

Two-Hundredth Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, on the occasion of the International Day for the Commemoration

"Throughout history, slavery and the slave trade have existed in diverse forms and in many societies. In view of its duration, scope, and consequences, the transatlantic slave trade is widely regarded as one of the most appalling tragedies in the history of humanity. According to leading experts, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, over 10 million Africans were forcefully deported to the Americas, thereby depleting the African continent of its most precious human resources and stifling African development, while fuelling the economies of countries in Europe and the Americas. Recent studies have revealed that during their captivity, deportation and re-settlement, many enslaved Africans steadfastly resisted and fought for their dignity and freedom, using all means and possibilities at their disposal including suicide.

Considering the institution of slavery morally unacceptable, leading Afro-British humanitarian campaigners and abolitionists, such as William Wilberforce, Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano, relentlessly condemned the horrors of the slave trade. They paved the way for its abolition across the entire British Empire in 1807. Many other countries followed suit in the course of the nineteenth century.

In keeping with its mandate to uphold the principals of dignity, equality and mutual respect of all peoples and cultures, UNESCO, at the initiative of Haiti and several African countries, launched the Slave Route Project in 1994 not only to "break the silence" and shed light on this unprecedented global atrocity, but also to promote a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among all peoples.

As a result of the growing international awareness of this issue generated by activities such as UNESCO's Slave Route Project, the Durban World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, organized in South Africa in 2001, qualified the slave trade and the slavery as "a crime against humanity".

Less than three years later, at the initiative of UNESCO, the United Nations General Assembly, designated 2004 as the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition in conjunction with the bicentenary of the first independent black state, Haiti. The international year was observed by numerous UNESCO Member States through an impressive range of educational and cultural activities and events around the globe linked to the three priority areas of scientific research, living memory, and encounters and dialogue.

To complement the nation-wide observance organized by the British Parliament on the bicentenary of the signing of the act that abolished the slave trade throughout the British Empire, the UN General Assembly has proclaimed the 25 March 2007 the International Day for the Commemoration of the Two-Hundredth Anniversary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This decision clearly reaffirms the UN's commitment to our collective duty to remember a tragedy that has long remained hidden or unrecognized and to assign it its proper place in the human conscience. It also reflects the international community's resolve to pursue the combat against the sad legacy of slavery namely, racism, intolerance and xenophobia, which still pervade many of our societies and are considered to be among the root causes of many internal and international conflicts, including armed conflicts and the forced displacement of populations.

In keeping with these goals, the UNESCO Slave Route Project encourages research centres, universities and the associated schools project network to pursue the study of the causes and dynamics of this shameful chapter in the history of humanity and its manifold consequences, which are permanently imprinted in the world's geography, economy and culture. The Project also calls for the development of pedagogical materials and educational programmes designed to inculcate in future generations an understanding of the historical consequences of the slave trade and slavery, while at the same time exposing and denouncing all forms of contemporary racism, discrimination and intolerance. Among the programmes implemented by UNESCO within this framework is the Transatlantic Slave Trade Education Project.

Moreover, through its action in favour of establishing and promoting historical heritage sites, places of remembrance, the Slave Trade Project aims to build itineraries of memory that will open up new opportunities for cultural tourism and sustainable development in addition to reinforcing a sense of identity in descendants of slaves throughout the world. To date, over ten significant sites related to slavery have been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. Additional sites are expected to join the ranks of this prestigious list in the coming years.

Another priority of the Slave Route Project is the creation of slavery museums for the tangible and intangible heritage of African peoples and the African diaspora. Such institutions can generate wider public awareness and serve as forums for debating issues related to slavery. However, the lack of artefacts and documents and their dispersion constitute major obstacles to the diffusion of information related to this tragedy. The majority of the surviving objects are stored in museums and archives in Europe and North America, leaving the showcases of the few slavery museums in Africa and the Caribbean nearly empty. In response to this situation, UNESCO has launched a series of initiatives to facilitate access to these irreplaceable artefacts and to encourage concerned institutions and scholars from developed and developing countries alike to collaborate and share their collections, experience and expertise in this field.

It is UNESCO's firm conviction that by analyzing, understanding and disseminating knowledge about this

tragic chapter of history, we will be better equipped to combat discrimination and racism in all of their forms and to build a sustainable future in which respect for diversity, social cohesion and peace triumph."

Koïchiro Matsuura