

A LOOK ALONG THE SLAVE ROUTE - A DUTY TO REMEMBER

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In memoriam Dr. Jean Metellus

The « Slave Route » project, launched by UNESCO in 1994, inexorably evokes the journeys amid cruel and unspeakable sufferings of millions of captives, forcibly taken from their homeland, Africa, with no hope of return. For centuries, they were ruthlessly embarked on slave ships at the Goree Island and other macabre ports of Benin, Guinea, and Congo in particular. They were transported, buffeted by the winds, sweeping vast areas of the Atlantic Ocean, to distant destinations in the New World, America, fascinating for Europeans motivated by a thirst for adventure and lust.

Inhuman and degrading treatment inflicted upon them cause anger and revolt reactions from those populations subjected to daily harassment and degrading tortures. Such treatment resulted in rare whims of disapproval. It also gave rise to some speeches or writings from a number of famous religious leaders, such as Martin Luther, William Wilberforce, the Abbot Raynal, or philosophers and writers of the Enlightenment, such as Diderot, Voltaire, etc.

As we look back on this painful past, our goal is not to revive the memories that could rekindle resentment, sluggish sources and hatred, but to fulfill a duty to remember towards those millions of black slaves who, at the price of their sweat and blood, enriched the initiators and beneficiaries of the "triangular trade of ebony." We want to exorcise the ghosts and, thereby, better meet the other party.

Three prominent figures

Three men have conceived and promoted the settlement and development of the French colonies of the Caribbean: Cardinal Richelieu, Minister Colbert in France, and Governor d'Ogeron Bertrand in St Domingue. Richelieu created a huge fleet to protect the French possessions and merchant ships. He encouraged the emergence of French trade companies to promote the colonies and protect the interests of France. Colbert, who bequeathed his name to the Colbertism policy, strengthened the merchant fleet assisted by a powerful navy to protect it. He continued to implement the colonial policy initiated by Richelieu. He believed that the colonies could greatly contribute to the prosperity of France. They would provide the raw materials to the Metropole for its industry and absorb the finished products of its manufactures, which is an illustration of the Exclusive System "All by and for the Metropole". Governor d'Ogeron, meanwhile, strove to implement the instructions of the powerful Comptroller General of Finance, Navy, and Colonies of Louis XIV, the irreplaceable Colbert.

The sufferings and tribulations of the slave in St Domingue

The settlers of St Domingue, enjoying the super power that the Black Code attributed to them in the management of slaves, treated them as chattel not enjoying any rights, resorted to coercion to get them to provide their maximum capacity. The work on the plantations was therefore more

demanding and especially more grueling for these slaves undernourished, exposed to debilitating tropical diseases: malaria, yellow fever, dysentery, etc.

In this regard, the testimony of a Swiss traveler reported by James is instructive: "They were hundreds of men and women of different ages, all busy digging pits in a cane piece ... The sun darted lead on their heads; sweat poured from every part of their body; their members heavy with heat, tired of the weight of their picks and by the resistance of the clay ground hardened to the point of breaking the tools ... The merciless eye of the manager observed the workshop and several commanders, armed with long whips scattered among workers, roughly struck from time to time even those who, because of weariness, seem forced to slow down ... "¹.

The burden of the slave in St Domingue was not limited to endless labor on sugar cane fields and living areas. The practice of torture was common: Torture by the whip, but also some more cruel forms as the "hammock" where the slave remained suspended by the four members. There were other more inhumane punishments than those already mentioned: the torture of the wheel, amputation of an ear, a hand, a leg, hanging, drowning, etc.

A well-known cases should be highlighted: Caradeux, a settler living in the Plaine Cul de Sac region, survived in the collective memory of Haitians as a cruel master. He used to organize large receptions on his plantation, to which he invited many settlers. Amidst the celebration, he would launch a shooting competition between its guests. The target: a fruit placed on the head of a slave. Needless to describe how some slaves fell, victims of awkward shots. One of Caradeux's favorite punishments was to bury a slave to his shoulders and sprinkle cane syrup on his head. Then, ants would be rushing to this defenseless prey offered to their voracious appetite.

