

UN Observance of the Commemoration of the
200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade
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ADDRESS:
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE AND
SLAVERY: THE PSYCHIC INHERITANCE
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I come from that part of the Americas – the Caribbean – which is arguably the living laboratory of the dynamism of the encounters between Africa and Europe on foreign soil, and both with the Native American who had inhabited the real estate of the Americas time out mind, during periods of conquest and dehumanization along with the corresponding process of struggle and resistance. For these purposes, North-East Brazil with its iconic centre in Bahia, New Orleans and all of that Eastern littoral of North America, referred to as Plantation America, constitute along with the island-Caribbean the geo-cultural area that houses a civilization with its own inner logic and inner consistency.

The advent of later arrivants into the Caribbean after the abolition first of the trade in enslaved Africans and later of slavery itself did not save them from labour exploitation. But those new arrivants did enter as free men and women into a society which by then had the promise of decency and civility informing human, if not an altogether humane, existence. This has been made distinctive by the catalytic role played by the African Presence in social formation within a psychic universe a great part of which has been plunged, wittingly and unwittingly, into subterranean and submarine silence – to mix a metaphor. Mixed metaphors are, in any case, masks to hide real visages, audible decibels to mask the ultra-sound or mute-buttons to impose that threatening silence which Jimmy Cliff the reggae superstar and talented lyricist characteristically described thus: *“You stole my history/Destroyed my*

culture/Cut out my tongue/So I can't communicate/Then you mediate/And separate/Hide my whole way of life/So myself I should hate".

It is fitting that ones like us in the Caricom Caribbean should be concerned with breaking the silence, that second most powerful act of oppression which the African Presence in the Americas has suffered for the past 500 years along the Slave Route which Unesco has wisely placed on its agenda of concerns with a resolve to have action follow intention through efforts like this very Special Assembly of the parent body. Such are the acts that define the journey by those who having been **severed** from ancestral homelands and **suffered** in exile on plantations but have **survived** and continue to struggle beyond survival.

The quest for delivery to humanity of the truth of what has evolved over the past half a millennium is all part of the exercise. It is a form of co-ordinated social action and an effective way of tackling what has been arguably the greatest scourge of modern life. I refer to that which may well have been the culmination of some four centuries of obscenities perpetrated in the pursuit of material gain, fueled by greed and the lust for power, and often under the guise of carrying out a civilizing mission said to be divinely ordained and even earlier sanctified by Papal edict.

The fight for land space leading to wars and rumours of wars over time but starting with the occupation of newly "*discovered*" spaces which as we know were there before the Genoan Wanderer and his marauding successors, armed with papal papers, claimed the Americas and continued with the enslavement of millions torn from ancestral hearths and bulk-loaded across the Atlantic. This was followed by the systematic dehumanization of an horrendously exploited labour force in the production of commodities for commercial profit as well as by the psychological conditioning of millions into stations of self-contempt bolstered by an enduring racism, underlying rigid class

differentiation, and ending up with the habitual violation of human rights. These are but a few of the blots on human history that have left all of us legacies of the deepest concern in humankind's journey into the 21st century.

However, there are other legacies – legacies that are relegated to silence, but which in stubborn defiance speak, often through the intangible heritage of non-verbal communication, to the invincibility of the human spirit against all odds, to the ability of the human mind to exercise the intellect and imagination creatively for the advancement of human knowledge and aesthetic sensibility, to the refinement of ideas about individual rights and collective freedom giving rise to civil society and democratic governance, and to the exploration of the learning process to produce in the human being higher levels of tolerance in dealing with each other manifested in mutual respect, human dignity, caring and compassion, despite temptations to embrace selfishness, dissembling and even strong doses of mean-spiritedness evident among ones of us. The contribution of the African Presence to all this is without hubris or rancour deserving of bold assertion supported, to be sure, by painstaking investigation, critical analysis and decisive programmed dissemination – all part of the mission of Unesco's Slave Route Project.

