



SPEECH

**His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K.,
President of the Republic of Mauritius**

**EVENT: LAUNCHING CEREMONY OF NOUS BANN ANSET ES-
AFRIKEN / ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF 1695
INSURRECTION / PUBLICATION OF TRAS
INTERKONTINANTAL**

**VENUE: INTERCONTINENTAL SLAVERY MUSEUM (ISM)
QUAY STREET, PORT LOUIS**

DATE: 19 AUGUST 2025

TIME: 14:00 HOURS

Protocol

Honourable Paul Berenger, GCSK, Acting Prime Minister of the Republic of Mauritius

Honourable Mahendra Gondeea, Minister of Arts and Culture

Honourable Ministers, Junior Ministers and MPs

Excellencies and members of the Diplomatic Corp

Mr. Aslam Adam Hossenally, Lord Mayor of City of Port Louis, and the Deputy Lord Mayor

Mayors and Deputy Mayors

Mr. Stefan Gua, Chairperson of the Intercontinental Slavery Museum

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media,

All Protocol Observed.

Introduction

Bon après-midi à toutes et à tous, et merci de m'avoir invité à cet évènement si important.

C'est un grand honneur d'être parmi vous aujourd'hui dans ce magnifique bâtiment patrimonial, au sein du Musée intercontinental de l'Esclavage afin de donner le coup d'envoi des activités liées à la Journée internationale du souvenir de la traite négrière et de son abolition, observée le 23 août de chaque année depuis 1997.

With your permission, I shall now make my address in English.

The International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO established The International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, which is observed annually since 23rd August 1997, to commemorate the transatlantic slave trade and honour those who fought for its abolition.

The date specifically marks the beginning of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, a pivotal event in the struggle against slavery.

I understand that the ISM has indeed prepared a rich and meaningful programme for this week, ranging from exhibitions and workshops to publications and performances.

The focus will be on Reparations, Restitution and Return, and this event will be a strong signal that Mauritius, with a history of slavery and a member state of the African Union, engages fully with the pursuit of continental and global justice.

The Historical Site

It is also significant that this launch is taking place here at what was once the Military Hospital- the oldest standing building in Mauritius.

The Military Hospital, where we are today, is not only the oldest building on the island, with its four wings still standing, but it was the work of a multicultural group of workers: French, Indian and Malagasy artisans and slaves were brought by the French Governor Labourdonnais to build this hospital.

What better example of our interculturality of the history of our island?

This very site is therefore a living testimony of our island's intercultural foundation.

I commend the ISM, with the support of the U.S. Embassy, for restoring one of its small structures by using 18th-century methods, even training young Mauritians. in the making of argamasse roofs with the help of artisans from Pondicherry.

May this serve as a model for the full restoration of this historic complex.

Allow me to thank Mr. Stefan Gua; the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and all esteemed organisers for or their dedication and commitment to this important commemoration.

I would also like to thank previous speakers for the scholarly and invaluable insights they have shared in connection with today's event.

It is also good to see the involvement of the scholarly community, civil society and people from all walks of life and I am happy that they have being invited to participate in these events.

My gratitude also goes to all those in the academic and scientific community as well all partner organisations who are contributing to expand our knowledge of history through their research, writings and publications generally, and their collaboration in the management and development of our heritage sites.

Special Welcome

Allow me to extend a very special welcome to Professor Benigna Zimba, the person who conceptualised the Intercontinental Slavery Museum project for the Truth and Justice Commission in 2011.

It was befitting that it is a scholar from Mozambique was chosen to conceptualise the Museum in Mauritius for the ties that bind us to the African continent are age-old, especially from Eastern Africa and Madagascar, a region where a massive slave trade in the 18th century took place.

I also extend a warm welcome to Dr Klara Boyer-Rossol, distinguished historian of East African captivity and slavery in the 19th-century South-West Indian Ocean, who is with us to present the exhibition “Nou Bann Anset Es-Afriken.”

Dr Boyer-Rossol has devoted years to unveiling the hidden histories of enslaved peoples, and her scholarship on the work of Eugène de Froberville allows us today to reconnect with the human faces, voices, and legacies of our ancestors.

The Froberville Collection

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am particularly pleased to note that this year’s programme entails the exhibition of three of the 65 busts sculpted in the 1840s by Eugène de Froberville, which capture the real faces of formerly enslaved persons.

A powerful and moving element which will allow Mauritians to encounter their ancestors not through the colonial gaze of stereotypes, but through authentic representations of human dignity and resilience.

So, I join the ISM in hoping that, in the future, the remaining busts-now housed at the Château de Blois- may also return, together with the Froberville manuscripts, which provide invaluable detail on the music, dance, and traditions of formerly enslaved peoples.

I take the opportunity to thank Emmanuel and Brigitte Huet de Froberville, former custodians of the manuscripts of Eugene de Froberville for having agreed to allow the ISM to obtain digital copies of these manuscripts and to have deposited the original copies at the National Archives in France.

These collections must be preserved, studied, and shared, not only as academic resources but as touchstones of memory for present and future generations.

