

Breaking the Silence: Slave Trade and Slavery in Africa: History, Legacies and the Present

30 October, 2014, Nairobi - An International Conference on “Slavery in Africa: History, Legacies and Present” was organized at Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi from 27-29th October 2014. With UNESCO as a major partner, the Conference brought together more than 100 participants comprising academia, researchers, experts, and representatives of civil society working in the area of slave trade and slavery from different regions of the world.

This Conference was organized in line with UNESCO’s objectives of the Project, The Slave Route: Resistance, Liberty and Heritage launched in 1994, aimed at breaking the silence on slave trade and slavery; highlighting its traumas and consequences; as well as contributing to a reflection on its history and new challenges. With this in mind, the International Conference on “Slavery in Africa: History, Legacies and Present”, interrogated a wide range of subject areas contributing to a wealth of knowledge to UNESCO’s Slave Route project focused on the following themes:

- Slavery in Africa: global perspectives of slave trade, ideologies, memories and returnees;
- Legal pluralism and African slavery linking slavery with social structures and its contradictions to do with slave wives and concubinage;
- Slavery abolitions, resistance, marronage, social formations, religious and power relations ;
- Contemporary slavery, forced labour, indentured, and illegal migrations; and
- Slavery heritage.



Speakers highlights on the collaborative efforts to deepen the knowledge and scientific issues related to slavery ©Masakazu Shibata/UNESCO

During the opening ceremony of the Conference, various speakers highlighted the need for collaboration among all stakeholders in particular scholars, institutional actors and civil society on efforts to promote research on slave trade and slavery in Africa. Mr. Alain Borgel, the Representative of the Research Institute for Development (IRD) in East Africa explained that the objective of the Conference was “to deepen the knowledge of scientific issues related to slavery”. Mr. Jean-Pierre Tutin, Co-operation and Cultural Counselor from the French Embassy reflected on the “complex history”of slavery, and the importance of how “we always must be vigilant and aware that this heritage is about a long struggle, and that in many places in the world, many efforts remain to be done to bring about a legal framework” for protection against human exploitation.

In his remarks, the Director of UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa, Mr. Mohamed Djelid explained how UNESCO’s “Slave Route Project” is a catalyst for cooperation and access to knowledge and recognition about the history, causes and consequences of slave trade and slavery”. Touching on UNESCO’s *Memory of the World programme*, he emphasized the importance of research and documentation on slave trade and slavery, highlighting that the two projects have become a reference point regarding “the issues and challenges raised by the construction of new identities and citizenships, and forms of ‘living together’, which take into account the plurality of collective memories and affiliations”. He congratulated the researchers and experts for organising the Conference and reminded them of the need to particularly generate knowledge on “the history of slave trade and slavery, its legacies and its present in African societies.”



Director of UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa, Mr. Mohamed Djelid emphasizes the importance of research and documentation on slave trade and slavery, touching upon UNESCO’s *Memory of the World programme* ©Masakazu Shibata/UNESCO



Participants consisting of scholars, institutional actors and civil society engages with the discussion
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During the Conference, UNESCO also presented the Exhibition, “Lets we forget: triumph over slavery” which was received by the conference participants. Most of the participants from African academic institutions expressed interest in having the Exhibition shown in their respective countries as well as involvement in the UNESCO Slave Route Project. After the Catholic University the Exhibition was also presented at **United Nations Office Nairobi**, Central Lobby area from **17th – 24th November where it was visited by a** a cross section of people that included UN staff and visitors particularly school children as well as Hon Silverse Alamual Anami, Member of Parliament for Kakamega who was visiting UNESCO. The reaction from the visitors was varied but generally appreciative of its informative and educational role.

Through UNESCO’s support, participants at the Conference also had an opportunity to see a participatory “artistic interactive puppetry based performance on slave trade and slavery and modern-day slavery incorporating music and dance.

As UNESCO reflects on 20 years of the Slave Route Project and its achievements, and as UNESCO leads the world in promoting the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), platforms such as the International Conference on “Slavery in Africa: History, Legacies and Present”, and the presentation of the Exhibition “Lets we forget: triumph over slavery”, are important widening partnerships and encouraging a research agenda that will contribute to combatting historical experiences of captivity, inequality, domination, slave trade and enslavement of humans present in societies today.