For all of us who tenant the Americas are the creatures of that awesome process of *'becoming'* consequent on the historic encounters between diverse cultures from both sides of the Atlantic in circumstances that, for all their negative manifestations, have forged tolerance out of hate and suspicion, unity within diversity, and peace out of conflict and hostility. The ongoing struggle by those who seek recognition and status in human terms demands from all with the gift of knowledge and insight, the commitment of self in the continuing development of humankind. For stronger than war, which dehumanises, humiliates and destroys, is indeed the love of life. And the African Presence on the Route continues to speak of those gone, those living and those yet unborn – a celebratory incantation of a philosophy of life and of the hope-in-despair

which has sustained survival in defiance of the trans-atlantic slave trade and slavery.

What we have learnt from history will have sharpened insights about ourselves in the process of cross-fertilization which is the great art of humankind's '*becoming*' out of the dynamism of the synthesizing of contradictions. For this is the story of Africa-in-the-Americas for the past half a millennium. This, from ancient times to this day, is indeed the source and stuff of great literature, great art, and great social structures, of sturdy crucibles of human understanding, of great intellectual achievement in science and the humanities. And all of this has taken place along the Slave Route of which we speak! And has taken place, indeed, despite the stubborn persistence of the rules of representation which decree the denigration of things African as well as a debilitating racism against all who carry the stain of Africa in their veins.

Lest we forget, that Presence, that African Presence, informed the ancestral pedigree of ancient Greece and Rome which Western civilization has hijacked into its history with monopolistic fervour. In that Mediterranean crossroads civilization the treasures of cross-fertilization gave to humanity the sort of creative energy which guaranteed humankind's capacity to live, die and live again. Within historical memory we again see that Presence playing its catalytic role in the Iberian Peninsula when the cross-pollination of cultures (the one from Africa included) gave rise to an expansiveness of thought that resulted in the so-called "*discovery*" of the Americas and our own flowering into the vital source of 'crossroads' energy that this Hemisphere has been for modern humanity.

It is good for us to remember that the moment the European Iberians expelled the Moors and the Jews, Spain declined having lost its intellect and its imagination as someone pungently and wickedly remarked. The enslaved and colonized Americas provided, as it were, a new arena for experimentation in

human exploitation admittedly but it was the relegation of hordes of humanity (themselves sources of creative energy) to margins of silence that was to render the Americas more impoverished than she might be. Thanks, however, to the resistance of those who would be silenced, the vitality and energy of the Hemisphere was to benefit. Neither total physical expulsion nor ethnic cleansing has been possible (since both modes of liquidation would have been unprofitable for slave owners and metropolitan masters) and the African Presence continues to make the impact where it most matters in the enduring areas of language, religion, artistic manifestations and even kinship patterns, as well as in areas of ontology and cosmology rooted in the creative diversity that is now the global reality of our Third Millennium and has been the lived reality of the Caribbean and the wider Americas of which the Caribbean is an iconic integral part.

This is something that invites understanding and acknowledgement from the countries of modern Europe which have been colonized in reverse and their extension, white North America, where homogeneity has been considered a virtue among the power-structures but which is now threatened by heterogeneity following on the breakdown of geographical boundaries with the advent of migrant hordes of different hue as well as a textured sensibility via galactic spheres. But alas, the legacy of slavery and its fertilizer of a trade in African labour, continues.

I agree with the notion that “there comes a time when the past ceases to be an alibi, and [that]....at the turn of the 20th century [we had] surely reached that point” [Fergal Keane: “Time to Wake up to the false dawn of Africa’s renaissance” in ***The Independent*** (London) Weekend Review 13/3/99 p.3], but what I cannot agree with is the shrouding of critical elements like the brutality of the trade in enslaved Africans in a silence that would deny to hordes of humanity the fullest possible participation in all discourse that would attempt to define, determine and delineate the destiny of said hordes of humanity long

relegated in that past to stations of humiliation, would-be psychic despair and non-personhood. Indeed, those who dare to ignore their history are doomed to repeat it. And the Unesco Slave Route Project in helping to prevent this is clearly designed to identify all the deep social/cultural forces which have successfully conspired to prevent any such repetition at least on the scale of that past or to deny history and us the long memory of that past. Hence the Caricom Caribbean's deep involvement in the operations of the Project ever since its inception in 1994 and still today in its revitalized and re-structured form. And that vision is what now fortuitously brings us here to challenge the validity of such past obscenities.