Reactions of the Slaves

Faced with these inhumane treatment, the slaves' reactions take a multifaceted allure, from despair leading to suicide and infanticide, through escapes and runaways in mountainous areas, nocturnal dances to the sound and rhythm of the ancestral *tam-tam* drum, interspersed with songs related to voodoo.

These reactions culminating in an attempt that failed because of the weaknesses of its leader, Mackandal, for alcohol and women. He came from West Africa, probably Guinea, where he grew up under the Islamic religion. Educated, he spoke Arabic. Being a sorcerer or prophet, he had an immense influence on the black slaves. He conceived the plan to poison all the white people. He escaped several attempts to capture him. The failures of the colonial forces to arrest him reinforced Mackandal's invincibility in the minds of the Africans people. He managed to establish a clandestine organization covering several plantations and towns in the Northern part of the colony. He was denounced by some slaves jealous of his adventures with their wives. Arrested by the authorities, which surprised him drunk on a plantation, he was burnt alive under the incredulous eyes of his supporters who continued to believe that he was immortal.

¹ Les Jacobins Noirs de C. L. R. James. Page 19.

The general slave uprising

Despite the substantial speeches of some philosophers of the Enlightenment, Diderot in particular and the interventions of speakers as l'Abbé Grégoire in the Convention Tribune in favor of the abolition of the slave trade, the article written by Marat in the "l'Ami du Peuple" (The People Friend) newspaper, until September 1791, the slave trade had not yet been abolished in the French colonies of the Caribbean.

Nevertheless, it is in this context that the general slave uprising broke under the leadership of a priest of voodoo, Dutty Boukman. He organized a great ceremony in Bois Caiman on August 14, 1791, where thousands of slaves vowed to rid the colony of white settlers. The uprising broke out on the night of August 21 to 22, 1791 and lasted ten days. Nearly 1,000 whites were murdered, 161 and 1,200 coffee sweets into smoke flew. The settlers who had escaped the massacre took refuge in the Cap city. The rebels, emboldened by their initial victories, unleashed the onslaught of the Cap city. The quick response of the settlers was both violent and fierce. Boukman was riddled with bullets, beheaded and his head stuck on the end of a stake, was exhibited on the parade ground of the Cap city with the sign "Head of Boukman, Chief of the rebels".

The rise of new leaders Jean Francois, Biassou, and Toussaint

A triumvirate composed of generals Jean Francois, Biassou and the Army doctor, Toussaint, replaced Boukman. Toussaint became Biassou's lieutenant, who was soon supplanted by his discipline, his influence on the black people, his leadership and organizational skills, and his physical endurance. Toussaint quickly emerged as a leader of the slave movement. His compass and goal were the freedom of slaves and the end of the exclusive system in St Domingue.

Jealousy and envy aroused by the economic performance of St Domingue pushed England and Spain to undertake anything that could hinder the action of the government agents of the revolutionary and regicide France. Toussaint Breda understood the importance of these rivalries among the major powers of his time. The eye riveted on his ultimate and sublime goal: the general freedom of the blacks, he seized the opportunity offered by the Spanish part of the island St Domingue and the most Catholic Majesty the King of Spain. The result was the introduction to the discipline, techniques and tactics, military strategies most advanced in the late 18th century. As Aimé Césaire rightly said: "we had bequeathed him some gangs, he made an army; we had given him an insurrection, he made a revolution; a population, he made a nation".

While he was committed under the banner of the royalist Spain, Toussaint, undertook a sensational propaganda for the general freedom. He declared in a clear and compelling way, capable of galvanizing the energies of the young rebels: "Brothers and Friends, I am Toussaint Louverture, my name might be made known to you; I undertook revenge. I want the freedom and equality to prevail in St Domingue. I work to make them exist. Unite with us! ". This declaration was signed: "Toussaint Louverture, General of the Armies of the King for the public good." What more eloquent testimony to its political intelligence!

