

**Remember Slavery: Celebrating the Heritage and Culture of
the African Diaspora and its Roots
International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery
and the Transatlantic Slave Trade
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Ladies and Gentlemen

We are here today to “remember slavery” and “celebrate” the heritage, culture and roots of the African Diaspora.

Most people do not want to remember slavery—some from feelings of guilt, others from feelings of pain. Most people of African descent, in recalling the centuries of brutal oppression to which our ancestors were subjected, prefer to forget slavery.

To associate “remembering slavery” with “celebrating” seems contradictory—unless we “remember slavery” differently by telling the story of slavery, and of the contemporary African Diaspora that resulted from it, in new ways. Current research makes this retelling not only possible, but even obligatory.

Such a new narrative corresponds to the mandate of the Remember Slavery Programme that seeks to educate people about the causes, consequences and lessons of the slave trade and slavery and to raise awareness about the dangers of racism and prejudice.

Telling this story in new ways also fits with the first theme, Recognition, of the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent. Recognition is a necessary foundation for the other Decade themes of Justice and Development.

The Programme of Activities for the Implementation of the Decade states that these activities should:

- lead to greater knowledge, recognition of and respect for the history, heritage and culture of people of African descent through research and education;
- promote full and accurate inclusion of their history and contributions in educational curricula; and
- raise awareness by providing information.

Questions that immediately come to mind are:

- What do we know and not know about the history, heritage and culture of people of African descent?
- What are the implications of knowing and of not knowing—for people of African descent and for others?
- What do we need to know and what do we need to do in order to create respect for this history, heritage and culture?

Today's International Day of Remembrance commemorating Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade should remind us of the foundational role that the enslavement of Africans in the Americas played in the creation of the modern world. It is also important, especially for the United Nations, to situate this Atlantic presence of people of African descent within the global African Diaspora that reveals broader dimensions and implications.

Of the 6.5 million people who crossed the Atlantic between 1500 and 1800, only one million came from Europe. Five and a half million came from Africa. So for the first 300 of the 500 year

history of the modern Americas, the overwhelming majority of the population was of African origin.

The unremunerated labor of these enslaved Africans and their descendants enriched Europe and developed the Americas. Between 1650 and 1850 they produced 75% of the commodities traded in the Atlantic world, fueling the industrial revolution that created today's economic system. It is impossible to tell the story of the Americas without considering the roles and contributions of this majority of the population that laid its foundations.

When industrialization replaced slavery in the 1800s, people of African descent received no compensation for their centuries of unpaid work. In the British, French and Spanish Empires, in Brazil, and in Washington, DC, however, enslavers were rewarded by their governments with generous compensation for the loss of the income they would no longer derive from the free labor of their former human property. So the same people who for hundreds of years were enriched by the enslavement of people of African descent were further enriched by their emancipation.

It is generally assumed that Africans were enslaved just as unskilled laborers. Such a perspective is illogical given that Africans were brought across the Atlantic to create new societies often in natural environments more familiar to them than to their enslavers. Some Africans were enslaved precisely because of their skills and knowledge. They provided a transfer of technology from Africa to the Americas.

People from the Gold Coast, now Ghana, whom the Portuguese and Spanish called *negros minas*, “Mine Negros,” were selected for their expertise in gold mining and metallurgy. In Ecuador and Colombia descendants of *negros minas* still pan gold and transform it into beautiful creations.

African knowledge also helped feed the Americas. In Brazil, Jamaica, Suriname and the United States, enslaved Africans planted rice that had been domesticated 3500 years earlier in Mali. U.S. plantation owners asked slave ship captains to bring them “Rice Negros” known for their expertise in the complex cultivation and preparation techniques. South Carolina became North America’s richest plantation economy thanks to this African rice.

In addition to bringing systems of knowledge with them to the Americas, Africans maintained and recreated their cultures. Almost half of the Africans came from Angola, the Congos and Gabon, the Central African region over which the powerful Kongo Kingdom reigned for centuries. In their festivities, Brazil's Congadas and Panama's Congos perpetuate memories of royal traditions.