I have long had reason to address such obscenities elsewhere but in the context of the responsibilities of the African Diaspora which has helped to seminally shape the Americas but which is still being denied its historic and historical role in the growth and development of this Hemisphere and of elsewhere.

The African Diaspora cries out for recognition and status in the new dispensation that goes by the name of globalization which from the perspective of ones like us in the ex-slave post-colonial Caribbean threatens to be a calculus of inequality rather than an opportunity to make a last dash towards universal human dignity and individual freedom **in praxis**.

Such dignity and freedom in praxis must continue to be on the agenda of concerns and positive action for the African Diaspora in the new Millennium. Crossing the boundary of thought to programmes of action that will benefit the millions that tenant the African Diaspora is itself an imperative. Hence the need to incorporate designs for social living and a positive sense of self into the mainstream development strategies of the newly globalised world. The aim for Diasporic Africa must be to help determine the mainstream and not merely to float along with the currents wherever they may take one. The age-long

struggle “*to be*” and the working solutions providing life skills for survival and beyond should be utilized to the hilt in sustaining the strengths of the Diaspora and eliminating the weaknesses that have come to systematically plague progress and development.

So one 21st century challenge for the African Diaspora is to have the new globalization veered away from inherited obscene habits of racialised division of the world into the rich industrialised North and the poor non-Caucasian South, the developed civilized world versus the two-thirds underdeveloped world misnomered the Third world. That this is best done by the manifestation of achievement through the Diaspora’s exercise of the creative intellect and creative imagination is impatient of debate. But it must help replace the Cartesian driven thought-system that declares that the show of emotion is a “decline from **thinking** to **feeling**”, with the Diasporic reality that genuine creativity and intellectual rigour are not mutually exclusive and that the harmonization of the two may well be the hope of a third millennium world. The abolition of the Trade for all the reasons, including those outlined in the Caribbean scholar Eric William’s seminal **Capitalism and Slavery**, could not help but facilitate the re-humanization of the offspring of the millions involuntarily and inhumanely lured/dragged from West Africa and the Congo across the Middle Passage. The mind, as the African Diaspora has long known, can be a passionate organ too.

This is arguably a main point of the Reparation advocacy – by no means seeking a hand-out of 500 pounds sterling per person to descendants of the oppressed but rather positing serious investment by countries which have been enriched by the heinous crime of the Slave Trade and Slavery, in the human resource development of countries that suffered, preferably through the education and preparation of their young to enable them to cope with the inheritance of a continuing unjust world. And above all, for them to be able to understand their own history and help plug the knowledge gap which the

Honourable Representative from St. Vincent and the Grenadines so eloquently emphasized in the UN debate of last November. For as a well-known African proverb goes – *“until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”*.

To cross the boundaries of hate, intolerance, discrimination, racial arrogance, class exclusivity, intellectual snobbery, and cultural denigration, which constitute the legacy of that horrific past, the African Diaspora must continue with its time-worn strategies of demarginalisation, re-enforcing the intensity of the creative work in the expansion of communication arts serving humankind. Caribbean kweyol, sranan tonga of Suriname, and Jamaica Talk, all legitimately speak to the African diasporic reality and help to substitute voice for the imposed silence of oppression. The choice of one’s Creator whether it be the Jah of the Rastafarians, Pentecostal versions of Jesus, or African-American versions of Mohammed and Islam, the Orishas of Cuba’s santeria, Brazil’s candomble and Trinidad’s shango, or the oguns of Haitian vodun must insist on the legitimacy accorded Christian and other Orthodoxies in the spirit of that ecumenism which has forced the ritual of apology from Rome to Judaism and has the Graeco-Judaeo-Christian religious-cultural complex acknowledging the rightful existence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism, the great religions of the East. Heterogeneity as a guiding principle of human organization is here the desired framework for peace – global, regional and local.

