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COMPARATIVE ANNIVERSARIES OF EMANCIPATION:

From Wilberforce and Lincoln to Toussaint L'Ouverture and Mandela

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Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations to mark the International Day of
Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, March 2013.

I would like to dedicate this speech to **Chinua Achebe**, arguably Africa's greatest novelist and a warrior of cultural emancipation. Achebe joined the ancestors in this great week of liberty. May his soul rest in peace. Amen.

The United States celebrates every year the 4th of July to mark its independence. Almost every post-colonial country does also commemorate its Independence Day. The Jews mark and lament Holocaust day. The British salute the birthday of their monarch.

But the heroes of emancipation and the abolition of slavery have not had enough recognition across the centuries. Abraham Lincoln looms large because he was Head of State and presided over a civil war. But William Wilberforce in the United Kingdom is a familiar name only to the learned.

It is therefore truly appropriate that the United Nations should seek to make amends by saluting abolitionists and emancipation. I am privileged to be keynote speaker in the U.N. General Assembly this year.

The Emancipation Proclamation was the Edict issued by US President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863, that emancipated or freed the slaves, not in the country as a whole, but slaves in the confederate states in rebellion against the Federal Government.

But the Emancipation Proclamation did begin the process of abolition of slavery. This process was accelerated with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution in December 1865.

The International consequences of the Emancipation Proclamation were also significant. In the earlier part of the American Civil War the Confederates hoped for the internationalization of the war in their favor. Either France or Great Britain or both were

expected to intervene for as long as the Civil War was simply about “saving the American Union.”

But the Emancipation Proclamation turned the Civil War into a crusade against slavery. Such a crusade made British and French intervention politically impossible. This gave Abraham Lincoln a freer hand, unimpeded by foreign complications.

On the other hand, the Union side in the Civil War became multi-racial as a result of the Emancipation Proclamation.

When American Blacks were invited to join Lincoln’s armed forces, they responded to approximately 180,000. By August 26, 1863, Lincoln would make the following observation in a letter to James C. Conkling:

“... the emancipation policy, and the use of coloured troops, constitute the heaviest blow yet dealt to the rebellion.”

In February 1865, as the Civil War was coming to an end, Lincoln was ready to say the following to Francis B. Carpenter, the portrait painter:

[the Proclamation] was the central act of my administration and the greatest event of the nineteenth century.

Much of the abolitionist movement in Great Britain was a case of White folks fighting for the emancipation of Black folks. White activists of Great Britain freed the slaves of the British.

But in the American Civil War the final stage included the agency of the oppressed. Black soldiers participated in emancipating Black slaves.

William Wilberforce (1759–1833) was a close friend of future Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger.

They both became abolitionists.

But it was not until 1833 that the Slavery Abolition Act was passed—one month after the death of Wilberforce.

Today is March 25. But there was another March 25 more than 200 years ago. On March 25, 1807 a bill to abolish the slave trade in the British West Indies was passed in the House of Commons in London.

France at that time was torn between the new legacy of the French Revolution and the rising ambitions of French Imperialism.

The French Revolution carried aspirations of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” The French Imperial role carried aspirations of dominance and cultural supremacy.

Ironically, one French colony symbolized both revolutionary spirit and rebellion against imperialism. The colony was part of *Hispaniola* in the West Indies which was soon to make world history. It was soon to re-adopt its ancient name of *Haiti*.

During this period when France was torn between humane liberalism and hegemonic imperialism the leading *British* crusader against slavery was honoured by *France*. William Wilberforce led the British abolitionist movement. In September 1792 Wilberforce was awarded the honorary citizenship of France.

But in both Britain and France the crusade against slavery was led by White men. Black people were not yet agents of their own emancipation.

And then came part of Hispaniola later known as Haiti. Let us now turn more fully to Haiti as the greatest case of Black self-determination. There were Black slaves emancipated by Black revolutionaries. Blacks became agents of transformation.

FROM MAJI MAJI TO HAITI

I am a student of Comparative Black Experience rather than a specialist on the slave trade as such. I therefore propose to place slavery in the context of wider comparative Black history.

