atemporal space that lies between the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade and contemporary economic development.

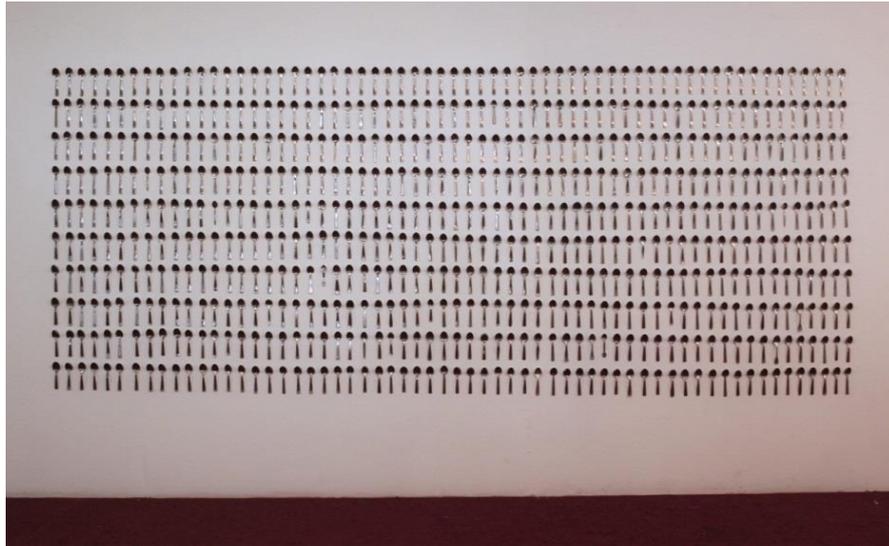
Moridja Kitenge Banza, *L'Union des états de 1848 à nos jours*

In the work of this young artist from Kinshasa, trained in the *Ecoles des Beaux-Arts* of Lumumbashi, Kinshasa and Nantes, and now working in Montreal, the enslaved body is explored through an installation that takes the viewer on a journey from total disembodiment, through a process of reflection and reconfiguration, to arrive finally at a third stage of joyous individuation and reincarnation.

In the winning installation in Dak'Art 2010, the first part of *L'Union des états de 1848 à nos jours* contained a display of massive bank notes denoting a fictitious pan-African currency. The centrality of money and exchange in the past, present and future of Africa are cemented here in the viewer's mind as the journey proceeds to the central piece in the three-part work: a large-scale mural, composed entirely of sugar spoons.<sup>10</sup> At first sight, the spoons look uniformly positioned and identical; but on closer inspection they are merely similar. In fact, they are the result of a participative event that took several years to complete as the artist bartered his fictitious currency against the purchase of these sugar spoons from many locations, in restaurants, cafés, mostly from France, and from friends and acquaintances .

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<sup>10</sup> It was this mural that visitors encountered on entering the official exhibition housed in the Musée Theodore Monod on Place Soweto in Dakar.



*Section of Union des Etats de 1848 à nos jours, Prix Léopold Sédar Senghor, Dak'Art 2010.*

*Image courtesy of the artist.*

Drawing directly from the same Elford print (image X, page XXX) that inspired *La Bouche du roi*, this reconfiguration is mapped out in spoons that constitute both the print medium and the image. What Hazoumé creates from recycled jerrycans, Kitenge creates from spoons, acting here as a human cipher that is emptied of agency and voice, and is disembodied and commodified. This commodification reinforces the relationship between material and narrative in both of these works. Notably Kitenge's work also brings together a metaphysical retelling of the history of the slave trade within the physical materiality of the sugar spoon. This article of European manufacture takes the viewer directly into a tangible relationship with this enduring by-product of the primary export product of the French slave-based economy in the Americas.

A reproduction of the original Elford 1789 image of the Brookes, which is located to the left of the mural, serves as a pivot for the installation as it shuttles between abstraction, materiality and temporality. In the sugar spoon frieze, this icon of the abolitionist movement has been deconstructed and transformed into an

abstraction, the human cipher evolving out of its simplistic original form and forward on its journey from disembodiment to corporeality.

Developing this interim space of connection and disconnection with the history of slaving, a later installation of the work in Nantes sees the addition of a new version of the original Elford print (image X, page XXX) made using coffee as the print medium, and again replacing the human cipher of the slave in Elford's diagram with the sugar spoon of the *de 1848 à nos jours* frieze.