The gift of the grasp of the plurality and intertextuality of existence, though not exclusive to African diasporic experience, is the primary feature of that experience. The 21st C and the new millennium which, through the accessibility by each segment of Planet Earth to every other at a moment’s notice by way of internet, e-mail, (and electronic media), could benefit tremendously from such sense and sensibility to get the millennium’s hopes for peace, security and the improvement of the social capital, fulfilled. Can the world without anguish accept itself as **part this, part that, part the other** but

totally **human** without one part of it trying to dominate the other? The idea of the Caribbean person being part-African, part-European, part-Asian, part-Native American but totally **Caribbean** is still a mystery to many in the North Atlantic which has been spoiled by the very hegemonic control it has had over empires and far-away real estate for half a millennium – and with the indulgences of a trade in slaves, slavery and colonialism acting in tandem.

It is the full grasp of the creative diversity of all of humankind that provides the source for tolerance, generosity of spirit, forgiveness, respect for the Other, that the new millennium will require if it is to house the brave new world with the human being as centre of the cosmos. It is the source, as well, of the patience which is needed for the human-scale development which all the grand objectives of United Nations declarations envision. That patience is honed in the habit of the African diasporic tenants who have had to negotiate their space over time and to find form on a playing field that has not been level, not since 1492 when Spain's Cristobal Colon lost his way to Japan; not since 1562 when England's John Hawkins traded some surrogate beasts of burden (enslaved Africans) to the Spanish West Indies; not since 1807 when a mix of capitalistic self-interest and humanitarian impulse drove the British Parliament to enact the first step on the journey to restore decency to human life and living.

The African Diaspora is for this reason more than equipped to enter the dialogue among civilizations having seeded the germ of a civilization itself, as if with the beneficence of retributive justice.

Such dialogue, after all, is all about the quest for peace, tolerance, justice, liberty, sustainable development, trust and for respect and human understanding and should not be seen as a threat but rather as a guarantee for peace.

Yet, even while I recommend this to our African Diaspora and to the world as the guarantee of a safe and meaningful future, the experience of ages drives me back to some wise words uttered on February 28, 1968 which have been immortalised in the Bob Marley musical setting ironically entitled “*War*” even while it hankers after peace.

“Until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned,

.....

Until the colour of a man’s skin is of no more significance than the colour of his eyes,

Until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race...

Until that day...

The dreams of lasting peace, world citizenship and the rule of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued but never attained!”

Such, distinguished delegates, are the many boundaries, left by the Slave Trade and Slavery. Many rivers are indeed yet to be crossed, to take us all over to the right side of history and away from the obscenities of the Slave Trade and of Slavery, as well as from the vile consequences that continue to plague far too much of humankind, depriving us all of decency, and threatening our innate humanity.

APPENDIX

LAW ABOLISHING THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE MARCH 25, 1807

“Be it therefore enacted by the King’s most excellent majesty by and with the advice and consent of the Lord’s spiritual and temporal and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, that from and after the first day of May, one thousand eight hundred and seven, the African Slave Trade, and all manner of dealing and trading in the purchase, sale, barter, or transfer of slaves, or of persons intended to be sold, transferred, used, or dealt with as slaves, practiced or carried on, in, at, to or from any part of the coast or countries of Africa, shall be, and the same is hereby utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful, and also that all manner of dealing, either by way of purchase, sale, barter, or transfer or by means of any other contract or agreement whatever, relating to any slaves, or to any persons intended to be used or dealt with as slaves or persons being removed or transported either immediately or by trans-shipment at sea or otherwise, directly or indirectly from Africa or from any island, country, territory, or place whatever, in the West Indies, or in any other part of America, not being in the dominion, possession, or occupation of his majesty, to any other island, country territory or place whatever, is hereby in like manner utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful”.

NOTE: The Abolitionist Movement was spearheaded by “*the Saints*”, a group of evangelicals led by William Wilberforce, Member of Parliament from Hull and a born-again Christian. A similar American Act was passed into law in the same month as the British Act by US President Thomas Jefferson but was to become effective on January 1, 1808 in the United States. But slavery continued apace terminating in the British Empire between August 1, 1834 and August 1, 1838,

but not until 1865 in the USA in 1882 in Cuba and in 1888 in Brazil. The system still exists today in parts of the world.