While 2004 marked the two hundredth anniversary of the Haitian revolution, 2004 also marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Maji Maji war against the Germans in Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). The Maji Maji war was inspired by an East African version of voodoo. The warrior's immersion into water was supposed to provide a magical shield against German bullets. Those beliefs were successful in mobilizing the masses with next to no training or organization. In reality the African warriors' baptism was no match for German bullets. Thousands of Tanganyikans died before the warriors lost faith in the invincibility of water.

The Maji Maji war lasted from 1904 to 1906, a much shorter period than the Haitian wars. Scholars have characterized the Maji Maji war as "*primary resistance*"—meaning resisting colonization before it is fully established.

Secondary resistance is like the liberation movements in Zimbabwe and South Africa which were rebelling against colonial structures already entrenched.

Because the bulk of the slave population in Haiti at the beginning of the nineteenth century was fresh from Africa, were they resisting against a new colonial subjugation (*primary resistance*) in their own experience? Or was it *secondary resistance* to a long-established imperial order? Should we judge the Haitian revolt by the newness of the victims (fresh from Africa), or by oldness of the slaving and colonial structures on the island?

The Maji Maji war was brutally suppressed by the Germans. The Haitian revolution had a happier outcome, at least in the short run.

In addition to marking both 200th anniversary of the Haitian revolution and the 100th anniversary of the Maji Maji war, the year 2004 also marks approximately the 50th anniversary of the Mau Mau war against the British in Kenya. Mau Mau—like Maji Maji—also invoked a version of East African voodoo. But Mau Mau—unlike Maji Maji—did not emphasize the protective qualities of baptism by water. Mau Mau invoked ritual use of *menstrual blood* and worked out elaborate oaths of allegiance for warriors stripped naked for the ceremonies. The warriors fought bravely in spite of the military odds.

Unlike Maji Maji, Mau Mau did defeat the British politically though not militarily. The Mau Mau warriors fought from 1952 to about 1960. They convinced the British that it was time to pull out of Kenya as an imperial power. The British colonial exit occurred in 1963.

THE RACIAL LEGACIES OF HAITI AND SOUTH AFRICA

The year 2004 also marked the tenth anniversary of the end of political apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Let us pay particular attention to the comparative meaning of South Africa in relation to Haiti. Throughout this presentation I shall use the name “Haiti” rather than the wider, cold colonial name of Hispaniola.

The following proposition is arguable. Haiti was the *first* Black rebellion against Whites, which was successful enough to produce a Republic under Black rule. South Africa is the *last* Black rebellion against Whites, which has been successful enough to produce a Republic under Black rule. Haiti set the precedent of “*revolt towards republic*”

under Black control. South Africa is hopefully the last chapter of Black militarized challenge to white racism. The two struggles have historically been symbolized by Toussaint L'Ouverture of the Haitian revolution and Nelson Mandela of South Africa's liberation.

South Africa in 1994 and Haiti in 1804 shared certain things in common. South Africa in 1994 was the brightest jewel in Africa's crown. Haiti in the years preceding 1804 had been the brightest jewel in France's imperial crown. South Africa was Africa's vanguard of precious minerals—diamonds, gold, platinum and a variety of industrial minerals. South Africa led the rest of Africa in agricultural output and in industrial and social infrastructure.

More than two hundred years ago Haiti was widely regarded as the richest of all colonial territories in the world. In the 1780s Haiti was supposed to account for “some 40 percent of France's foreign trade, its 7000... plantations were absorbing by the 1790s almost 10–15 percent of United States exports, and had important commercial links with the British and Spanish West Indies as well. On the coastal plains of this colony, little larger than Wales, was grown about two fifths of the world's sugar, while from its mountains interior came over half the world's coffee.”¹

If South Africa is today the first among equals among the well-endowed African countries, Haiti was at the turn of the nineteenth century the first among equals among all the colonized territories of the world.

Then how did Haiti descend from the brightest jewel in France's imperial crown to the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere? How did the first Black republic of the nineteenth century become among the most economically retarded of all republics in the

world? There have been times when out of every ten live births in Haiti, one died. HIV/AIDS, since the twentieth century, has compounded the issue—as it had in South Africa.