*Moridja Kitenge, Bateau négrier, installation, Nantes 2011, detail. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The third and final section of the Dakar triptych is a video entitled *Hymne à nous*. Here the spoon of the original frieze has become embodied into a single human form that has multiplied and then collectively breaks into song. The viewer is presented with a two-minute film of what appears to be a choir of men singing to Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. The human cipher has arrived at the end of the journey of reconstruction and has recovered agency and voice. In fact, the video shows a compilation of multiple takes of the artist himself singing an anthem he entitled *Hymne à nous*. Kitenge has described the purpose and content of the video as a work of both individuation and collectivism:

Je dirais plutôt qu'elle fait appel à une conscience collective. J'ai mixé des textes extraits des hymnes nationaux congolais, français, belges ainsi que des extraits du poème de Friedrich von Schiller dont Beethoven s'est inspiré pour composer l'Ode à la joie et d'un extrait du discours du roi Léopold II 'roi des Belges' quand il envoie les missionnaires au Congo pour la colonisation. J'ai filmé un plan fixe d'une chorale qui se dirige elle-même, sans maître de chœur, pour dire que c'est à nous Africains de décider de nous-mêmes et de dire ce que l'on pense (Andriamirado, 2010: 1).

I probably say that the piece is appealing to a collective consciousness. I've mixed up extracts from the Congolese, French and Belgian national anthems, as well as the poem by Friedrich von Schiller that was the inspiration behind Beethoven's Ode to Joy and an extract from a speech made by King Leopold II ('King of the Belgians') to missionaries sent out to colonize the Congo. The film is a single angle shoot of a choir with no choirmaster. What I am saying here is that it's up to Africans to manage their own affairs and to say what we think.'

The return of the 'voice' has a particular salience in this context. The 'silencing of the slaving past' that Christiane Taubira highlighted in her campaign for recognition of the 150th anniversary of the second abolition in France in 1998 has been underscored and reinforced in the work of academics and activists, such as Françoise Vergès and Myriam Cottias. Cottias, in particular, has focused on the importance of 'voice', or the taking away of voice, in the aftermath of abolition, notably in the case of Martiniquais whose freedom after 27 April 1848 was offered in exchange for their silence (Cottias, 1997: 293–313). The incorporation of words and creation of text are key elements in the way this work can be seen to engage with the historiography of slavery and with contemporary political development in central Africa.

Pélagie Gbaguidi, *Le Code noir*

*Le Code noir* is the third and final work that contributes to what is being posited here as a new visual historiography of the slave trade. It moves away from representations of the human body to focus on a visual rendition of the sensory experience of the body in the history of slavery. What the artist Pélagie Gbaguidi achieves in her series of works engaging with the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is perhaps nearer to what has been identified as a ‘biopolitical’ dimension in African art; an aesthetic that has been closely explored in relation to the visual expression of the physical impact of brutalization, notably under the Apartheid regime, as seen in South African art (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009: 49).

Born in Dakar to Beninese parents and educated in West Africa and Europe, the work of this Beninese artist presents the human body as an atomized and individuated materialization of human suffering. The human being becomes isolated from the mass, allowing Gbaguidi to reflect upon the dehumanizing logic of slavery. Several works from her series, *Le Code noir*, have been exhibited in the official selections at *Dak’Art* in 2006 and 2008 (image x, page xxx), and more recently at several venues in Europe, including Nantes.



*Image 4: Le Code noir, Dak’Art 2006. Image courtesy of the artist (permission confirmed).*

Gbaguidi came to this subject matter in 2004 as a result of having taken up an artist-in-residency at the *Centre des Arts Contemporains* in Nantes. Attesting to the importance of Nantes in the French trans-Atlantic slave trade, the city's historical museum at the *Château des ducs de Bretagne* houses a permanent display of slave trade-related artefacts. Among these lies a very small, leather-bound book behind thick glass in its own display unit. The book contains the official legal framework for the operation of the French slave trade. The extraordinary and inhumane impact of the contents of this book, known in French as *Le Code noir* since its promulgation by the King of France Louis XIV in 1685, is explored by the artist in her series of the same name. Gbaguidi's first encounter with the 1742 edition of the Black Code unleashed a series of visions that inspired the launch of an initial set of drawings and paintings under the title *Le Code noir*, a collection which over a period of three years grew to some 120 works (Gbaguidi, 2012).<sup>11</sup>

Describing her role as a *griotte*, in the sense of a historian of our times, Gbaguidi argues that 'ce travail de mémoire' ['this memory work'] is more than an artistic project. It is a project that works on how memory is constructed, how it is written and how it is transferred from generation to generation. It focuses particularly on what is omitted and on what has not been recognized or recorded. It is in this space that she re-finds that lost reality and reconstructs the memories of slavery. It is a project that is bringing the artist into direct contact with the on-going re-memorialization and re-writing of the history of slavery, both in Europe and in West

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<sup>11</sup> This and subsequent information regarding Gbaguidi's work comes from an interview with the author at the artist's studio in Belgium in April 2012, and subsequent email exchanges.

