

# Ali Moussa Iye Interview: Why Talk About the Slave Route Today?



The *Slave Route* is not merely a thing of the past. It is our history and it has shaped the face of many modern societies. In this (October 2014) interview, Ali Moussa Iye, Chief of UNESCO's Slave Route Project, explains its relevance today, in terms of historical reparation and current debates about racism and social justice.

**Why is it important to discuss the *Slave Route* today?**

We often think that it is a project of the past, but the slave trade was a foundational event of modernity: its economic impact, which enabled the industrialization of colonial powers; the emergence of new cultures, and great artistic innovations, such as jazz; its universalism, which forced a rethinking of Human Rights, once conceived as reserved only for certain categories of people; the transfer of knowledge and know-how from Africa to the rest of the world.

**Do you think that the *Slave Route Project* has helped to break the historical silence which has shrouded the slave trade for so long?**

It helped to understand that any concealment of important historical facts is in itself an obstacle to reconciliation and peace. A great deal of work has been done to convince governments, particularly the Ministries of Education, to talk about this in textbooks.

From the start, the project had a holistic and – I'd like to emphasize - non-accusatory approach, based on scientific research, education and preservation of the written and oral records. We promote cultures that were born of this heritage and we show the contribution of the African diaspora in the construction of modern societies. We must use our shared heritage as a bridge for peace and dialogue.

**How would you evaluate the progress in historical reparation, globally?**

The first reparation was ethical and political: our project has allowed the greatest tragedy in terms of numbers (up to hundred million deported) and time (four centuries) to be recognized as a crime against humanity in 2001. UNESCO was the first UN agency, to have recognized slavery and the slave trade as such.

There is also reparation in historical, educational and memorial terms: we must inscribe this tragedy in the history books and teach it in schools. We must build monuments, memorial sites and museums dedicated to the tragedy.

The crime of the slave trade is the only crime in the world where the perpetrators were compensated and not the victims. According to Sir Hilary Beckles, the United Kingdom has paid about 16 and a half million pounds (the equivalent of 11,6 billion pounds in 2010) to compensate slave owners for the loss of their "human assets". The project commemorates the tragedy, suffering and resistance of these victims and at the same time celebrates the artistic and cultural interactions and innovations born of the slave trade.

**How does the *Slave Route Project* inform the world's most pressing debates regarding racism and discrimination?**

The Project allows people to understand the sources of prejudice in order to prevent the reproduction of the stereotypes that have served to justify the "inferiorization" and bestialization of Black people. For example, nowadays, some football supporters throw bananas when they see a Black player enter the field. We need to trace back to slavery to understand this gesture. It is precisely this genealogy of racism and racist prejudice that the *Slave Route Project* tries to get across.

The project offers a new historical perspective on the inequalities carried out during the slave trade and which can still be felt today. It tackles the question of living together, the multiethnic societies in which we live in today... How can we let go of the prejudice and hatred that people can have towards one another? How can we build a new form of citizenship that emphasizes dialogue, while it repairs inequalities? We need to go back to the sources of injustice and discrimination in order to go forward. Promises built on wishful thinking are not enough.

In this regard, the affirmative action policies launched in the 1960s in the United States were a way to repair the prejudice which Black people had suffered for centuries to the benefit of American society at large. The *Slave Route Project* is fully in line with the Durban declarations and action plan which state that this historical reparation is needed in order to facilitate the ideal of peacefully living together. Brazil is currently implementing affirmative action policies 30 years after the United States; it is a policy of justice. Other South American countries, such as Venezuela and Colombia, are also considering affirmative action.