

2018

# Translating Slavery As Told To My Daughter

Victoria L.A. Carvelli  
*University of South Carolina*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Carvelli, V. L. (2018). *Translating Slavery As Told To My Daughter*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/4753>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Translating Slavery As Told To My Daughter*

By

Victoria L.A. Carvelli

Bachelor of Arts

State University of New York at Fredonia, 2016

---

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

French

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2018

Accepted by:

Jeanne Garane, Director of Thesis

Jeff Persels, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

## DEDICATION

To Taylor, Ambra, and Mia

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my professors, colleagues, and Christiane Taubira, in addition to rooibos tea and electric kettles.

## ABSTRACT

I am translating an excerpt of the work *L'esclavage raconté à ma fille*, by the French Guianese politician Christiane Taubira. A former Minister of Justice of France, Taubira is famous for her legislative work in recognizing slavery as a crime against humanity and instituting national educational efforts on the subject. The book is an exposition of the history of slavery, set in a storytelling, question-and-answer style, which has the merit of bringing a conversational and accessible aspect to a difficult topic.

I chose this work at the recommendation of one of my professors, and when I was unable to find an English translation, I decided to try my hand at producing one. As I read the original text, I was struck by the historical revelations Taubira offered, and I began to wonder what our American educational system would look like if we incorporated this perspective in our history courses. One of the most striking features of *L'esclavage raconté à ma fille* is its refusal to remain impersonal: the stories that Taubira explores during the conversation with her daughter are human, real and personal, and it is impossible to leave the text without a sense of abject outrage and the desire to make change for the greater good of society.

## PREFACE

*Slavery As Told To My Daughter* is a historical commentary written by the French Guianese politician Christiane Taubira. It is an exposition of the history of slavery, its present ramifications, and the importance of its stories. The book is structured in a question-and-answer style, a dialogue between mother and daughter, which lends a storytelling aspect to this complex topic. Taubira includes a vivid and poetic prologue that sears the reader with visual and sense impressions of enslaved peoples. This is followed by an introduction that calls into question the practice of that essential mandate of French law and society: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”, in relation to members of the historically enslaved societies and their rights in the current political system. In the first chapter, Taubira opens up the dialogue with her daughter, whose questions are italicized to differentiate them from Taubira’s explanations and references. The prologue, introduction, and first chapter will be the only sections of the book that I translate, due to time constraints.

I am motivated to translate this text for two reasons: the first is that Taubira’s presentation of slavery in this text breaks with the whitewashed history that is usually taught in American schools, and I believe that it is an

important narrative that should be accessible to the English-speaking world. Secondly, Christiane Taubira is an important figure to introduce to American society: beyond her professional credits as politician and economist, she recently authored the prologue of a book by Ta-Nehisi Coates, the creator of the Black Panther comic. Last fall, she participated in a speaking circuit of American universities to speak about the issues of race, gender, and the importance of the vote for minorities. She is a thoughtful, reasoned, and intellectual speaker who expresses her ideas with force and beauty. I aim to bring her perspective and knowledge to a wider audience.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Preface.....	v
Foreword .....	1
Prologue .....	6
Introduction .....	12
Chapter 1: The truth of the slave trade and slavery.....	20
Works Cited .....	59

## FOREWORD

Christiane Taubira is a former Minister of France. She trained as an economist and worked as the director of the Caribbean Confederation of Agricultural Cooperation, an organization that she founded to support Guianese interests, from 1982-1985. In 1993, she was elected to the French National Assembly as the representative from Guiana and was subsequently re-elected in 1997, 2002, and 2005. In 2012, she was nominated to the position of Minister of Justice by Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault during the government of François Hollande. In 2016, she resigned from this post due to a conflict of convictions with President Hollande regarding the treatment of French Nationals convicted of terrorism: Hollande proposed to strip French nationality from terrorists with dual citizenship, and Taubira strongly objected to this. Since that time, she has been writing books, giving tours about the struggle for equal rights among women and minorities, and continuing the fight for justice in society.

Taubira was born in Cayenne, French Guiana, in 1952. She grew up in a large family of modest means, but there was evident emphasis on education: Taubira studied in Paris and eventually earned diplomas in four disciplines: economics, sociology, ethnology, and agricultural science. She became an

economics professor in 1978. However, she grew increasingly troubled by the state of French Guiana and returned to help found the political movement *Mouvement guyanais de décolonisation* (MOGUYDE) with her husband. This was the beginning of her career as a “militant independent”, echoes of which would follow her in one form or another throughout her political work: Taubira has been noted for her independent stances that sometimes deviate from party politics.

Being passionate about justice and knowledgeable about the ill effects of slavery, Taubira sought a way to improve the condition of the people who had been exploited by colonialism. After François Mitterrand was elected President of the Republic in 1981, Taubira withdrew from the MOGUYDE movement and its radical independentism. It was at this time (1982-1985) that she became the director of the Caribbean Confederation of Agricultural Cooperation (Caricoop). In 1993, Taubira founded the political party Walwari with her husband, as an alternative to the Guianese Socialist Party, which had previously dominated the local political scene. “Walwari” refers to a type of basket weaving that is particularly identified with French Guianese culture. The choice of name reflected the commitment to local causes and identities of the party, which mixed these priorities with certain socialist ideas. Later that year, Taubira was elected the independent Guianese deputy in the French National Assembly.

In 2001, Taubira was the principal author of the first of three Taubira Laws, which recognized slavery as a crime against humanity. The law also

requires that the history of the slave trade be taught in schools, and it also calls for memorial sites and actions to keep the knowledge of this history alive.

*L'esclavage raconté à ma fille* is an expansion of Taubira's efforts to right past wrongs in society. It is an extremely inspiring and engaging text, and I hope to make it accessible to the English-speaking world.

Regarding my method of translation, I spent a lot of time processing the text, so much so that I often discovered errors later that were due to a preconceived perception of metaphorical language, or a too-literal interpretation of what was later revealed to be figurative. My aim was to completely understand, but I realized swiftly that it will take much more reading, research, and review to fully polish my translation of this text. This project is not a final version.

When I began translating, I started by writing by hand all of the words that required further contextual elaboration. I used Larousse's French-to-English bilingual dictionary for an initial working definition, and followed it with Larousse's French dictionary, as I often found that the mere English translation was either insufficient or wrong in context. Having access to the French opened the door to a deeper cultural understanding, allowing me to begin the process of situating elements of French culture for an English-speaking audience, a process that is still ongoing. The downside to this habit of writing out double definitions is that it became very time-consuming, but even my later modifications of researching unfamiliar words were colored by a greater reliance on an actual

French dictionary rather than the French to English equivalency. The equivalency is important for initial comprehension, but it was rarely the final choice for the word definition.

The second and also rather time-consuming habit that I adopted was to retype the pages of the original text as I was translating them. This initially served the purpose of automatic reference: I would enter my translation immediately under the original text so that I could compare them easily and verify or question the choices that I made. Later, I realized, along with my laborious definition-searching, that I was freshening the material in my mind and priming myself to absorb the essence of the text. For example, in the prologue, Taubira illustrates a naval scene. The vocabulary of ships is often formed by basic words that have vastly different meanings without the context of the sea. Grasping that context by reading the section, typing it out and reflecting on it, accessing the flavor, would then aid immensely in the selection of words as I needed to translate them effectively.

One of the primary problems I encountered in this translation was the question of rearranging syntax. As many classically trained French authors, Taubira is given to circumlocution, where the subject or the verb has a tendency to get lost in elaboration. This translates poorly in English, creating unwieldy sentences that often require a repetition of the subject or reincorporation of the verb. Though my instinct is to adhere as strictly as possible to the original, which causes word-for-word translation to take precedence over other considerations

like the unwieldiness of syntax or a more elaborate French phrasing, I was eventually persuaded to adopt the sense-for-sense maxim in situations where comprehension and readability were being reduced.

In the spirit of faithful adherence to the original, I often left Taubira's more arcane phrasing or flouting of grammatical convention as it was: the prologue of *Slavery As Told To My Daughter* has many surreal and poetic elements that I tried to closely maintain. Additionally, several of Taubira's references are intended for a French audience with a solid grounding in French history. I chose to translate these literally, in the hopes of puzzling the reader just enough to inspire curiosity and subsequent research. I also made the choice to keep certain difficult-to-translate words in their original language, with a footnote for clarification.

I would be immensely grateful to have this work published, but I must stress again that it is not in final version now. It will take much more review, editing, and research to fully capture both the essence of the text and the fluidity of its dialogue.

## PROLOGUE

It is a history of violence and of beauty.

A nightmare without escape.

The wild-eyed children search under the opaque fog that follows the fire.

The sun has already torn itself from the treetops, and the creek flowing to the river sings as it skims the point of a rock fixed in its way. It brushes the earth that is held back by the bushes along the riverbanks, as if it were a day like any other.

The human chain, hobbled at the ankles and neck, provokes anger at times against the procurers, white or black, the anger of the men and women returning from the fields, encountered on the roads leading to the coast where the slave ships are moored.