Lost Cultural Traditions

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our distinguished scholars and visitors in Mauritius are devoting themselves to consolidate the ties that bind us to the African continent, especially with Eastern Africa and Madagascar, where a massive slave trade prevailed in the 18th century.

Today, many ordinary Mauritians do not feel any affinity with our African brothers and sisters or with the continent.

There is however booming business between Mauritius, and East and Southern Africa. Despite the work of several institutions, such as the Nelson Mandela Centre and embassies established here in Mauritius, *Africa remains the continent to be exploited for its mines and fast-growing consumer market.*

We do little to preserve and revive lost cultural traditions that existed and were transmitted across generations among enslaved and free.

How many in Mauritius would accept to ‘reconnect with Africa, in the same way as is being envisaged in West Africa, in particular in Senegal, South Africa, Benin, where citizenship is being offered to African Americans?

If we are to be serious and sincere about Reparations, Restitution and Return, then this situation must change.

The ISM has an enormous role to play to bridge the gap and create this sense of belonging and search for our roots in Eastern and West Africa and in Madagascar.

Reconciliation through Interculturalism

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Remembrance is primordial but so is reconciliation.

I quote from the Truth and Justice Commission recommendations:

“The Commission further recommends that consideration be given to commemorating 23rd August (UNESCO Day of Remembrance of Abolition of Slave Trade) as a Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation which will more fittingly honour both slaves and their descendants, as well as the descendants of indentured labourers.”

But as stated also in the TJC Report, ‘reconciliation is never easy, is never cheap and remains a constant challenge.’

We, in Mauritius today, must continue to be vigilant and aim through **constant inter-cultural dialogue**, to maintain the peace and unity that characterises Mauritius.

We have a unique opportunity in Mauritius to showcase our inter-culturalism to the world, through our history and our heritage.

Scientific research as backbone for Justice and Reparation

Scientific research, backed by solid evidence, must remain the backbone of any reclamation for justice for all, including that of reparations.

I refer to the ISM brief stating that ‘a critical confrontation’ is required ‘with structural inequalities that persist within the society’.

If scientific study of ‘these structural inequalities’ is not undertaken, the desire and reclamations for social and economic justice will remain in the realm of wishful thinking, rather than achieve concrete outcomes.

Anna Van Bengale

In this connection, I must commend young historian Joel Edouard, studying in the Netherlands, who has mastered 17th century Dutch palaeography, and is undertaking his doctoral studies on Dutch Mauritius and the Dutch colonial empire in the Indian Ocean.

Without his painstaking work, we would not have been able to learn today of Anna van Bengale and other enslaved persons who fought against their enslavement.

Through his book which we launched in February of this year during the UNESCO Slavery Conference, we also learned another very important fact: that Mauritius was far from being a ‘terra nullius’, in other words ‘land belonging to no one’.

Indeed, maroons and deserters of several nationalities, stayed on in Mauritius, when the Dutch abandoned Mauritius.

These maroons and deserters could be described as Mauritius’ first permanent inhabitants of Mauritius.

I am aware that this discovery somewhat upsets the information in our existing history books and our views on who first settled on the island.

Scientific research has also taught us that Mauritius has been a multicultural society from the very beginning of its existence.

History and Nation-Building

Indeed, there is no excuse for people to continue to write ‘parallel histories’: in other words, we have many works where authors write on their own ‘community’ in a vacuum, without any reference to other people living there at the time.

For example, among the abolitionists, there were both blacks and whites, both men and women.

In our educational system, we must strive to equip our youth (and others as well of course), with the skills to study, analyse and discuss complex and controversial topics in our history, with a critical and open mind even if this challenges certain myths.

But first and foremost, we must do everything possible to cultivate the love and motivation for studying the history of our Republic.

As President, nation building forms an integral part of my mission.

But how can we build a strong and vibrant nation when its children and youth are not connected with the history of their own motherland?

UNESCO’s Routes of Enslaved Peoples

It was a pleasure for me in February of this year to meet with Doudou Diene, conceptor of UNESCO’s Routes of Enslaved Peoples and find that we have a common vision, and that is to promote intercultural dialogue among our peoples.

In Mauritius, our educational and cultural institutions, public and private, have a huge role to play in fostering and encouraging this process.

Similarly, the ISM, together with other institutions, has an enormous role to play to bridge these gaps and adopt a historiography that upholds truth and justice, while creating a sense of belonging with our roots in Eastern and West Africa and in Madagascar, and nurturing a while a culture of nation building.

Closing Remarks

Ladies and Gentlemen, this brings me to a saying with which you may be familiar and I quote:

“If you don’t know history, you don’t know anything. You are a leaf that does not know it is part of a tree.” Michael Crichton

Reparations, Restitution and Return must accompany reconciliation

Remembrance is not passive- it is active, restorative, and transformative.

I hope that these commemorations will guide us not only to honour the past but to seek justice in the present, and to build a more equal and reconciled future for generations to come.

As One People, As One Nation, In Peace, Justice and Liberty, true to the values enshrined in our Constitution.

I wish the ISM Board and Staff well in future years and hope you will continue to ‘Kas sa Silans la’ (Breaking the silence). (For those who are not aware, this was the theme of ISM’s first temporary exhibition).

Thank you for your attention.