



SPEECH

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

**EVENT: LAUNCH OF DUAL EXHIBITION AND BOOK -
CONSTANCE COURONNE / FURCY MADELAINE**

VENUE: INTERCONTINENTAL SLAVERY MUSEUM

DATE: 02 FEBRUARY 2026

TIME: 15: 30 HOURS

Protocol

Honourable Mahendra Gondea, Minister of Arts and Culture

Honourable Ministers, Junior Ministers

Her Excellency Ms. Kate Chamley, High Commissioner of Australia

Excellencies and Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Members of the National Assembly

Ms. Gabriella Batour, Mayor of Beau-Bassin / Rose Hill

Respected Government Officials,

Mr. Stefan Gua, Chairperson of the Intercontinental Slavery Museum

Distinguished Guests,

Members of the Media

All Protocol Observed.

Introduction

Bonn apre midi à tous.

Merci pour l'invitation pou sa l'occasion la, et pou permette moi partaz quelque reflections.

Se avek ene plezir ek enn profon santiman de responsabilité ki mo tenir a être present zordi pou sa seri activité ki pe organisé sa semenn-la par Mize Interkontinantal Lesklavaz pou komemor labolision lesklavaz.

Mo tenir a remersie tou bann organizater, an partikilie Mons. Stefan Gua ; Ministere Lar ek Kiltir, ek Haute Commissaire Australie, pou zot invitasion pou lancement livre de Monsieur Nicholas Couronne ek osi pour lepozision lor Constance Couronne ek Furcy Madeleine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With your permission, I shall continue my address in English.

I listened attentively to the preceding speeches, and I thank the speakers for their thoughtful insights.

Almost a year ago exactly, I launched an international conference on slavery at the University of Mauritius, organized by UNESCO and in which many recommendations were made for future research.

In my address, I argued whether after 58 years of independence, with Mauritius having acceded to the status of a Republic, we should continue commemorating slavery and indentured labour as two separate chapters of our common history.

- **Should we not pause and reflect about a new and better way forward without minimizing the specific historical significance of these two episodes in the life of our Republic?**
- **Should we not look at these events from a broader and more encompassing Human Rights perspective?**

In August last year, I stood in this very place to mark the International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition, where our focus was on the **3Rs - Reparations, Restitution, and Return.**

These commemorations and reflections were never intended as an end in themselves.

They were meant to open a longer, more demanding reflection about where we come from, who we are and who we want or would like to be.

It is in this continuity that today's event must be understood.

New and Multiple Voices

In both events, it was stressed that hitherto silent voices must be heard.

The voices of the enslaved, the voices of the oppressed, the voices of those who have been silenced **must** be heard and understood.

We must continue to be curious about our common heritage. It will help us towards better mutual understanding, so essential for nation building.

We must also respect the fact that there are multiple voices that can be heard and which sometimes contradict each other.

Indeed, there can be several interpretations of a story. Every story has multiple sides.

The account of the history of Constance Couronne and author Nicolas Couronne's search for his ancestor is an example.

This personal story must be respected and encouraged.

Engaging in reconstructing personal family histories and narratives can be very therapeutic.

Mr. Nicolas Couronne,

Like your ancestor, you have demonstrated extraordinary resilience, agency, and moral courage in your search for your ancestor.

Moreover, you are also an accomplished writer, and write with much elegance and simplicity, making the text accessible to all.

I hope this book will find its way in school libraries to inspire future generations, much in the same way you were inspired when you were in school!

I have not read the book yet, but I do hope that the book contains some powerful lessons that we must retain so that we do not repeat injustices of the past.

Rather, we should aim to repair and reconcile.

Congratulations on your perseverance, and for having become the co-winner of the Jean Fanchette prize in 2025.

I also welcome the presence of a fellow descendant of Constance Couronne, Gloria Provest, who has travelled all the way from Australia to join us today.

A big thank you to the Australian High Commission for its continued commitment to initiatives that deepen historical dialogue between our two countries.

I also welcome the exhibitions on Constance and on Furcy Madeleine, who, in contrast, pursued freedom through juridical resistance, contesting the legality of his enslavement in 1817.