The coast is voluptuous. It opens out to the indigo sky that confuses the horizon with the throat of a pitiless world. As they break on the blocks of stone, the waves tear at themselves like a deranged mother.

Some of the young women are bent double, others square their shoulders more firmly, their eyes troubled but steady. They have undergone the *appareillage*, that ritual of rape which the sailors give themselves over to. Some of

the girls, most of them, have their souls shattered. Others understand that this is the first challenge cast at their humanity. And they rise to meet it.

The women keep their hands steady, in case the children require their care. The women hum to them that this is one of those inconveniences of life, like the seasons that cause migrations, or when faraway neighbors, armed and shrill, set to looting.

The men are humiliated that they can no longer protect them.

There are wise ones on the voyage. Seized with the others during the raids, or having voluntarily slipped among their people in order to support and watch over them, those women and men that an attack, a misfortune, or an injustice have destined to an ill fate.

The shimmering heat exhausts the immobile bodies.

The smell lingers. It mixes with the clink of irons, thickens in the persistent darkness, overlapping the words that, reflexively, dwindle to whispers. Head-to-foot, being on their left sides, they endure the roll and pitch of the ship, gritting their teeth and adapting to the moods of the sea. They will come to distinguish night from day this way, by the hammering of the water against the hull of the ship, and even more precisely by the subtle variations of the to-and-fro motion of sailors on the deck. They await the moment when the turbulence diminishes, and in the darkness that never fades, they manage to count the hours.

The first revolts will be born from this mastery of the cycle of night and day.

It is the women who have started it. No longer able to stifle the whimpers that assail their throats, they dampen them, affix them, smooth them out, polish them, and transform them into fanged noises, into notes, into blues, into *saudade*.<sup>1</sup>

How many, over the course of four centuries, have plunged, ballasted by their chains, after having tried to master sailors and ship, or even without having tried, preferring the hospitality of the roaring ocean to the bleak and arrogant cruelty of men?

Suddenly the food is slightly less stale. For the past two days, they are taken by small groups onto the deck. To breathe, to move, to feel human again. It is actually so that the merchants can feel them all over, the teeth, the muscles, the lice.

How beautiful these lands are! How welcoming these mountains seem! Begonias compete with the sargasso to perfume the breeze. The coasts are like jagged edges of parchment. The moon, ashamed, shows only its back.

The separations are devastating. They follow only one law, the will of the colonizer and the weight of his purse. The sun is no more biting on the plantations than it had been in the millet fields. But here water is scarce, very scarce. The whip whistles as though it is drunk on its own song. The voices rise,

---

<sup>1</sup> Saudade is a Portuguese term that has no direct equivalent in English. The concept is defined as a melancholy nostalgia for things that may not have happened yet.

reedy at first, improvised work songs that are strangely harmonious, even as they dislocate the rhythm. Creeping from feet to fists, gasping from the lungs to the throat, they are filled with a cold rage, with a tamed impatience, with a choked despair. The children don't play at working, they slave. The women, weavers of sugarcane, harvesters of cotton, gatherers of tobacco, collapse of fatigue sometimes, pregnant up to their necks. The men chew their fury not only against the exhausting work, but against the inability to shield the women from the brutal and beastly desire of the master, and from the treacherous vengeance of his wife.

Men, women, children? Chattel, according to the Code Noir. Livestock, according to the comptroller. Slaves at his mercy, according to the master.

And the fugitive slave broke free.

They knew they were men.

The griots have chanted the laws and interdicts calligraphied in Sundiata Keita's Dunya Makilikan, the bull of Ahmed Baba, as well as the laws of Urukagine and the Code of Hammurabi, since the beginning of time.

They recognized them as men.

The Roman Habeas Corpus and the Magna Carta had long established the limits of force and the abuses of power.

How many papal bulls, royal ordinances, controversies, edicts, rulings, and decrees did it take to contradict and maintain this moral and social disorder...

How many exegeses, doctrines, dogmas, postulates were necessary to justify this unnatural and inhuman commerce, in order to appease tormented consciences...

They have not all perished from it, but all are stained. Religion, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, sciences...including the law, these manipulators of concepts will instill vague theories, adding their share to this great fallacy!

All of this while the surface of the oceans become overburdened with the flags of rival ships, while anonymous cadavers carpet their depths...

While fabrics, iron bars, guns, curios, trinkets from European sea markets, those items derived from extravagant profits of gold bars and silver, sacks of coffee and of cacao, barrels of rum, bales of tobacco, bundles of cotton, cases of silks and boxes of precious jewels, are circulated like never before ...

While these tropical objects and curiosities, these superfluous creature comforts ooze the blood and the execration of decimated American Indians, these things which still ring with the roar of the combats of resistance...

While the exchange is globalized, that it is made clear to the conscience of all that the world is ended...

While racial theories are established, so that racism, worthless to explain the world but quick to ratify its dissoluteness, roots itself for centuries...

While young European sailors, confused, disgusted, resolve, as soon as they return home, to bear witness to the crimes thusly committed...

While slaves create languages and arts, shape religions, meld spirituality, explaining the world and its folly; while they burn the plantations, poison the animals, sabotage the harvest and sink this economy of stipends ; while from ragtime to gospel, from spirituals to blues, from candomblé to the tango, from kasé-kô to capoeira, from banjo to jazz, and from the unassailable quilombos to the treaties of peace, they live the experience of their invincibility ; while their bosses hoist themselves to the heights of humanity linked by the same demand for equality and respect...

While from Europe and America, by injunctions and petitions in Paris, Lyon, Champagny, Barbechat, in London, Liverpool, and Bristol, in Amsterdam and in Pennsylvania, the famed voices of philosophers and of activists, the clamor of ordinary citizens proclaim that they believe in this human equality...

While we finally challenge the slaveries and the servitudes of times past, of times present, of the times to come, and take up once more the conventions and protocols of the Dunya or the Magna...

While from the four corners of the earth and from all cultures we ask ourselves how we might share the world, not in pieces, but in common...

Something is trembling, which from the globalization of brutality and greed wants to materialize the promise of a world, wise in its diversity and passionate for brotherhood.

A history of violence and beauty.

It could be that it is beauty that prevails

## INTRODUCTION

France calls herself a civic nation.

She is right.

Even during this racket of frightful tribal nationalism that has reappeared.

She is a civic nation by rights of the Revolution that smashed privilege and extolled equality, by her origins on the 14th of July 1790 on the Champ-de-Mars, by her intentions to gather her citizens in a common destiny; she is civic in that she transcends group, tribe, ethnicity, race, and blood.

This Nation figures the social and political body linked by the laws it renders unto itself and the institutions that organize civil life.

And it is for this very civic nation that those, “whose names are difficult to pronounce” (Aragon) gave their lives to her.

All citizens are therefore equal.

And yet...

There are still citizens who are burdened with inequality, discrimination, and injustice on a daily basis; those who are condemned by prejudice, clichés, and bias of all kinds; those who confront ostracism and exclusion.

Discrimination is inflicted under various pretexts. It affects women, because women are subject to the real or supposed beliefs of their handicap, of the real or supposed origins of their romantic preferences.

Discrimination generally germinates from intolerance, from the refusal to accept the slightest difference in another. No discrimination is justifiable. No discrimination should be tolerated, because it breaks the pact of the republic that, conforming to the first article of the Constitution, does not recognize differences, and clearly retains none so as to exclude no one.

A characteristic component of prejudice that is founded on this idea of rejection derives from the remoteness of a history that, like the Algerian War, still traces a wake of rancor, even resentment, on collective memory. Prejudice comes sometimes from even further back, from the first colonial period, when trade and slavery produced crude and vicious theories on the inequality of races, in order to justify this rather peculiar economic system.

The long road to the reconciliation of these memories remains chaotic, even though it has made significant progress. There is still much to do in order to extract useful lessons from the political and cultural heritage of the history of colonial conquests. This work should be communal, because this history is communal. It was lived together. Slavers and captives were in the same boat, some on the deck, by their own design, others suffering and revolting in the dark and foul-smelling hold. Together they crossed the oceans and confronted each other on the lands of the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean. From

different positions, they lived through the genocide of the Amerindians. In unequal conditions they forged knowledge of the so-called New World. In a relationship that was initially antagonistic, they inscribed the tracks of Europe and Africa, alongside those which bore witness to the ancient presence of the Amerindians, tracks which had existed since their migrations from Asia. Then the racial mixing, which began with rape on the ships, followed by rape in the shacks on the plantations, illuminated by a few rare and resounding love stories, and finally amplified by the meeting and the solidarity of resistance. This racial mixing has been made null by the binary narration of the world.

Voyages never transport silent and naked objects, nor mute and amnesiac men. These centuries of exchange that were led by the Triangle Trade struck economies and cultures, each as porous as everything that is living, and percolated into common knowledge and representations, unbeknownst to those who believe in the airtight superiority of certain cultures. It is from these connections with the world that Europe drew its new vigor, the generator of its industrial revolutions.

All of the disciplines played a role.

Navigational technology, of course.

Geography broadened its horizons.

