

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

MUSEUMS FACING SLAVERY: CHALLENGE OF RECONCILING NARRATIVES ON A COMMON HERITAGE ?

11-16 April 2023 | Réunion Island



REPORT

AFROSPECTIVES

A GLOBAL AFRICA INITIATIVE

KARTIYE LIBE

Mémoire & Patrimoine
Océan Indien



CONTEXT



A visitor and statue of Olaudah Equiano by Christy Symington (c) Gareth Jones

Jointly organised by **AFROSPECTIVES**, **Kartiye Libe**, the **Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** and the **International Coalition of Sites of Conscience**, the international symposium was held from 11 to 16 April 2023 on Reunion Island as part of the commemoration of the 220th anniversary of the death of Toussaint Louverture.

It was held in the current context of deconstruction and redefinition of the mission of museums on the one hand and the interpretation of slavery in these public spaces on the other. Indeed, museums as privileged places where national narratives on the great moments of history and on the contributions of peoples to the human adventure are elaborated, confronted and imposed are the subject of a critical analysis of their functions and approaches. In most countries and regions, they continue to remain silent or to cast a superficial eye on the enslavement and mass deportation of millions of Africans in the various continents, which, by their scale and duration, constitute major historical facts and are at the foundation of our modern world. The recognition in 2001 of this human tragedy as a Crime against Humanity by the United Nations has not sufficiently encouraged the countries affected by this history, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, to create museums or other public spaces dedicated to this tragedy in order to explain to their peoples the consequences of this great catastrophe (Maafa) which changed their destiny.

However, over the last two decades, museums or sections of museums dedicated to slavery have emerged in different parts of the world and have developed diverse approaches, often marked by miserabilistic, paternalistic, minimalist or antagonistic visions. These approaches, which use outdated methods and techniques and often fail to take into account the rapid evolution of historical knowledge on the subject, have shown their limits and their conceptual, political and socio-cultural biases.



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At a time when the very mission of museums, their approaches and their methodologies are increasingly being questioned and challenged, the interpretation and representation of slavery in these places are therefore part of the global debate on their refoundation. Historically and theoretically attached to a world (the European world), to a class (the educated bourgeoisie) and to a certain cultural perspective, museums are today at the heart of major challenges as showcases and mirrors of partial, biased and truncated knowledge that has often been developed in contexts of domination.

When confronted with the issue of the slave trade and slavery, museums even find themselves confronted with their own past as places of accumulation of spoils of war, theft and exhibitions in the glory of empires. Western museums are increasingly questioned about the way their collections have been built, their scenography and their discourse, while African museums are strongly criticised for their mimicry which reproduces many aspects of coloniality.

This redefinition of museums comes at a time when dominant perspectives on culture, cultural heritage, the arts and aesthetics are being challenged and placed within their cultural contexts and conditions of emergence. Efforts to recontextualise and reconceptualise the very notions of humanity, nature, development, universality are being made in different regions of the world to emancipate from Eurocentric perspectives and categories.

This symposium marked an important step in a process of reflection on new approaches to interpreting and representing slavery in museums that began in 2018 in Charlottesville, United States, an emblematic city where resistance against institutional racism led to the debunking of statues of slaveholders erected in public spaces. This process, which involved some 200 museums, memorials and sites of memory in five regions of the world, resulted in the development of a Guide to the interpretation and representation of slavery in museums, which was presented and discussed at this symposium.

Statue of a child slave in Zanzibar.



PROCESS AND OUTCOMES

The symposium brought together museum and heritage professionals, managers of sites and places of memory, researchers, experts in digital and multimedia technologies, educators and creators from different regions of the world (Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Americas and the Caribbean, Europe).

The presentations and exchanges were structured around three major themes:

1. Exploring the silences and ignorance that still persist about slavery and the new insights provided by research;
2. Analysing and evaluating existing experiences and practices on representation and interpretation of slavery;
3. Discussing new approaches and methodologies for transforming museums into places of democratic debate, resilience, healing and reconciliation.

In order to better situate the symposium in the general debate on the epistemological, conceptual, methodological and terminological decolonisation, the work accomplished in the framework of the second phase of the UNESCO General History of Africa project was presented, in particular the writing of the last three volumes of this prestigious collection, the development of pedagogical contents on the basis of these volumes and, finally, the elaboration of a decolonial glossary to accompany this process.

The participants analysed the experiences and museographic practices on slavery that were presented to them, exchanged views on new approaches and methodologies that could meet the expectations of different audiences and discussed the stakes and challenges of renewing the narratives on this history and tragic memory.

The main elements of the Guide to the interpretation and representation of slavery in museums were presented and discussed, namely

- ▶ The reasons for and process of developing the Guide ;
- ▶ The evolution of museums and their definition ;
- ▶ The historical framework that needs to be constructed;
- ▶ The conceptual and methodological approaches to be adopted ;
- ▶ The constraints to be faced;
- ▶ The main orientations formulated on interpretation, representation, innovation and listening to the public.