Africa, as it is reframed within the universality of violence and relocated to a contemporary context.

In 2007, during a residency in Krems in Austria, Gbaguidi explored the *Code noir* theme in the context of its connections with Nazism and state violence. The Austrian residency gave rise to a further forty works, leading to a selected exhibition in Krems with the series now expanding to some 160 works. Gbaguidi's description of her motivation in producing these latter works on the 'indicable' or unspeakable aspects of the crime of slavery has precedents in Holocaust studies. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt described her engagement with the trial of Adolf Eichmann as one of exposing 'the unspeakable in the banality of evil' (1964: 118). It is this dimension in the history and legacy of slavery that Gbaguidi's work articulates so effectively in her series *Le Code noir*. Among the many images, we encounter distorted faces (image X, page XXX), their open mouths emitting soundless screams, projecting a sense of the psychic and physical imprint that intolerable and monstrous violence leaves behind on the individual and in the memory generated in and by those individuals.

In 2008 the selection committee of the *Dak'Art* international biennial chose two of Gbaguidi's *Code noir* works for inclusion in the official exhibition. One of these is a textual piece, containing no visual representations of the human body.

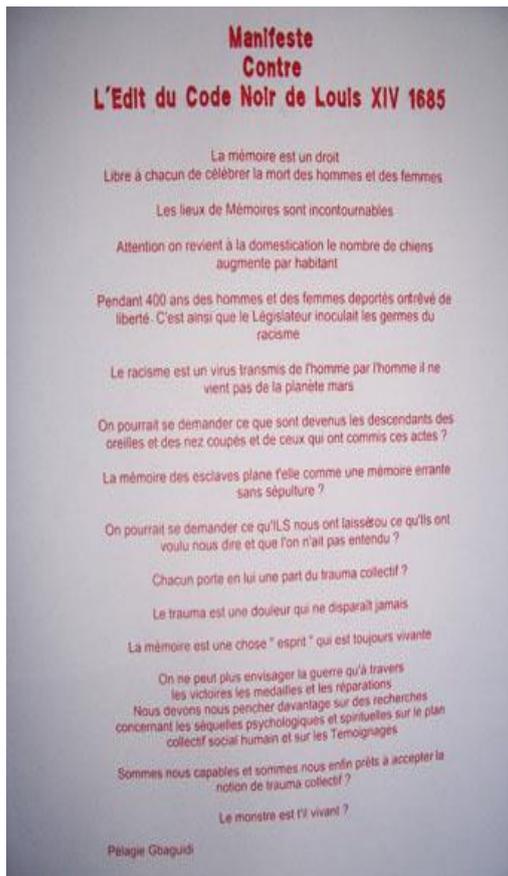


Image 5: Le Code noir, *Dak'Art* 2008. Image courtesy of the artist (permission confirmed).

The title of the work, *Manifeste contre l'édit du code noir de Louis XIV 1685*, embroidered in red silk on white linen, encapsulates the narrative function of the piece.<sup>12</sup> It is a response to the *Code noir* of 1685, exposing what Abdoulaye Gueye has described as the core function of that original text: 'The *Code noir* epitomizes the relegation of blacks out of the category of human, a total estrangement from humanity by way of bondage' (2011: 93).

Gbaguidi's exposé of this function is underscored by the stark contrast between the medium and the message: the stitchery, calligraphy and surface medium are refined and delicate, redolent of an age that was both brutal and genteel, and riven

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<sup>12</sup> Conversation with the author at the artist's studio, 12 April 2012. The fine stitchery was done by hand by a Belgian needlewoman.

with the contradictions epitomized by the Slave Trade. What follows in the text is a searing attack on the human cost of this legislation. The *Code* is not simply attacked as a historical crime, but rather draws connections between historical slavery and contemporary racism. In this way, the artist locates this work alongside others in the series by firmly embedding it in a contemporary context. For example, in a current project in the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren in Belgium, Gbaguidi's drawings respond to works in the museum's archives and on display, notably Edouard Mandouau's *La Civilisation au Congo* of 1884. She does this by stripping history back, uncovering the 'unspeakable' and challenging the erroneous timelines that traditionally frame our references to Africa.<sup>13</sup> Gbaguidi explains her engagement with the subject in these terms: 'For me outing the monster from oblivion has required my taking a stand in relation to the history of Africa; and in so doing participating in the transmission of the contemporary story'.<sup>14</sup>