History became richer.

Archaeology got carried away.

Anthropology lost its way.

Ethnology went to the dogs by way of exotic and hierarchical considerations.

Sociology began to stutter.

Theology persuaded itself and others of the vague curse inflicted on Ham by a humiliated and unjust Noah.

Science skidded on lackadaisical statistics and theories.

Economic theory sailed away.

And Law was tarnished by the Code Noir.

In all of these subjects, there were marginalized minds that would choose other pathways than those in the service of power, of domination, of injustice, and even for some, who knew fully what they were doing had knowledge of the cause, of the crime. The debates of that time attest to it.

But the effects of this multidisciplinary and biased explanation of a long period remain, they operate in the collective unconscious, permeating the subconscious, and they are sometimes deliberately supported in the consciousness of those who cling to the nostalgia of a world that they believe exists in black and white, white on black.

It is true that the Third Republic got entangled in these motives. It was made to pronounce that civilization offered by the saber and the evangelization imposed by the aspersion were so precious that they were worth a few massacres, the confiscations of lands, forced labor, the pillage of resources, a code for indigenous peoples.

It is necessary to deconstruct to understand, to undo in order to live together. To remake the community.

Those who today are exposed to discrimination are citizens, and they should be treated as such. The status of citizen implies that the fight against discrimination allows for the firm, judicial and restorative response demanded by the constitutional ban, the prescribed penal sanctions and the conservation of the republican pact. But in addition to their status as citizens, the people at whom discrimination is aimed expect something else: the honoring of the social contract. An individual response will not suffice, even as necessary as it is. The institutional response is indispensable. It is therefore by their inclusion in all fields, the economic, the social, the cultural, the symbolic, and the political, that they must be associated, not invited. We must accustom ourselves to see them not as presumed strangers, nor second-class citizens, nor as problems, but as subjects by right, full citizens, granted all attributes of citizenship in theory and finally in practice. It is the defining condition of a collective and durable response to individual torment. From a political perspective: make the community together.

For once we recall the horror of the slave trade, the hell of slavery, the prosperity that Atlantic Europe drew from it, the upheaval that followed the activities, the relationships, the doctrines, and the representations that furnished such deep roots for racism; once we have posited that since that time the resistance and the transcontinental solidarity already postulated the rejection of

servitude, oppression, humiliation, and already enunciated equality among human beings, it stands to us to agree upon what we have in common.

And, without becoming lightheaded from the vertigo that they bring, stand to meet the challenges that face us.

Are we going to watch, indifferent or mortified, this long work of social, territorial, and cultural fragmentation, of the consolidation of bitterness, of the incrustations of a muffled wrath, and let the world disintegrate as society caves in?

Are we going to condemn firmly and loudly, betraying our future powerlessness, without succeeding in containing or convincing or conquering?

Are we only going to pursue those who, by the death that they inflict and self-inflict, evade justice, without catching in time to prevent, those who could topple into this obscure, deadly, and destructive camp that fuses around jubilatory assassination and the eradication of cultures, liberties, and heritages?

The stakes are uncontestably those of affiliation, of "Us", this place in which we dream and elaborate a common destiny. The "Us" of a shared humanity, the "Us" of a world become indivisible. In order to give this world its vitality and consistency once again, it is necessary to recognize the range, the diversity, the disparity, to admit its share in the unpredictable and irrational, to understand this particular quest for identities, this aspiration of the group, this need to incorporate so closely with those who are most similar, and to know how to oppose this with beauty and strength but also the necessity to belong together

and not by fragments. For this, the ability to render accessible, comprehensible, and reassuring the mysteries that encompass the encounters between different beings.

There is no incantation that knows how to provide it. No totem that can protect us against the disenchantment at work in the multiplicity of separatisms, the question of alleged communities that ostensibly showcase themselves, or of supposed natives who believe themselves barricaded by timid or provocative withdrawal. The Republic must establish itself once again as a communal house. In order to do this, it must regain its credibility by existing everywhere, part of everyday life, as equally present in the mind of the public as in public services; it must sustain enthusiasm by ceasing to disdain this eminently legitimate and reasonable desire of the future.

The great and invaluable lesson that is left to us by the long and dark journey of the slave trade and of slavery has been the gift of seeing the world in its plurality, of inviting us to grasp that the only unchanging and indissoluble truth is otherness.

It is not necessarily a given that one familiarize oneself with it, surrender to it, offer oneself to it, learn from it.

There are lands that have housed this continuous and polyphonic experience, in the aforementioned regions overseas and the Americas. The condition of alterity is the relationship, in the sense meant by Edouard Glissant, whether a world where juxtaposed universes cease to confront each other,

ensconced in their atavisms and their certainties, but linked by tongues and languages that domesticate and fertilize each other. Globality.

Education, culture, social life will have to tackle it, resolutely, by placing more value on emulation and solidarity instead of competition and rivalry, and by making a beginning nest for the true, the just, and the fraternal.

That is the possible promise of the reemergence of the civic conscience, by focusing on all and on each, particularly the young generations who feel pushed to the edges of the Republic.

It is true that what I know will no longer master me.

## CHAPTER 1: THE TRUTH OF THE SLAVE TRADE AND SLAVERY

*The definitions that I looked up in the dictionary are perfunctory. And they very quickly refer you to other words – captivity, servitude, oppression, bondage – and then right to modern-day usages, like « to be a slave to one's feelings ». It gives the impression that slavery wasn't that serious!*

By their nature, dictionaries have a tendency to offer concise definitions. What seems even more worrisome to me is the dry neutrality of encyclopedias. Of course, I would have preferred that the dictionaries themselves make reference to historical events, because they are consulted most frequently. But that is assuming that this part of French history is not glossed over by academic curricula. Yet there is a heavy silence from primary school to university.

*Why the silence? Shame?*

Without a doubt, and that would be a very good sign. But that is not the principal reason. The colonial conquests had the perverse effect of convincing Europeans that their civilization is superior to others. Additionally, the efforts deployed to justify the slave trade, slavery, colonization, plundering, forced

labor, or the limitation of the rights of natives under colonial rule, and other abuses have produced their fruit.

*Hang on, hang on! What do you mean?*

Let's start with slavery, because it seems the most well-known. Academic explanations tend to be cold, distant, and muted. Let me offer you the definition given by the 1926 Slavery Convention that was adopted by a later convention of the United Nations in 1956. You know that the League of Nations, created in 1920 to maintain peace after World War I, became the United Nations in 1946, after World War II. But this convention is the only international legal text containing a definition of slavery, considered the "status or condition of an individual who is subject to all or certain rights of property". This definition is not especially warm, but it has the merit of being clear. The slave is therefore a human being reduced to the status of animal, chattel, object, or commodity, in short, he is the property of another. Various pieces of legislation, black codes or slave codes, accorded the master the right of life and death over "his" slaves. The Anti-Slavery International has proposed, since 1973, the following definition for a slave: "A person, working for another, who is not free to refuse his work, and a person who is the property of another and therefore possesses neither liberty nor rights."

*So slavery has always existed?*

That is the refrain of those who wish to brush aside and dismiss all debate on the question. It has always existed, therefore what is more natural? Know that something else has always existed: the refusal of slavery, the rejection of injustice. At any time and in any place, there were those men who placed liberty, equality, and fraternity above economic considerations.

*Aren't you being a little idealistic here?*

Not at all. Maybe just a little bit...

*You criticize these definitions for being too cold, but you are perhaps a bit too passionate about the subject, no?*

I might remind you that you are too young to judge me. There is a Guianese proverb that says that which you overlook will overtake you. But let's say that I happen to be partial, in the sense that I take part in the discussion. I don't make a mystery of it. I don't protect myself from it. I don't believe in objectivity when it is a question of human society. Rigor and method, yes. Objectivity, no. I leave that to crooks and happy idiots. I believe, like Marc Augé, that "an objective representation of the past makes no sense, not because it is not possible, but because this past, when it was present, did not contain objective content".

The history of human societies is a history of power relations, representations, beliefs. It is depicted and rendered by people who not only are

not neutral, but also cannot completely escape the influence of their own culture, of their experiences, of their conception of the world. One can always find men who rise up against injustice, inequality, abuse, cruelty, all of the inhumane acts. And despite the fact that I do not have the proof of each situation, at each moment, in each place, I have in my mind too many examples of men having preferred to incur the supreme risk rather than capitulate or simply be complicit. This sufficiently convinces me that there have always been such men.

*You're always talking about men. And the women, they were passive?*

Absolutely not! They have always taken part in the struggle. And admirably so! I will tell you about "vertical" and brilliant women. When I say "men", I'm referring to the human species, humankind. In that I conflate men, women, children, all by that insurmountable, invincible, indomitable quality, their common humanity.

*Finally, has slavery always existed? It seems that slavery dates from antiquity, from the Romans and all that?*

I can at least speak to you of what we have established. Of what has left traces. I will tell you what I know of the varying forms of slavery that have existed. But, in order to avoid ambiguity, I want to tell you first, very clearly, that all forms of enslavement are to be condemned. And to be fought against. The degree of seriousness varies, as do the methods of resistance. But the reprobation

must be unwavering. There is no waterline when it comes to the integrity of a human being. Liberty is inalienable.

