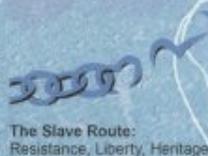
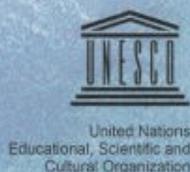


UNESCO International Symposium on Healing the Wounds of Slavery

Towards Mutual Recovery
18-19 October 2018

Concept Note

Host: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs,
Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA



Objective: UNESCO Slave Route Project and Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace are co-organising an international symposium to explore ways of addressing the root causes of racial prejudices, racism and discrimination derived from slavery, past and present. In particular, this symposium will deepen our reflection on the present-day socio-cultural and psychological impacts of the traumas of slavery and discuss the conditions necessary for healing the wounds of this history. This symposium is organised within the framework of the 70th Anniversary of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024).

Rationale: The transatlantic slave trade involved a systematic deportation and dehumanisation of tens of millions of Africans. Its purpose was to exploit their bodies and minds for economic profit. This subjugation entailed the use of extreme violence and barbaric behaviour, which caused untold misery and suffering that reverberates to this day throughout the Americas, Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Europe and Africa. Slavery reduced men, women and children to commodities and denied their humanity, dignity, histories and cultures. An extraordinary range of intellectual, religious, scientific and legal resources were mobilised to legitimise this injustice and to construct theories of racial hierarchies. It is no surprise that the huge psychological damage inflicted by the slave trade and slavery continues to haunt us today.

This history persists to the present day through cultural and psychological trauma. Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists and social activists working in regions that once practiced slavery have independently identified and treated multifaceted traumas, transmitted from generation to generation among the descendants of enslaved peoples. These experts have come together in prior symposia and described the trauma rooted in the accumulated painful experiences that cut across languages, cultures and national histories. Common traumas explain some of the attitudes, behaviours and social relations prevailing in post-slavery societies that affect the descendants of slaves, of slave owners and of non-owners who benefited from slavery. It is imperative to further explore the psychosocial consequences of slave trade and slavery, to better understand the complexity of the relationships amongst all those affected, as well as the institutionalised practices that punctuate life in contemporary plural and multicultural societies. Likewise, achieving recognition of this legacy, healing, dialogue and reconciliation necessary to building inclusive societies, requires overcoming denial, oblivion, racial prejudices, mistrust, racism and discrimination inherited from this history.

Recent epigenetic research has shown that historic trauma can leave psychological markers in successive generations. However, these traumas are not irreversible and can be healed. Effective psychosocial and spiritual approaches can liberate the denial, suffering, grievances, fear, hatred and prejudices derived from history and facilitate recovery of the lasting impacts. However, any attempt at healing necessitates having available and ensuring access to multidisciplinary research that explores roots causes, and modes of operation; and unfolds the socioeconomic, political and institutional processes that permitted and delivered the slavery system. It also requires challenging interpretations of this history disseminated through national narratives, education, museums and media that ignore the involvement and contributions of the enslaved peoples and their descendants in shaping national histories. Equally, it demands re-examining the part that religions played in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and reflecting on the significance of spirituality in sustaining humanity and transcending race-based identities.

Points of Discussion: The symposium will take stock of the latest findings and exchange views on the ways and means to confront this history and overcome its legacies. It will bring together 25 scholars and practitioners from different regions of the world. They will engage in a dialogue that could help diagnose, frame, analyse and suggest meaningful approaches to address the transgenerational wounds and traumas inherited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery.

More specifically, the Symposium will explore the following questions:

1. What are the historical contexts, foundations and underpinnings of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery?
2. What lessons can we learn from other dehumanizing tragedies in world history?
3. What are the latest research findings on the psychosocial consequences of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery?
4. How do the different approaches, experiences and processes contribute to the healing the wounds left by such historical traumas?
5. What are the main obstacles and resistances to healing?
6. What would be the necessary steps to design a pilot program on healing the wounds of transatlantic slave trade and slavery?
7. What would be the appropriate strategies to communicate and inform the public for a better understanding of the challenges to overcoming these legacies?
8. Who are the key stakeholders and partners to associate with the healing processes and dialogues?

To facilitate an interactive discussion and seek innovative perspectives, participants are invited to share their responses to these questions in view of identifying convergences, which would help further develop meaningful guidelines for policymakers, professionals and civil society activists in working through this sensitive matter.

For more information about the Symposium, its conclusions and follow-up activities, please visit: www.healingthewoundsofslavery.org.