

City of Cartagena de Indias Honors Its African Legacy

In the framework of the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) and of the African Heritage Month, celebrated each month of May in Colombia, a series of initiatives were undertaken by the Colombian Ministry of Culture and the National University of Colombia to recognize the memory of slavery and praise the contribution of people of African descent in the city of Cartagena de Indias.



The UNESCO “Slave Route project: resistance, liberty, heritage”, which is actively engaged in the preservation and promotion of sites and places of memory related to the slave trade and slavery, was invited by the national and local authorities to participate in various activities and events organized in this city.

The project’s coordinator, Ali Moussa Iye, presented the accomplishments of the Project and reminded participants of what was at stake as regards remembering slavery in all the countries that were affected by this tragedy. He took part in the conclusion of a training module for 25 tourist guides to raise awareness on this history and reinforce their capacities to tell another narrative of their city. This narrative is based on historic events that took place on at least 18 sites in the city of Cartagena de Indias, identified by researchers of the National University of Colombia, that constitute an itinerary of memory. A booklet entitled « Sitios de memoria de la esclavitud en Cartagena de Indias. Una Invitación a su recorrido », coordinated by a Colombian member of the International Scientific Committee of the Slave Route project, Claudia Mosquero, was published on this occasion by the National University of Colombia. It brings precious information to anyone curious about the different sites of memory of the city.

One of these important sites, the Plaza de los Coches, was chosen for a special ceremony on 19 May 2016 in the presence of the Vice-minister of Culture, the Secretary-General of Iberoamerica and the Mayor of Cartagena. A commemorative plaque was unveiled to pay tribute to the African captives that were brought in chains to this square to be thrown into the horrors of slavery.

A seminar organized by the Colombian Ministry of Culture presented an opportunity to discuss the key role that sites of memory play in increasing recognition and appreciation of the contribution of people of African descent to the cultural, economic and social diversity of the Colombian nation, and to the current struggle against racism and discrimination.

During a conference organized on 20 May by the Spanish Cooperation Training Center in Cartagena de Indias, the Slave Route Project's coordinator analysed the memorial, political, social, cultural, education and economic stakes of sites of memory. Discussions were held with the Spanish Cooperation Training Center in Cartagena de Indias to ensure that the training module for tourist guides becomes a sustainable initiative, in collaboration with the Slave Route project and the National University of Colombia, over the coming years.

Structured around the three themes of the International Decade for People of African Descent « recognition, justice and development », and examining the traces left by the exploitative system of slavery on the physical and social body, an original choreographic creation by Atabaques, Permanencias and Periferia dance companies was interpreted by an ensemble of 30 dancers.

The Colombian collaboration with the UNESCO Slave Route Project has been very strong in recent years. In 2011, for example, Colombia hosted and financed the statutory meeting of the International Scientific Committee for the Slave Route Project, and since then has financed the Project and members of the Committee's participation in various events of the yearly celebration of African Heritage Month.

Note: Photo by El Heraldo and Lorena Henriqez

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