*But there are still plenty of countries where the individuals don't have every freedom, notably in certain tribes. And you who love to talk about solidarity so much, how do you decide between the group and the individual?*

First, it is not a question of having every freedom. It is about not recognizing, under any pretext, the right of property over another person. And in what you call tribes, which are actually communities of men who have chosen the rules of communal life – which there is no reason to idealize either--, liberty is frequently less theoretical than in societies where individual liberties leave each person alone to face injustice and his distress. Nevertheless, even traditional societies practiced forms of servitude and slavery. No matter what affinities or admiration we might have for one form of social organization or another, we cannot consent to the idea of oppression. We cannot find any excuse for it. But I repeat that all forms of enslavement are not identical. Some are more alienating than others. Some call for resistance more vigorously than others.

*Were the damages of ancient slavery the same as those inflicted by the slavery of the Blacks? At the time, the people did not know their rights: they could not therefore be as unhappy as after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen ?*

It is a popular misconception to think that we don't suffer the lack of what we have never known. It is true that if we have never tasted chocolate, we cannot crave it. But liberty is not an ordinary possession. And even those people born into slavery suffer from a lack of freedom. The rationale of habituation to servitude is often applied to the case of animals born into captivity. But man has something that is substantially different than an animal: he projects himself into the future. It is possible to lose oneself mentally in the horrific image of an enslavement that would last one's entire life. Above all, the question of freedom does not only concern those who are deprived of it. It concerns also those who enjoy it, all the while knowing that the other is deprived of it.

*Does that mean that no one should be deprived of their liberty? Should we also abolish prisons?*

I speak of the withdrawal of freedom for arbitrary and often sordid reasons: profit, contempt, racism, and other abuses, prejudice and other outrages. When someone is deprived of freedom after a judgement, if the process was a fair one, as Article 11 of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1948 requires, there is nothing to say, except to call into question the penal system of the country concerned. Prison is unfortunately the chosen method to sanction transgressions, misdemeanors, and crime in contemporary societies. And still, it is among the least violent of those methods. Reflecting on prison, its alternatives, the influence that social fears exert upon the severity of certain judgments, to the

public duty of reintegration, otherwise known as release preparation, etc., should be a permanent requirement. But this debate draws us considerably far away from our discussion of slavery.

*Very well, madame. Now if you would at last tell me about slavery in Roman, Arab, European, and perhaps other times ?*

All of us have indeed learned that slavery has existed since antiquity. We know that it was practiced by the Sumerians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, and numerous other ancient peoples. It was two thousand years before the Christian era. The Egypt of the pharaohs treated conquered foreigners as slaves. This was the lot of Nubians or Libyans, for example. In the majority of cases, these slaves were assigned to the laborious tasks of constructing and laying out cities, but they were equally responsible for the harsh work of the fields.

In conquering Greece and ancient Rome, slaves were first and foremost vanquished enemy warriors. Women and the rest of the population were considered the spoils of war or piracy. But citizens could also be reduced to slavery for owing debts or having infringed certain laws. This situation was however more frequent in what was called the « Oriental Pole » as opposed to the « Greco-Latin Pole » where people supposedly of Hellenic race and language were spared. All of this was sanctioned by Plato and Aristotle. They considered that certain categories of men were destined to be enslaved so that others could

flourish and apply their talents to the management and protection of the State. Plato said that « any word addressed to a slave must be an absolute order ». In these class societies, there was no solidarity between free men. Thus, the wage-earners, the small craftsmen, and the poor could also suffer a material life that was almost as destitute as that of the slaves. But there was a marked difference between a very poor, but free, man, and a slave, even if the latter were less miserable: the former enjoyed free man rights.

Moreover, there was no unity either in the lot of the slaves. There were those who could be domestic but also convicts, assigned to public, agricultural, or mining work. They could be authorized to practice an artisanal career and to pay a fee to their master. They could purchase their liberty, thus becoming emancipated. In Greece, the emancipated slave was comparable to the metic, or the domiciled foreigner. There were many functions and certain careers that were forbidden to him. However, we know that at the end of the 400s B.C., the armed police of the State was comprised of Scythian slaves. In Rome, access to certain functions remained impossible for an emancipated slave, but he enjoyed all civic rights and a large portion of political rights. It seems also, according to some authors, that former slaves were able to achieve the role of senator or become integrated in the government.

*When all is said and done, their fate wasn't as terrible as I had imagined.*

That is probably also the sentiment of those who reject all discussion of slavery with this summary: slavery has always existed and it is possible that the fate of slaves was more enviable than that of certain free citizens. It is a fact that, in antiquity, Middle-Eastern, Greek, and Roman slavery provided for a means of escape by access, though partial, to the privileges of citizenship. This should not make us lose sight of the fact that slavery is a deprivation of freedom, it is arbitrary because it comes from acts of war or piracy, abusive because it punishes debts or certain crimes. Nor should it be forgotten that slavery consists of wresting labor from human beings without paying them. Furthermore, this slavery of war and piracy ended by making way for a massive enterprise of capture and enslavement, motivated by the conquests in Africa, in Asia, in Gaul, in Germania, in the Balkans, and stimulated by the development of agriculture and animal husbandry.

*You mean to say that beyond spoils of war and piracy, people went looking for slaves expressly in order to make them work?*

Yes. A veritable economic activity was organized because the markets for a workforce were no longer occasional, but became stable and voracious. Nevertheless, as mass slavery developed, so did mass resistance. Among the most famous revolts is that of Spartacus in the 1st century B.C. Spartacus was a shepherd. He was captured and placed in a school for gladiators, from which he escaped. He raised an army and held Rome at bay for several years before being

vanquished by Crassus and crucified. These insurgent slaves were better judges than anyone to know if their lot was an enviable one. They rebelled against concentration-camp work, the cruelty of masters, the absence of all possibility of a return to their home country.

*When you talk about the conquest of Africa, does that also include the Arabs? I read that they had organized a full commerce for capturing Africans?*

That is correct. This commerce is called the Arab-Muslim Trade. Arabian countries are situated on the African continent, to the north of the Sahara Desert. The countries to the south of the Sahara, or the sub-Saharan countries, are inhabited by Black Africans. Up until colonization, which traced the borders of the continent according to the ambitions of the European powers, the human communities that resided there were nomadic or semi-nomadic, and confrontations between them sometimes gave way to the enslavement of the vanquished.

Before and after the Christian era, the continent had nonetheless known flourishing civilizations, prestigious kingdoms, and erudite dynasties. And the women were not left out. I know that you have read stories about Hatshepsut, queen of Egypt, who extended this first great African civilization all the way to the Middle East towards the north and to Nubia towards the south. That was in the 15th century B.C. You have possibly heard tell of the Candaces, these queens of Meroë, who reigned for seven centuries starting in the 3rd century B.C. for this

second of the great African civilizations. You surely know a bit less about Queen Amina who founded the famous mounted army of the Hausa kingdom that she ruled. That was in the 16th century B.C. The empresses Helena and Sabla Wangel, in the 16th century, saved Ethiopia from a crisis that could have proved fatal. The queen N'zinga of Ndongo, a country which the Portuguese named Angola, was so proud, courageous, and powerful that according to legend, a hollow in the prehistoric rock of the fortress of Pundu Andango is her footprint. She fought fiercely to prevent the Portuguese invasion and establishment of slavery in her kingdom. That was at the end of the 17th century.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, these queens, these women, radiated and thundered, rigorous and remarkable. Their destinies were tragic sometimes, striking always. Doña Beatrice was burned alive, her infant in her arms, for having confronted the Congolese authorities that had colluded with the Portuguese and caused poverty and misery among the people. Mmanthatsi, from Sotho, halted the march of the Boers of Cape Colony to the north ; she saved her kingdom during the times of great turbulence in South Africa, at the beginning of the splendor of Chaka, the Zulu emperor. Ranavalona the First fended off the European colonization of Madagascar and managed to keep it at bay until her death in 1861. Muganzirwazza drove the resistance of the kingdom of Uganda until her troops were crushed, caught between the Arabian slave ships and her rival Mutesa, who had been armed and corrupted by the invaders.

Yaa Asantewa made the Ashanti kingdom of Ghana invincible against the British attempts at invasion of Eastern Africa. Nehanda propelled and led the first war of resistance and independence of Zimbabwe; her influence was so great, she was considered one of the outstanding minds of the Shona Lions; she was hanged after the victory of the British who did not hesitate to use dynamite to vanquish the rebellion of the Shona people.

*My goodness, we are proud to be women!*

Don't you think so? And you will feel even more proud after having read the works of Cheikh Anta Diop, especially *Nations nègres et culture*. You will feel proud of your femininity, of your identity, of your humanity. And when you are confronted with inexplicable gaps, incomprehensible voids, and strange holes in this long and glorious genealogy, remember these verses from Derek Walcott that recall that the ocean was, during these fatal crossings, the harrowing *middle passage*, a deafening cemetery.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?

Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,

in that gray vault. The sea. The sea

has locked them up. The sea is History.<sup>2</sup>

There you may indeed find one part of the mysteries of the long night of this interminable oppression.

*And the Arab-Muslim trade, then...*

Thus, as you say, this trade known as Arab-Muslim or Arab-Islamic, which was actually the business of Arab merchants, because it involved commerce, not religion, was exercised against people of sub-Saharan Africa; it left traces which date back to the third millennium B.C. These traces are more numerous from the New Empire from 1580-1085 B.C. It is acknowledged that it would have been sporadic. A few surprising episodes seem to me to be interesting to highlight. They demonstrate not only that the victims of this trade and slavery were never subjugated, but that among their ranks they counted leaders that were capable of dominating the world, if that had been their philosophy.

For seventy years, between the 13th and 12th centuries before the Christian Era, the twenty-fifth dynasty known as Sudanese reigned over Egypt. It often happened that the slaves enlisted in the army comported themselves so bravely that their epics fed legends. In 869 A.D., in the face of an extremely well-organized and imposing slave insurrection, the Abbasid Empire had to mobilize

---

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from "The Sea is History", The Star Apple Kingdom, 1979

all of its armed forces, which then undertook a monumental massacre. In the 11th century, an emancipated slave spearheaded an overthrow in Yemen. There he installed a dynasty that lasted for a century and a half. Actually, it appears according to the archives that Trans-Saharan trade was significantly practiced from the 7th century. Treaties are frequently found in support of this, like the one drawn up in 652 with Christianized Nubia. The Maghreb, Rome, and Greece were involved. This trade in Africans, men, women, children, carried out on behalf of Arab traders, was linked to the business of gold, ivory, ambergris, and wild animals. It was a trafficking of human beings. This is not any more excusable than others, notwithstanding the reversals of the situation that I have mentioned.

*If I am understanding correctly, there is always an economic reason?*

It does indeed seem dominant. All of the other arguments asserted in order to justify these practices have all the allure of sorry excuses. This traffic of human beings from before the colonial European conquests passes along the Trans-Saharan route, the Horn of Africa, the coasts of the Indian ocean, the routes of India, of Malaysia, of Maritime Southeast Asia. It serves the most diverse economic interests. It supplies the salt industry, furnishes workers for Mesopotamian agriculture, the cultivation of pearl oysters in the Red Sea, the palm plantations, the construction of irrigation channels, the mining of gold and of precious stones, the cultivation of sugarcane in Morocco and Portugal. It

procures troops and the free workforce enlisted for the invasion of the south of Africa all the way to gold deposits of Monomotapa, and for the pursuit of spices.

After the fall of Constantinople which the Turks seized in 1453, the geopolitical climate was turned upside down. The rivalries between the south of Europe and the regencies of North Africa intensified. With the aid of technological progress and the modernization of navigation, the slave trade swelled to considerable proportions, implicating European powers more and more, bleeding black Africa and dragging the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean through a chain of human tragedies that would last more than four hundred years.

*More than four hundred years! For economic reasons!*

The reality, for Africa, a victim since the time of the Arab slave trade up until the European slave trade, was millennia of misery, of variable intensity depending on the period. The trade perpetrated by Europeans marks a turning point by its nature, its duration, the way that it is conceived and regulated, its legitimization. Until that point, the trade was undertaken by land and slavery was principally reserved for the vanquished, excluding predatory expeditions. It was an affair of might. The procedure was savage. From that point on, theories, doctrines, and codifications would accommodate such practices. These last four hundred years began with the Portuguese expedition that reached Cap Bojador or « Cape of Fear », in 1434. The first known raids date from 1441 in Río de Oro,

the river of gold. And beginning in 1454, Pope Nicholas V legitimized the commerce of these human beings who were designated as « ebony wood » in his bull *Romanus Pontifex* by which he accorded his authorization to the king of Portugal, Alfonso V.

*After the Muslims, the Christians?*

Yes, the Christians. They allowed the *pomberos*, the traffickers, to believe that the trade and slavery of Africans were the process of accomplishing the prophecies contained in the Holy Scriptures. The curse of Ham also served this purpose.

*The Curse of Ham? Who was Ham??*

I will tell you this story that can be found in translations, incidentally contested, of the Old Testament. Noah, the patriarch to whom the Lord gave permission to construct an ark before the Flood in order to save his family, a pair of each species of animal, as well as plants, had three sons: Ham, Shem, and Japheth. One day, Noah, who after the Flood had switched from nomadism to agriculture, had abused the juice of the grapevine and became drunk. He removed all of his clothes and slept naked in his tent. Ham had found this very funny and mocked Noah. Shem and Japheth, with respect and modesty, took a mantle, and, walking backwards to avoid seeing their father's nakedness, covered him with it. When he woke, Noah learned what had happened, probably

from Shem or Japheth. It seems he became indescribably furious. He cursed his son Ham and condemned his descendants to serve as the slaves of the descendants of his brothers for eternity. Among the four sons of Ham, he did not punish Cush, ancestor of the Ethiopians, Mizraim, ancestor of the Egyptians, or Put, ancestor of Arabs and of Libyans. He chose to weigh down only Canaan with a curse that would follow his descendants eternally.

*But that is so ruthless!*

Just a bit! But let us look at things serenely, if that is exactly the right adverb in the context. All of these explanations about the universe and man seem to me to merit respect, for they are founded on a coherent system that contributes to the elucidation of the great moments of History and great natural events, and therefore they contribute to cultural originality and social cohesion. As long as they do not include racism or intolerance. If they do, their fruit is already beginning to rot!

Let us take the case of France. Country of the rights of men and of liberties, it was in fact, in trafficking volume, the third slave trade power in the world. Incidentally, Abbé Grégoire<sup>3</sup> proclaimed that « slavery demeans the

---

<sup>3</sup> Abbé Grégoire (1750-1831): French politician and clergyman, advocate of the emancipation of Jews during the French revolution. He was the original writer of the first decree of the abolition of slavery (1794)

master as well as the slave ». Frantz Fanon<sup>4</sup> and Albert Memmi<sup>5</sup> demonstrated that the perverse effects of colonialism affect both the colonized and the colonizer. An American author developed a thesis according to which the white man began to abuse his wife because he had acquired the behavior of using violence towards women by raping black slaves. This appears specious. But who knows?

*Let's go back to your story of Ham and Noah, if you would please...*

You can find it alive and well in the Jerusalem Bible, in chapters 9 and 10 of Genesis. This myth has been the subject of numerous exegeses, of which the most accessible feature in Bible dictionaries. Don't look so astonished. Look for the word « exegesis » in your dictionary. I'll wait...So, these elaborate interpretations intended to enlighten the laypeople we are do not tell us which part of the world is represented by Canaan. Certain people state nevertheless that Ham is a word of Hebrew origin that means « to be hot » or « to be black ».

---

<sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon (born in Fort-de-France in 1925 and died in the United States in 1961): psychiatrist, writer, supporter of the Algerian Revolution, author of *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952), of *Damnés de la terre* (1961), prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre, and of *Pour la révolution africaine* (1964). Head physician of the psychiatric hospital in Blida, he observed psychological troubles linked to the colonial situation and established parallels between the sufferings of the insane and the situation of the colonized.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Memmi (1920): French writer of Tunisian origin, author of *La Statue de sel* (1953, prefaced by Albert Camus), that analyzed the mechanisms of racism and colonization from a sociological point of view. Author of *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du Portrait du colonisateur*. Buchet-Chastel, 1957.

*You mean to tell me that Noah, the only man that God had judged worthy of being saved before the Flood, was so cruel and so unfair?*

Listen, for the moment we will leave God out of this. You speak of injustice, you see very well that it is on a worldly plane that we must dissect this story and pull the moral from it. Take it again from the beginning.

*Noah was drunk, then. And if this bad example were not enough, he rewarded the denunciation of Shem and Japheth, instead of restricting them to dry bread and water, or giving them twice the area of the field to till in order to plant new grapes.*

Well said.

*And then he condemns the innocent!*

Without redemption!

*Redemption?*

Yes, the possibility to redeem oneself. The end of the punishment. The hope of relief. Here is a story that does not place the least emphasis on fraternity, or love, or mercy, or even charity. And it is upon the supposed foundation of this

story that the slave trade and slavery inflicted on millions of men, women, children were able to be perpetrated, sometimes with indifference, often with complicity, and even with the blessing or under the authority of the generous founders of missionary orders. They proclaimed that Europe had the noble mission of assuring the salvation of the souls of these unfortunate sons of Africa struck by the curse.