In a multiracial society, healthy progress is reached either when the White elites are in control or when the Black majority has taken over. The worst scenario is when the Mulattoes are in absolute power, poised against both the White minority and the Black majority. In the study of logic this is called *the fallacy of the undistributed middle*.

Haiti has been a casualty of the undistributed demographic middle. The Mulattos have been disproportionately powerful in postcolonial Haiti much more than the Coloreds in South Africa have ever been. But in both countries racial gradation has been a central engine of historical change.

Racial mixture as a category has been important in the history of both Haiti and South Africa. The so-called “miscegenation” may have a typology of four:

- I. *Descending Miscegenation:* This means that children of mixed marriages descend to the status of the less privileged parent. This is the dominant model in the United States. If either parent is Black, the child is Black.
- II. *Ascending Miscegenation:* Under this model, children of race mixture ascend to the status of the more privileged parent. In Israel, if the father is Jewish the child ascends to Jewish status regardless of who the mother is. In Sudan and Egypt, if the father is Arab, the child is Arab, regardless of who the mother is.

- III. *Divergent Miscegenation:* A child of racial mixture under this model belongs to a third group apart. This has been the dominant model in both Haiti and South Africa. In South Africa it produces a mixed category called *Coloreds*. In Haiti this category produced the *Mulattoes*.
- IV. *Ambivalent Miscegenation:* A child of racial mixture may move *up* racially or *down*, depending upon other variables like income, social class, level of education, or shade of skin color. This is the dominant system of miscegenation in Brazil. But there are aspects of *Haiti's racial gradation*, *which* are also ambivalent. A darker skinned Mulatto may be categorized as "Black." A lighter skinned mulatto may ascend to WHITENESS.²

Haiti has often been described as the first slave rebellion in history to have successfully captured power. C.L.R. James comes close to that conclusion. That is claiming too much for Haiti. Haiti was the first rebellion of *Black* slaves to have achieved control of a society, but not the first generally.

In Africa, there was a prior rebellion of slaves which succeeded in creating a whole new dynasty which lasted for centuries. The slaves were not black, but they did capture a major African state. The slaves were the Mamluks of Egypt who captured power and ruled Egypt as a dynasty from the year 1250 to 1517. Descendants of the Mamluks continued as a major political force in Egypt from 1517 to 1798. The Arabic word Mamluk means the "owned one" or "slave."

If the roots of the Haitian Revolution lie partly in the French revolution, do the roots of the French revolution reciprocally lie in Haiti as a country? It has been argued

that the bourgeois revolution in France would not have taken place if the French bourgeoisie had not been enriched and emboldened by the huge profits from Haiti and from the accompanying slave trade. A revolution in Paris based on the Rights of Man was originally fueled by the profits of enslavement and colonialism.

HAITI IN WORLD HISTORY

The Haitian Revolution is an epoch-making event in history not because of what it did for Haiti but because of what it did for world history.

Haiti today is only marginally better off than it was two hundred years ago. So was the revolution worth it? Are there lessons for South Africa?

If we viewed the wider consequences of the Haitian Revolution, the revolution was worth it. Younger William Pitt's decision in England to seek an end to the slave trade in 1807 was probably partly influenced by events in Haiti and their significance for Britain's imperial rivalry with France. The use of the British navy on the high seas to enforce the ban on the slave trade was partly motivated by a British desire to weaken France in its economic and colonial ambitions.

Led by Toussaint L' Overture, The Haitian Revolution also dealt a major blow to Napoleon's dream to build an Atlantic empire for France. Napoleon decided to concentrate on his ambitions in Europe. He sold large tracts of land in North America to finance his European adventures.

In the midst of the Haitian Revolution France decided to sell Louisiana. The Louisiana Purchase by the United States was finalized in 1803. The purchase contributed

to the United States expansion not only in itself but also by facilitating further American expansion to Texas and then westwards.