And descendants of Yoruba people from Nigeria and Benin in West Africa are concentrated in Brazil and Cuba where they continue to celebrate their spiritual beings, the Orishas, who represent divinized forces of nature.

Today approximately 200 million people of African descent live in all the nations of the Americas from Chile to Canada—including in unexpected places. Their historical contributions and living traditions trace an African map of the Americas.

Beyond the Atlantic world of the Americas, people of African origin also live across the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey, where descendants of Africans enslaved during the Ottoman Empire affirm their identity as Afro-Turks.

Africans also traveled across the Indian Ocean voluntarily as well as involuntarily. India has several populations of African origin collectively known as Sidis.

Unlike the Americas where Africans were the work force constructing new societies, in India, with its huge peasant population, some Africans were able to become elites and even rulers. Malik Ambar, sold into slavery in the Harar region of Ethiopia, became a powerful general and then a ruler in the sultanate of Ahmednagar.

Sidis also built famous monuments such as Gujarat's 16th century Sidi Sayed Mosque. And on Janjira Island in Maharashtra, now a national landmark, a Sidi royal family ruled for centuries over a princely state.

Some Africans went to India voluntarily as traders, one of whom became a saint. Bava Gor, also from Ethiopia, went to Gujarat as an agate merchant and helped Sidi communities revolutionize the technology of agate production. His spiritual powers also allowed him to defeat a demoness, for which grateful villagers built a shrine in his honor.

The *malunga*, the Bantu name of an instrument that Sidis play for Bava Gor, is the same as the berimbau characteristic of Afro-Brazilian culture. Like the map of African presences in the Americas, African culture also maps connections between distant Diaspora communities.

When I showed the documentary *Slave Routes: A Global Vision* that a colleague and I produced for the UNESCO Slave Route Project to a group of Afrodescendant high school students in Brooklyn, their questions and comments went straight to the heart of the matter.

The first student asked pointedly, “Why haven’t we been told the whole story about African people? Like that we’re not just here in the United States but are all over the world. Not only throughout the Americas, but even in places we’d never think of, like India where Africans were even rulers. Why don’t they teach us in school the kinds of things you showed us in this film?”

The next student said, “Why haven’t we learned that some Africans were enslaved for how smart they were? Why were we taught that they were all dumb and did mindless work on

plantations and got whipped by people who owned them? Who wants that as the only image of our ancestors?”

A third added, “Yeah, why doesn’t school teach us stuff that would make us proud of our ancestors, and make other people respect us. They only want us to learn stuff that makes us ashamed to be descendants of enslaved people. It’s like they’re hiding the good part of the truth.”

Whereas the Programme of Activities for the Decade recommends “Ensur[ing] that textbooks and other educational materials reflect historical facts accurately as they relate to past tragedies and atrocities,” the Brooklyn teenagers insisted that there was already too much focus on “tragedies and atrocities,” on victimization.

It is necessary to educate people about the horrors of the slave trade and slavery because their consequences continue to determine and explain today’s prejudiced attitudes and racist behaviors. For educational materials to “reflect historical facts accurately,” however, they must also highlight the accomplishments and contributions of people of African descent in spite of the tragedies and atrocities.

The Brooklyn students, and their peers elsewhere in the Diaspora with whom I have spoken, want their schools to teach them more complete, truthful and empowering knowledge that will give them a sense of global citizenship. They want their education to offer them an honest narrative that will allow them to feel good about themselves and their heritage and inspire the esteem of others.

Raising awareness and creating respect for the history, heritage and culture of people of African descent by generating new research-based narratives and institutionalizing them in educational curricula is a stated goal for the UN Decade. Some of us are already deeply involved in shaping and sharing such new narratives and are seeking committed and conscientious collaboration to further the process. I invite you to collaborate in remembering that in spite of the slave trade and slavery, people of African descent globally have made major contributions to civilization that merit celebrating because they have enriched us all. Thank you.