*That is too much! Who could believe such a thing? In any case, it is a serious offense.*

*What religion does it come from, actually? Was it Catholicism?*

Hold your horses. The religions mutually accuse each other. Among the catholic authors, in a book written in 1928, Father Pierre Charles<sup>6</sup> accused the Protestants by affirming that, up until the Revolution, which sealed the rupture of traditional catholic teaching, « the Black was respected ». Raoul Allier<sup>7</sup>, a Protestant professor, explained that this interpretation of the Book was due to rabbinical speculations dating from the 3rd to the 5th century, according to which Ham had dishonored Noah on the Ark and that it was because of this that he had been transformed into a Negro. We might smile if this stupidity had not covered so many atrocities, had not provoked so many tragedies. It would appear that this piece of nonsense had known a particular vigor in the 16th century. Much later, in 1870, there was a council – that is, an assembly of

---

<sup>6</sup> Cited by Alphonse Quernum, *Les Églises chrétiennes et la Traite atlantique du XVe siècle*, Karthala, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Alphonse Quernum, *op. cit.*

bishops – that of Vatican I. The participants wanted to ask the Holy See to intervene in favor of the Blacks in order to expedite the end of the curse that befell them. This request was not actually examined, the war of 1870 and the struggle for Italian unity occupying minds with more « urgent » subjects. Other authors, equally embarrassed, explained that Noah had not cursed the descendants of Ham, but simply predicted the enslavement that would strike them. That it was not actually a curse, but a prophecy.

*It's the same thing, isn't it? If it is because of destiny, then it is because of God?*

It is certain that all of these deflections and evasions are not sufficient to completely erase the declaration of the biblical text announcing that the descendants of the cursed son will be enslaved: *servus servorum*. Even if no one had added this slander designating the black « race », it would be intolerable, whoever the men thusly condemned. Finally, what religion could comply with such precepts?

But knowledge progresses, the sciences become liberated from their dependence with respect to religious theses, modern physics has freed itself of the metaphysical, and all of this, finally, is very invigorating. Certain religions claim that the entirety of scientific knowledge is stated in the Holy Book, that for example it is written that the Earth is suspended in the Universe. This, well before the intuitions and calculations of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Magellan...

*Everyone is always right. How can we find our bearings in all this ?*

By taking an interest in this knowledge and these understandings, that, in every latitude, humans accumulate. These encompass the hard sciences, but also the humanities, the social sciences, philosophy. Moreover, keep in mind this aphorism from Rabelais: « science without conscience is nothing but the ruin of the soul »<sup>8</sup>. Equally as the only recourse of the narration of the world by the holy book leads to obscurantism, so also the veneration of only the material data, which is in itself an idolatry, can result in the mechanistic abruptness of cold monsters. That is an alchemy to brew within yourself. Not by taking sides. The conflicts between the Church and the scholars have been power struggles. There are high stakes in knowledge itself, and in the diffusion of knowledge. Whether they be secular or religious, institutions are regulated by men. It is necessary to fight to access knowledge and at the same time be lucid, remain free by way of doubt, and prioritize ethics which underlie certain knowing, certain techniques. To be clear, question oneself if one can, without impediment, dispose of all that one knows and if one has the right to do all that one knows how to do. The debates regarding human cloning push this question to its limit. Man may criticize God all he wants. The worst is that he thinks he is God.

*With all of these matters that never cease to raise controversy, between crimes against children and the Rwandan genocide, one never knows to what extent the responsibility of*

---

<sup>8</sup> François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 1532-1564

*the Church is implicated when priests do things that contradict morality and the word of Christ. Or at least according to what I remember of the catechism that I learned.*

In the cases that you mention, justice ought to shed light on the responsibility of each person and organization. We already know that a guilty silence on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchies permitted these priests to ill-treat vulnerable children, and perhaps to believe in impunity. For my part, I believe that these acts are a matter of crimes against children, because there is no love in the betrayal of trust and the theft of childish innocence. For the child victims of sexual violence, like those of slavery, the accountability of the Church varies according to the time. But in multiple circumstances, that accountability was indisputable.

In Rwanda, the price of the genocide and the traumas suffered are incalculable. Thankfully, justice has begun to be rendered, with the Gacaca Tribunal, which is pronounced *gatchacha* in Kinyarwanda, a local version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa ; but also in France, where Rwandans suspected of having participated in the genocide are taking refuge. The first condemnation has been pronounced. Twenty years later. It is a long time, but it's an encouraging start : no impunity.

You remember the *Romanus Pontifex* bull from January 8th, 1454, from Pope Nicholas V. That was early ! That a papal bull invoked the highest

authority of the Church, and it is important, because the European kingdoms recognized papal supremacy. Later, the bull *Inter Caetera* dated May 3rd, 1493, from Pope Alexander VI, instituted a line of demarcation in the Americas that was favorable to the catholic kings of Spain. The Portuguese, who until that point had been favored by Nicholas V and Calixte III, protested against this Iberian monopoly because they were worried about missing out on the royal taxes that would instead benefit the rival kingdom of Spain. The treaty signed June 7, 1494 between the Portuguese and the Spanish at Tordesillas, in Spain, moved the shared line by giving Portugal the eastern side of America and the Cape Verde islands to the west of Africa. The English, involved in the Reformation – you know, the religious movement of dissent that gave birth to Protestantism – rose up to question the pontifical authority.

Meanwhile, the French, with the voice of François I, asked « which clause of Adam’s testament excluded the kingdom of France from the division of the world ». Because, beginning with the latter half of the 16th century, in addition to Spain and Portugal, the slave trade was logged as a commonplace and systematic commercial practice in regards to the international economic competitions of the various European powers, principally England, France, Holland, Denmark, and even Sweden.

Numerous other papal bulls implicate the Church in the sharing of colonial conquests. It reveals itself to be a volunteer in the management of

rivalries between European powers, but indifferent to the lot of the slaves. In the Epistles of Saint Paul, the letter to Philemon binds this master to treat Onesimus, who fled and converted to Christianity, certainly more fraternally, but always as a slave. Numerous other verses exhort the slaves to religious submission in regards to their master. Saint Augustine presents slavery as a consequence of sin.

*And there was not a single merciful pope in sight?*

No. It must however be noted that, in his bull *Sublimus Deus* from June 9, 1537, Pope Paul III unequivocally condemned slavery, as he had condemned the enslavement of Indians in his letter *Veritas Ipsa* from June 2 of the same year. Nevertheless, commentators (our famous exegetes) say that he spoke of « all other peoples who might be discovered », without ever naming the « Negros », as they were called at this time, while there were African slaves in Spain during this period. These « other peoples » therefore only designated other American Indians. This is a credible commentary, because at this time Bartholomew de Las Casas, off to make his fortune in the Americas, was converted by becoming a Dominican priest and committed himself to the defense of the American Indians. However, he only pleaded that the « Indians be free of slavery » and replaced with Africans who were « more robust ». The same exegetes say that Las Casas had influence at the Spanish Court, and therefore influence in the close circle of the Pope. It was a few years before the controversy of Valladolid that, from August 1550 to May 1551, opposed Las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda, the great

defender of the colonial adventure who reclaimed the Aristotalian concept of « natural » slavery. They quarrelled over whether the Indians had a soul and therefore merited the release from slavery. Spain was in full evangelizing fury. The subject remained less the salvation of souls than the yield of the *ingenios*, the sugar mills.

*And is there not even one person who, unequivocally, as you like to say, disengaged themselves from this infamy ?*

There was of course Thomas de Mercado, a Dominican priest who, in a book that appeared in 1571, clearly stated that the slave trade contradicts the just rules of commerce, and the principles of humanity. He therefore denounced the trade, but accepted slavery. A secular jurist, Bartholomew de Albornoz, published a work in 1573 that clearly refused the pretext of religion and the claim that it was much better to be « slaves and Christians than free and ignorant of the rule of God ». He affirmed that the teachings of Christ could not « teach that the liberty of the soul must be paid with the servitude of the body ». His book was banned by the Holy Office. For our greatest comfort and happiness, Louis Salamolins uncovered two magnificent figures, two friars. Francisco José de Jaca<sup>9</sup> and Épiphanie de Moirans<sup>10</sup>, young priests of twenty-seven and thirty-two years of age, one sent to Caracas, the other to Cayenne where he would never arrive,

---

<sup>9</sup> Aragonais, 1645-1690

<sup>10</sup> Jurassien, 1644-1689

went to preach and denounce the practices of slavery, referring as much to law as the Christian faith, in the name of the « rights of man » and of the « light of reason »<sup>11</sup>. As for the first official position taken by the Church against slavery, it would be contained in a letter from Pius VII to the king of France, dated the 20th of September 1814 : it stipulated that it was forbidden to consider the commerce of Blacks as permissible. This was not an especially great advance for the secular authorities, because the Congress of Vienna would intervene a few months later, February 8th, 1815, to forbid the trade as « repugnant to the principle of humanity and of universal morality ». But slavery remained authorized.