Both the French Revolution of 1789 and the Haitian Revolution early in the nineteenth century which followed fueled slave revolts widely. More than *twenty* slave revolts in the Greater Caribbean flared up between 1789 and 1832. Particularly noticeable were the large-scale rebellions in Barbados in 1816, Demerare in 1823 and Jamaica in 1831. Those three, plus Haiti, were the largest slave uprisings in the history of the Americas.³

Temptations in some French circles to recolonize Haiti probably contributed to President James Monroe's decision to issue the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. But both the British and the Americans were even more worried about any attempt by Spain to recolonize its former Empire in the Americas, and any new Spanish attempt to inherit Haiti.

The Haitian Revolution also had an impact on the debate about slavery in the United States. Racist opinion in the United States felt vindicated in their opposition to the emancipation of Blacks. On the other hand, American abolitionists regarded the Haitian revolution as a warning about the risks of continuing with slavery.

Sometimes a country of the world produces something which changes global history but does not do much for that country itself. The area of the world which today encompasses Israel and the Palestinian territories gave the world Jesus and his message, but that area did not itself benefit much from that Christian legacy.

The land which gave the human race Jesus Christ is not itself Christian. The majority there are Jews and Muslims. The land which gave the world the messenger of

love is today torn by hate and blood. Greater Palestine has given the world a glorious Gospel, but has not itself embraced it.

Similarly, Haiti gave the world a message of hope and freedom, a demonstration of how to rise from object servitude to glorious self-determination. The Black race, especially, was inspired and emboldened by the Haitian Revolution.

But, like the land which gave the world Jesus, Haiti has not itself benefited from its bequest to the human race.

FROM PORT-AU-PRINCE TO PRETORIA

Now that Haiti has entered its third century since the revolution, that agenda of hope and freedom should be re-addressed. In this third century Haiti will at last partake of what it gave to the world—that message of liberty and that confidence of self-upliftment.

What about South Africa? Now that the Republic is entering its second decade of democracy, South Africa needs to learn from the lessons of Haiti. As the *FIRST* Black society to overthrow white oppression, Haiti rose triumphantly and then collapsed disastrously. As the *LAST* Black population to overthrow white oppression, South Africa has already risen triumphantly. Will it avoid the Haitian precedent of collapsing disastrously?

In spite of residual social and economic apartheid in South Africa, and in spite of the terrors of HIV/AIDS, the healing legacy of Nelson Mandela is likely to be more enduring than the revolutionary legacy of Toussaint L'Ouverture. But a successful South Africa should also contribute to the healing of Haiti in this new era of emancipation.

There is only one collective evil which is worse than *enslavement*. The worse evil is *genocide*, which is an attempt to obliterate a people. There is almost no positive consequence of genocide.

On the other hand, slavery in world-history has encompassed both negative and positive results. Negative consequences have included economic exploitation, physical brutalization, moral demeaning, sexual degradation, and basic dehumanization. On the other hand, the economic use of slavery on plantations did lay the foundations of early international capitalism. Plantation agriculture was a positive outcome of slavery, but at enormous human cost.

Nor were the consequences limited to the era of emancipation and the era of abolition of slavery. The age of emancipation unleashed at least ten legacies of subsequent historical change. Some were directly affected by emancipation; others less directly.

Let us now conclude. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued 150 years ago. To whom has the torch of emancipation now been passed? Most recently has it been handed over to the following heirs?

- I. The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- II. The legacy of Nelson Mandela
- III. The new legacy of the first Black President of the United States of America
- IV. The first Pope of Latin America, the Pope of the poor, the first non-European Pope in over a thousand years

- V. The unfolding Arab Spring—Arabs in pursuit of democratization and popular participation
- VI. The emerging world presence of China, India and Brazil
- VII. Europe in search of a new economic and fiscal order
- VIII. Women all over the world in pursuit of vindication, empowerment and equality
- IX. The green movement in defence of Planet Earth and quality of life
- X. The United Nations and its Specialized Agencies in search of greater effectiveness in protecting the peace and promoting social justice

Let me wish Christians a sacred Easter, Jews sacred Passover, let us join Muslims in praying for Syria, let us join other religions in joint prayers for peace.

NOTES

1. See THE AFROCENTRIC EXPERIENCE, TODAY IN BLACK HISTORY.
2. These four models of “miscegenation” were first formulated in Mazrui, *World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1976).
3. Franklin W. Knight “The Haitian Revolution,” from “The Afrocentric Experience.”