The connection her work has with the works explored earlier in this chapter does not lie in a reclaiming of an iconography of slavery. Indeed, Gbaguidi visualizes the imprint of slavery on human consciousness and memory in her series *Le Code noir* by drawing from different aesthetic and art historical traditions. Rather, where the work of these three artists intersects is in an analytical exploration of the contemporary dimensions of the historical crime of slavery. Instead of positing slavery as a past event, the ending of which was marked by abolition, the works subvert the progressive view of the historical process by locating the historical past within the present. As such their work is contributing to a dynamic critical discourse being generated by creative, cultural and academic communities, as well as by the

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<sup>13</sup> Accessible online at [http://www.africamuseum.be/collections/browsecollections/humansciences/display\\_object?objectid=32617](http://www.africamuseum.be/collections/browsecollections/humansciences/display_object?objectid=32617).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with the author at that artist's studio in Belgium, 12 April 2012.

plethora of political organizations that make up the critically-engaged civil society of the former French-speaking colonies.

## Conclusions

While not all art from Francophone Africa is ‘political’, there is a widely shared assumption in the art world, from practising visual artists to curators to critics, that the focus of the African artist should be directed towards social and political issues.<sup>15</sup> As Moridja Kitenge observes in an interview: ‘la politique impregne mon travail’ [politics infuses my work] (Andriamirado, 2010: 2). This dimension of Francophone African art is recognized beyond the ‘art world’, as testified by Abdoulaye Wade’s opening address to the *Dak’Art* biennale of 2010. The Senegalese President made great play of the close connection that exists in Africa between art, culture and development: ‘l’art’, he stated, ‘est le baromètre de nos réalités’ [art is the barometer of our reality] (Wade: 2010).

In the works of Romuald Hazoumé, Moridja Kitenge and Pélagie Gbaguidi, the enslaved body refers to a period in Africa’s past while signifying a contemporary reality. In transforming the iconography (that is the form) of the enslaved body and placing it into dialogue with the viewer, the works are generative of a new iconology that generates a new meaning.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the narrative load carried by the icon becomes dynamic, as the multiple audiences in Africa, Europe and the US engage with the works and generate more layers of meaning. As Blier (1995) has noted,

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<sup>15</sup> Table ronde, Conference *Dak’Art et Développement*, Village de la Biennale, Dakar, 9 May 2010.

<sup>16</sup> This difference was defined by Barry Hallen in reference to Suzanne Preston Blier’s work on African art and ‘her reworking of the distinction between iconography and iconology, between form and meaning’ (1995: 76).

meanings in African art are generated at multiple levels, and key to this is the reception of the work in these different contexts.

While there has only been space to discuss three works in detail in this chapter, it should be mentioned that there are many other artists drawing visually on the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to explore contemporary issues in West African development.<sup>17</sup> Together these works can be explored as an intellectual (as opposed to aesthetic) art movement in the mapping of contemporary development issues, and particularly the exploitation of human capital, onto images of historical slavery. Collectively, these works reclaim the humanity of the enslaved, either through a refiguring of the dehumanizing cipher or through the total absence of a recognisably human body in figurative abstraction or in text. Drawing from a range of visual traditions, the works offer a critical commentary of modernity and development in a conflation of historical time. This temporal collapse proposes an alternative historiography of Atlantic slavery, where abolition ceases to exist in its traditional legal and social formulations.

As the visual narrative positions itself within a wider multidisciplinary critique of the global issues of poverty, economic exploitation, under-development and emigration in contemporary Francophone Africa, these works contribute an alternative dimension in which to explore existing critical development theory in the region. In these works, history is visualized within a framework that succeeds in challenging and undermining erroneous ways of historicizing and presenting African development as continuous, ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’. In essence, this emerging ‘movement’ (as it might be labelled) is making a visual contribution to displacing

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<sup>17</sup> Notable among these are Julien Sinzogan from Benin, Guy Wouaté from Cameroon and Jems Robert Kokobi from Cote d’Ivoire, to mention just three. Other artists addressing the same themes through less explicit visual references to historical slavery include Barthélemy Toguo, Pascale Martine Tayou and Viya Dibé.

chronological constructions of slavery and abolition by offering an alternative aesthetic platform that is capable of accommodating a far broader, transnational history of the past and present of West and Central Africa.

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