*But how was it that they distinguished the slave trade from slavery so easily? How could one be refused and the other accepted?*

We must note that it is only in the case of black slavery perpetrated by the States, the ship owners, and the European merchants that the trade and slavery were so linked. In the trade practiced by the Arab dealers, the pool of slaves was already sub-Saharan Africa, therefore black Africa, but it happened that other populations – Arabs, Europeans, Slavs, Albanians, Moors, Greeks – were reduced to slavery, because of debts or defeat in war. Along with the European conquests, it was from 1416, possibly before, that trade began to be linked with slavery, in two distinct sequences each constituting a practice in its own right

---

<sup>11</sup> Louis Sala-Molins, *Esclavage reparations. Les lumières des capucins et les lueurs des pharisiens*, Nouvelle Éditions Lignes, 2014.

with its logic and its procedure, and justifications from all orders explaining why the Blacks were predestined to endure this unconscionable commerce. The Amerindians underwent slavery outside the slave trade and were victims of a genocide that took them from 11 million in 1519 to 2.5 million at the end of the 16th century in the region of central America. You remember that the enslavement of the Amerindians was the subject of the Valladolid controversy. It is likely that slavery's existence since antiquity, the numerous biblical references justifying the practice and the remarks of thinkers like Plato and Aristotle were able to clear Europe's conscience. The most audacious outlawed the slave trade while they accommodated themselves to slavery. To be honest, I do not have satisfactory explanations. And I equally do not understand the drives behind this gesticulatory reasoning. Besides, I believe that even if I were given to understand it, I would not share it with you. I sincerely believe that it is an ethical choice, a sound and salutatory act of resistance to refuse to be misled by explanations of monstrous acts. One can explore the mechanisms that drove them, in order to reinforce vigilance. But especially, especially not to risk the infiltration of what is absolutely inhuman into what is human by specious interpretations.

*And the philosophers knew how to express this, at least?*

Not all of them, not always. The great Hegel, German philosopher of the beginning of the 19th century, whose virtues are endlessly sung for what he brought of the real and rational to analysis, also affirmed that « for all the time

which we have observed the African man, we see him in a state of savagery and barbarousness [...]. One can find nothing of his character that is human. »<sup>12</sup>

*That takes my breath away! I had heard of the involvement of philosophers for the abolition of slavery. I did not think that one could be a philosopher and have such prejudice at the same time!*

Unfortunately, my dear little girl, almost all of the disciplines unhappily have something to be sorry about in this area. Anthropology, a human science that supposedly studies that which is common to all humans, was unable to see that theories of Count Arthur de Gobineau<sup>13</sup> about « the inequality of human races » were contrary to its very essence. Ethnology, a human science supposedly grasping the reasons that dictate the different behaviors of humans according to their culture, did not want to see the corruption in the proposals of Bartholomew de Las Casas, Andalusian bishop of the Dominican order. In order to protect the Indians to whom he became attached, he asserted that despite their animistic practices they had souls and that in the final analysis they worshipped the same God as the Christians, which ought to absolve them from slavery. But with the same fervor he affirmed that the Africans, though having the same animist practices, did not have souls and that, being stronger, they would make an

---

<sup>12</sup> G.W.H. Hegel, *La raison dans l'Histoire*, 1822-1830.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, 1853-1855

excellent and free workforce, subjugated and brutalized to cultivate plantations and work in gold or silver mines.

He did not use exactly these words, but the violence of the slave system which had already decimated the Amerindians did not escape him, because he sought to deliver them from that violence. And yet he proposed to add to the trauma of the slave trade by encouraging the deportation of Africans from their continent as far as the Americas, despite the horrible navigational conditions of the period.

*Was he aware of all of this?*

Undoubtedly. Although it seems that he repented of this before he died. You see, it is the values that we choose as the cornerstone of our lives which act as a safeguard, preserving us from all complicity and all complacency regarding inhumane practices. As long as we think that all men are equal, we do not accept under any pretext the acts that would put this conviction in peril by inflicting or allowing to be inflicted what we find unacceptable for others and for ourselves to a certain category of humans.

*Was science not sufficiently developed at this time to enlighten all these people?*

Science has also had its black sheep. It was not so long ago, three-quarters of a century, that we knew that the true markers of difference between humans were in the genes and not in the color of the skin: a Black and a White are not

necessarily more different than comparing two Blacks or two Whites between them. It is true that science itself recognizes multiple races. There was even a time when it counted thirty-two races, the last being the « race of evildoers ». However, there is a whole gulf between, on one side, observation and explication of these differences, even if erroneous, and, on the other, utilizing them as means of domination, exploitation, and destruction. One can still find scientists, like the doctor Camper<sup>14</sup>, who claim by means of vague studies on facial angles, that the « black race » was certainly inferior to the « white race ». Another scientist, the naturalist Cornelius Van Pauw, still during the 18th century, affirmed that humans were of equal quality, no matter which race they belonged to, but he instantly added, like the naturalist Buffon, that in the hotter regions of the world the intellectual capacities were altered. He asserted, « The actual country where his [the human's] species has always succeeded and prospered is the Northern temperate zone of our hemisphere; it is the seat of his power, his grandeur, and his glory. Beneath the Equator his complexion tans and darkens; the features of his disfigured physiognomy appall by their coarseness. The fire of the climate abbreviates the term of his days, & augments the ardor of his feelings, the realm of his soul shrinks: he ceases to be able to govern himself & he does not grow up. In a word, he becomes a Black & this Black becomes the slave of slaves<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Petrus Camper, 1722-1789, Dutch doctor, naturalist, and biologist.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Van Pauw, *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains, Mémoires intéressants pour servir à l'histoire de l'espèce humaine*, t. II, nouv. Ed 1772.

*The slaves were surrounded!*

You're right, it was a real encirclement. They could not call anyone to their aid. They could not seek refuge anywhere. The Church had cast them out, banished from the community of humans. Specialists gave arguments to the slave traders to appease their consciences. And the State orchestrated this lucrative trade.

*Did you say the State?*

Yes, the State. It was the owner of the private plantations. It possessed immense cane fields in which slaves worked. The authorities French, Spanish, Portuguese, English had created national companies, that is, public enterprises which had a monopoly over this commerce. You have already read things about the West India Company, the Equatorial Africa Company, etc. This monopoly lasted until 1716 in France, at which time land patents issued by the kingdom opened this commerce to private enterprises. The State didn't give up everything. It collected taxes on the tonnage of ships filled with such diverse merchandise as trinkets, fabrics, and guns, which secured the French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese Atlantic ports. They made berth in Africa, in the ports where the trading posts of slave trade companies were installed. They exchanged their cargo for slaves -men, women, children. The adolescent girls were often

raped. This was called « appareillage »<sup>16</sup>. The slavers took their pleasure and, as a bonus, made themselves richer, because the child which would be born from this rape would also be sold as a slave. Calculations were made to place the most slaves possible in the holds of the ships, like sardines in a tin. The fear, the hunger, the cold, the heat, the dirt, the blows, they were spared nothing. Once arrived in the Americas, they were sold, rarely by lots, almost never by family. One mother to a master, her children frequently to different buyers. The holds of ships were then filled with gold, silver, spices, sugar, tobacco, cotton. Direction: Europe. It was the Triangle Trade: from Europe, the ships stuffed with rods of irons, guns, bolts of cloth, various curios; from Africa, the holds filled with slaves; from America, the loads of coffee, cacao, precious minerals, spices; and the return to Europe.

*All of this for the sake of profit?*

Exactly. It was a fruitful business. The books of merchants as well as their correspondence show that, considering the risks of navigation and the hazards of such a business, the yield would have had to be considerable. They were more likely to be involved in this activity rather than others, which included much more comfortable investments. This trade generated diverse economic activity which filled the State till with multiple receipts. The State received dividends or

---

<sup>16</sup> A specific French term for the outfitting of a ship getting ready to sail. Here it has the connotation of breaking the girls in.

privileges from the charter company. The State received the revenues of the private plantations. The gains produced by the arms licenses, the royalties on cargo, the taxes on the emancipation of slaves who repurchased their liberty all returned to the State. It was a real economic system with its circuits of redistribution. For example, the State equally accorded fiscal exemptions and waivers to boost the privatized initiative of the slave trade. It disbursed a *per capita* allocation to the clergy for each adult, child, or infant baptized. The clergy had no shame while it proceeded to conduct collective baptisms. Thus, the State transferred the control of consciences to the Church, and the clergy was charged with watching over the submission and docility of the slaves by promising them celestial paradise in exchange for a patience lasting through the hell on earth.

You cannot imagine the number of European port cities that flourished around the slave trade. Lisbon in Portugal, Liverpool, London, Bristol in England, Glasgow in Scotland, Dublin in Ireland, Nantes, Bordeaux, Rouen, Le Havre, La Rochelle, Saint-Malo in France, Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, Hamburg and Glückstadt in Germany. All of these cities belonged to Atlantic Europe.

*That is a lot of ports and cities! I knew about Nantes, but that was all*

No doubt because Nantes provided 40% of slave traffic. But also probably because it was the first of the French port cities to look its history in the face.

Thanks to the intellectual curiosity and integrity of researchers, teachers, and

students, thanks to the dynamism of certain associations, thanks to the courage and greatness of soul of its mayor. So, in 1992, on the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas, Nantes launched a project « The links of memory » with the double symbolism of the shackling chain and the ring which makes a connection, the links of solidarity.