Meeting between two destinies – Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Toussaint Louverture

In this eventful situation, projecting on the scene some remarkable men by their leadership and organization skills, two samples of strategists can identify what the time was carrying: Toussaint Louverture and Léger Felicite Sonthonax. The latter, recently appointed to the post of Civil Commissioner in St Domingue, had attended the Black Friend Society in Paris. When the new governor, former settler Galbaud, supported by the royalist sailors, decided to defy the order of the civil commissioners to return to France, Sonthonax cornered, chooses to mobilize them against the rebellious slaves stationed in the vicinity of the Cap city. He distributed weapons to them with these words: "Those who try to take the guns away from you, will want to reduce you to slavery."

After patient negotiations, he managed to rally Toussaint to the cause of the Republic proclaiming "the general freedom of the slaves." Toussaint and Sonthonax not only identified issues and prevailing conditions, but also, for their timely decisions, their fostered irreversible changes and advances in the history of St Domingue. Cooperation between an informed representative of the "eternal yesterday" and a member of an oppressed majority can produce remarkable results. The World History provides quite a few examples of those opportune alliances.

In its inexorable march towards autonomy, the independence of St Domingue, which he considered as the guarantee of the survival of freedom of blacks, Toussaint dismissed, one by one, the representatives of the Metropole in St Domingue Sonthonax, Roume Lavaud Rigaud, Vincent Leclerc. All were his temporary allies, milestones towards a gradual autonomy. This gradualist approach did not save him the disappointment of his arrest through deception followed by deportation in France on June 7, 1802. At the time of boarding the ship that was to take him to his destination, he pronounced this prophetic statement: « In overthrowing me, you have cut down the trunk of the tree of St Domingue black freedom. It will grow again through its roots, for they are numerous and deep. "He was imprisoned in Fort de Joux in The French Jura mountains where he died of cold and starvation on April 7, 1803.

The Apotheosis

After Toussaint Louverture's death, the independence war continued to rage in St Domingue. Under the direction of Jean Jacques Dessalines the Great, assisted by a number of spirited young officers, brave to rashness, the soldiers of the army inflicted defeats after defeats to the French troops, despite the treachery, barbarism and boundless cruelty of General Rochambeau.

The fight for freedom will have lasted 13 years. The independence of Haiti was formally proclaimed on January 1, 1804, after the glorious battle of Vertières where Capois La Mort became famous for an act of bravery that earned the admiration of General Rochambeau, bringing him to stop the fighting to honor the officer "that had just covered himself with so much glory."

For a long time the only black republic in the New World was ostracized and quarantined with that famous phrase; "Let these negroes cooked in their own juice." In spite of this, Haiti has survived for 210 years. The country has maintained the torch of freedom. By freeing the slaves

it freed the masters and gave an example that influenced the South American colonies in the 19th century and even Africa in the 20th century during the colonization of this continent.

A wrecked historical achievement

It is heartbreaking to see that, after such wonderful prowess demonstrated by our ancestors, the current situation in Haiti is so deplorable and alarming. The description sheet: low per capita income, everlasting unemployment and hunger, glaring social inequalities, accelerated environmental degradation, a society that has lost its points of reference, its identity, its values, etc.

What to do? We must create a tolerant Republic, politically reconciled with itself, socially just and balanced, economically strong, efficient and modern so that 2020 finds us standing on the occasion of a double celebration: the 350 years of the Cap city and the 200th anniversary of the death of the builder of the Citadel, a symbol of good governance, strength, courage, pride and vision. For this, we need to promote a participatory political culture, an intelligent and pragmatic cooperation with the countries of North and South. We need a collective Yes, because the honor of our Haiti "Mother of Liberty" commands us to soar above all swampy backyard plots.

Let us work to build a new society, enriched with our entire productive capacity and warmed with the whole human fraternity. Looking to the future, let us walk together towards sustainable development. This is the price to pay to transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.

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