In the course of their constructive exchanges, the participants in the symposium discussed and formulated a set of recommendations that can serve as a dashboard or "toolbox" for all those who wish to engage seriously and honestly in the creation or reconfiguration of museums dedicated to the issue of slavery.

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MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Museums of slavery are ideal places to deconstruct and decolonise the historical narratives, perspectives, concepts, categorisations and terminologies generally used about Africans and Afro-descendants who were victims of the slave and colonialist systems. They have three overarching responsibilities: **epistemological, ethical and socio-political**.
- 2.** To this end, they must free themselves from both collections and objects in order to break with Eurocentric perspectives on museums and their contents. They must take advantage of the absence of artefacts on this history to invent approaches and methodologies that value the use of oralities, artistic expressions and symbolic representations of the communities concerned. They must go beyond the materialistic view of heritage and strive to resituate the strength, energy and spirituality of the creative act which transcend the objects of creation themselves in African and Afrodescendant cultures.
- 3.** They must learn to deconstruct the colonial archives and rehumanise the representation of the victims by taking them out of the numbers of the macabre counts and giving them a voice in all aspects of this history through their writings, testimonies and biographies. Each museum must develop its own narrative perspective without forgetting to connect the local and the global to show that this history is intercontinental.
- 4.** They must be museums of interactivity, movement and renewal, capable of adapting to the continuous progress of knowledge about this tragedy and the changes that this implies. They must integrate in their scenography all forms of knowledge, expressions and representations that can enable the communities concerned to reappropriate this history.
- 5.** Museums of slavery must not be frozen in the past or crushed by the weight of memory. They must first tell the historical truth while taking into account the expressions of memory of the populations concerned. They must reflect contemporary phenomena linked to the consequences of this history. To do this, they must be distinguished from sites of memory which fulfil different but complementary functions.



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- 6.** They must learn to challenge citizens and present themselves as places of democratic debate on the aftermath of slavery and on the conditions for psychological healing, national reconciliation and social cohesion.
- 7.** Museums should be conceived as complements, extensions and even correctives to the curricula taught in schools and universities because of their flexible programming and relative independence of interpretation.
- 8.** Museums must respond to the expectations of the public, and in particular of young visitors, by offering them interactive content through multimedia and the arts that solicit their participation in the narrative.
- 9.** Museums of slavery should encourage the use of local languages and scripts to facilitate the reappropriation by communities of this history and memory.
- 10.** They must go beyond their walls and reach out to the communities concerned, particularly the most disadvantaged, who often do not dare to visit these places, which they consider to be reserved for the elite. They must be able to provide legal, social and psychological support to these communities to help them reclaim their history. For this to happen, they must be safe places where people can talk in complete freedom and security and where they can become aware of emancipatory practices.
- 11.** Slavery museums should not only be showcases where certain facts are displayed, but should also provide space for regular workshops, dialogues and training for their various audiences, especially young people and women. They must be places where people can get involved, acquire a mission to advance a cause to break the silence on this history.
- 12.** Slavery Museums are also echo chambers of the outside world. They must be open to the question of reparations, which is now at the heart of the debate on redressing the injustices and inequalities inherited from slavery and colonisation.
- 13.** They must also respond rigorously to the discourse on African collaboration in the slave trade and slavery, which is often used to trivialise the barbarity of the human trafficking and enslavement and to disqualify the demands for reparatory justice.
- 14.** Slavery museums need to develop permanent and transparent consultation mechanisms with concerned communities at different levels.
- 15.** They should pay special attention to enslaved women and their various forms of resistance and contributions to emancipation.
- 16.** The curricula and contents of training for museum professionals and cultural heritage professionals in general must also be decolonised to prepare new generations of professionals capable of implementing the necessary changes.

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STEP FORWARD

The decolonisation of museums and the narratives they display about systems of exploitation and domination and about African resistance to dehumanisation is a propitious opportunity to strengthen awareness about Global Africa and the emancipation of the minds necessary for the achievement of the critical social and political transformations.

The recommendations drawn from this symposium will be used to enrich the Guide to the Interpretation and Representation of Slavery in Museums, which will be revised accordingly, translated into different languages, published and distributed to museum and cultural heritage professionals working on the redefinition, preservation and promotion of the cultural heritages of Global Africa

AFROSPECTIVES will organise presentations, experts meetings, workshops and training sessions, face-to-face and/or remote, in different regions of the world in collaboration with various partners (museums, cultural institutions, African regional organisations, universities, civil society organisations in Global Africa) to share these findings with professionals, researchers, educators, creators and activists who are interested in contributing to this decolonisation of knowledge, narratives and practices.

AFROSPECTIVES proposes to collaborate with public authorities as well as with private initiatives involved in the establishment of museums of slavery or the reconfiguration of existing museums.



"The Ark of Return", the Permanent Memorial to Honour Victims of Slavery designed by Rodney Leon.UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

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