*After the slave trade, were the port cities poor?*

They scraped by for the most part, thanks to an agricultural or artisanal economy. The cities that flourished the most were situated along the banks of the Mediterranean. The slave trade constituted a vacuum for European capitalism which began searching for outlets outside of Europe. It therefore displaced the central nervous system of economic activity from the Mediterranean towards the Atlantique.

France benefitted in large part from this, but it was not the only country. Spain, which, favored by the Church, held at the outset privileges and a quasi-monopoly over this maritime trafficking, but had decided to sell its rights in the form of *asientos*. An *asiento*, you know, is Spanish for...

*Registry, contract, treaty, rights to...*

Exactly. The *asiento* was a sort of license, an official authorization which ceded the rights of the slave trade. It served as credentials for international commerce. Spain distributed them to the Flemish, the Genovese, the Portuguese, the French, and the English, from 1532 to 1759. Spain drew enormous tax

revenue from this. And the actual trafficking was even more important because of the smuggling. The *asientos* were not eliminated until 1817, when Spain ratified the treaty banning the slave trade adopted by the Congress of Vienna on February 8th, 1815. It was also done in Portugal and in France.

*And it was finally finished!*

Unfortunately, no. Only the slave trade was forbidden. Not slavery itself.

*Even for the secular states?*

Even for the secular states, as you say. And you are right to make that distinction because the concordat signed in 1801, about fourteen years earlier, between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII reestablished « normal relations between the Church and the State after the Revolution ». While the Congress of Vienna, as you've probably learned at school, was a humiliation for France, a forced obligation to capitulation by the coalition formed of England, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Nostalgic admirers of Napoleon still carry the wound of that defeat. But for our ancestors, this vanquished imperial France and this emperor Napoleon forced into exile was a lull. Because this treaty of the Congress of Vienna which declared the slave trade « repugnant to universal morality » foresaw the creation of a maritime police under British responsibility. The infringements of the law were numerous. The States hypocritically closed their eyes to the trafficking that followed privatized slave ships. Slavery continued to prosper. The masters of plantations, the owners of cane fields and distilleries

continued to enrich themselves thanks to the free work force. Abuses continued to rain on the slaves.

*And all of this was permissible by law?*

Yes, according the Code Noir which was invented by Colbert, minister of commerce, and enacted by Louis XIV in 1685, immediately applicable to the colonies of the Americas, extending to La Reunion in 1724. In Article 44, slaves were declared « moveable property ». They were officially considered chattel, of the same status as the other assets belonging to the masters. And in the accounting-books of the plantations, slaves were entered in the category « livestock ». In Article 38, it was stipulated that the master had the right of life and death over his slaves, therefore he was authorized to brand the symbol of a fleur-de-lis with a hot iron and to cut their ears at the first escape attempt, a « jarret »<sup>17</sup> at the second attempt, and to hang or quarter them at the third. Branded like animals. Designated as animals. Assassinated like animals. Not even slaughtered as the cows and sheep were. Whipped. Tortured. Quartered. Hung. All under the authority of the State.

*Do we know how many people supported this?*

Not precisely. There are only estimations. Historians often refer to sailors' logbooks, the « roles », which is to say the registry documents for *asientos*, and to

---

<sup>17</sup> French term for slicing open the tendon at the back of the knee.

diverse administrative documents to try to elaborate the statistics. But they rarely agree on the same figures, because the margin of error is important. In both senses. For example, one cannot evaluate the smuggling. But it is certain that it increased the number of victims in relation to what is indicated by the official documents. But we know also that certain numbers taken from the books aboard the slave ships were overestimated. This allowed the ship owners to appear powerful by displaying greater economic surface than what existed in reality, thus accessing certain privileges.

Nevertheless, historians give a range of figures from fifteen to thirty million people – men, women, children – exiled to the depths of the hold. Moreover, certain experts consider that for every slave brought to the Americas, four to six had perished during the raids, uprisings, following sickness, or from execution, without counting those who committed suicide during the route to the storehouses, which were called *captiveries* or *baracons*, from Gorée in Senegal, from Zanzibar in Tanzania, from Ouidah in Dahomey, from Loango in Angola, and over the course of the sea crossing. Thus, seventy to one hundred fifty million people, young, vigorous, belonging to prolific generations, would have been torn from Africa.

You have seen the drawings illustrating the holds of slave ships. The organization for a massive deportation is evident. And it is likely that the conditions of the transit to the coasts and the resistance would have caused high

mortality rates. Heavy losses, as the slavers noted deplorably in their registry. It is equally important to add the thousands of slaves thrown into the sea by the traffickers after the Congress of Vienna. As soon as a patrol ship came into view, the sailors on the slave ships had orders to « throw the cargo overboard » to avoid the fines.

In regards to the Trans Saharan slave trade called « Arab-Muslim », practiced regularly between the 7th and 16th centuries, approximate evaluations present fourteen million victims.

## WORKS CITED

- “Ahmad Baba Al Massufi.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 14 Apr. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmad\\_Baba\\_al\\_Massufi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmad_Baba_al_Massufi).
- “Ahmed Baba.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Apr. 2018, [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmed\\_Baba](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmed_Baba).
- “Appareillage.” *Appareillage : Définition Simple Et Facile Du Dictionnaire*, Linternaute, 2018, [www.linternaute.fr/dictionnaire/fr/definition/appareillage/](http://www.linternaute.fr/dictionnaire/fr/definition/appareillage/).
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. “Gargantua and Pantagruel.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 17 Feb. 2014, [www.britannica.com/topic/Gargantua-and-Pantagruel](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Gargantua-and-Pantagruel).
- Buckner-Inniss, Lolita. “Taubira, Christiane.” *Taubira, Christiane (Taubira-Delannon, Christiane) (1952- ) | The Black Past: Remembered and Reclaimed*, [www.blackpast.org/gah/taubira-christiane-taubira-delannon-christiane-1952](http://www.blackpast.org/gah/taubira-christiane-taubira-delannon-christiane-1952).
- “Christiane Taubira.” *Linternaute.com*. CCM Benchmark, 2017.
- “Christiane TAUBIRA.” *Politique.net*. Politique.net, 2017.
- “Christiane Taubira.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Apr. 2017.
- Garsd, Jasmine. “Saudade: An Untranslatable, Undeniably Potent Word.” *NPR*, NPR, 8 Jan. 2015, [www.npr.org/sections/latino/2014/02/28/282552613/saudade-an-untranslatable-undeniably-potent-word](http://www.npr.org/sections/latino/2014/02/28/282552613/saudade-an-untranslatable-undeniably-potent-word).
- Larousse, Éditions. “Larousse.” *Dictionnaire Français-Anglais En Ligne*, Larousse, 2018, [www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais-anglais](http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais-anglais).
- Larousse, Éditions. “Larousse.” *Dictionnaire Français - Dictionnaires Larousse Français Monolingue Et Bilingues En Ligne*, Larousse, 2018, [www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais](http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais).
- “Les Peines Corporelles Infligées Aux Esclaves.” *Une Autre Histoire*, 20 Aug. 2013, [www.une-autre-histoire.org/les-peines-corporelles-infligees-aux-esclaves/](http://www.une-autre-histoire.org/les-peines-corporelles-infligees-aux-esclaves/).

- “Linguee | English-French Dictionary.” *Linguee.com*, Linguee, 2018, [www.linguee.com/english-french](http://www.linguee.com/english-french).
- “Loi Taubira.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Apr. 2017.
- “Marc Augé.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 14 Apr. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc\\_Aug%C3%A9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Aug%C3%A9).
- Média, Prisma. “Christiane Taubira - La Biographie De Christiane Taubira Avec Gala.fr.” *Gala.fr*. Gala, 2017.
- “Nations of Ham.” *Amazing Bible Timeline with World History*, The Amazing Bible Timeline, 2018, [amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/nations-of-ham/](http://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/nations-of-ham/).
- “Onésime (Ier Siècle).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Apr. 2018, [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/On%C3%A9sime\\_\(Ier\\_si%C3%A8cle\)](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/On%C3%A9sime_(Ier_si%C3%A8cle)).
- “Saudade | Definition of Saudade in English by Oxford Dictionaries.” *Oxford Dictionaries | English*, Oxford Dictionaries, 2018, [en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/saudade](http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/saudade).
- “Soundiata Keïta.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 Apr. 2018, [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soundiata\\_Ke%C3%A9ta](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soundiata_Ke%C3%A9ta).
- “Sundiata Keita: The Lion King of Mali.” *Ancient Origins*, Ancient Origins, 18 April, 2016, [www.ancient-origins.net/history-famous-people/sundiata-keita-lion-king-mali-005733](http://www.ancient-origins.net/history-famous-people/sundiata-keita-lion-king-mali-005733).
- Taubira, Christiane. *L' Esclavage Raconté à ma fille*. Éditions Points, 2016.
- “Urukagina.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 17 Apr. 2018, [fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urukagina](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urukagina).
- Walcott, Derek. “The Star-Apple Kingdom.” *PoemHunter.com*, Keltis, 12 Apr. 2010, [www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-star-apple-kingdom/](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-star-apple-kingdom/).