Slavery was not only about submission and humiliation, but also about resistance and respect.

The life and work of Jacques-Désiré Laval and Adolph de Plevitz resonate with similar values and must be told more often than it is done today.

They speak of universal values without the filter of community, caste, race or religion.

Technology and History

I am also happy to note that in the context of the commemoration of the 191st anniversary of the abolition of slavery, technology and AI is being leveraged to bring alive historical events and extend their reach to wider audience.

A wonderful opportunity **to reconnect with History, bring down walls, and build bridges, especially with our younger generation,** who are considered to have little interest in our past.

Visual history is a new field in Mauritius and allows for multiple interpretations of our history.

And, once again, to remind us that courage, memory, and the pursuit of justice are enduring forces which touched the lives of every single human being, in search freedom, justice and dignity.

Reflections:

Allow me to make a few reflections on Mauritian history in general.

Mauritius has long stood at the crossroads of civilizations- a liminal space where people, cultures, and histories converge.

Lost Afro-Malgasy Connections

Of all the historical and cultural connections that exist between Mauritius and continents, it is our **Afro-Malagasy connections** that appear the least understood and respected.

Many Mauritians continue to feel little connection with our African and Malagasy brothers and sisters.

Why? Is that connection not important? If it is, then what can be done to reinforce these connections?

If **other nations** - such as Senegal, South Africa, and Benin - are **creating pathways of reconnection for the African diaspora**, then Mauritius, too, must rise to this responsibility.

Our “devoir du memoire” must **not be limited** to commemorations; we must travel to our roots and **build the people-to-people** connections.

We must **develop** a broader, more **inclusive historical agenda** which intersects with arts and culture, politics and economics, technology and science.

For example:

•Should we not encourage **cultural tourism, pilgrimages and research journeys to Eastern and West Africa and to Madagascar**, allowing our people to trace their roots and engage directly with their ancestral histories?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Africa is not only yesterday; it is today and tomorrow.

Let us **reconnect** with our roots.

Leopold Sedar Senghor, the celebrated African poet and past President of Senegal, had this to say and I quote:

«écoutons la voix de nos ancêtresdans la cabine enfumée les âmes qui nous veulent du bien murmurent. »

Let us listen to the voices of our forebears....in the smoky cabin, souls that wish us well are murmuring

I, therefore, **reiterate my call to institutions like the ISM** to brainstorm and to assume this pivotal, pioneering role.

Come together, think together, act together to **bridge gaps, revive lost connections, and cultivate** a profound sense of belonging among Mauritians.

Towards multiculturalism

Distinguished Guests,

The **lives of Anna van Bengale**, Constance Couronne, Furcy Madeleine, and countless others, reveal stories that are inseparable - woven **across** communities, genders, and origins.

History must not be wrapped in myths and prejudice, barriers and boundaries.

Our past must therefore be taught with rigour, critical insight, and the courage to confront difficult, uncomfortable truths.

Our past must not divide us; it must unite us.

Research across the wider Indian Ocean world has reaffirmed a fundamental truth :

‘Mauritius has been multicultural from the very beginning.’

The work of historians like Joel Edouard on Dutch Mauritius, launched last year, tell us that Mauritius was far from a ‘terra nullius’/ land belonging to no one.

Maroons and deserters of various nationalities remained on the island after the Dutch departure, becoming its first permanent inhabitants and **challenging long-held assumptions in our history books about who first settled here.**

The history of slavery, indentured labour and other forms of unfree labour that have existed in Mauritius cannot - and must not - be taught as separate or disconnected episodes.

They are part of a single, continuous historical process that shaped our multi-ethnic, multi-cultural identity as Mauritians **as well as our political - economic history.**

Let us be clear: in our nation-building journey, **there must be no place for “parallel histories” or selective memory.**

Let us commit to teaching all the truths of our past and not be selective.

Let us encourage multiple approaches to telling our common story: **revive lost oral traditions**, encourage the study of **lived experiences**, establish local community museums, **encourage cultural pilgrimages.**

Every Mauritian must not only know his or her story but know and understand those of others too.

Only then can we build **a Republic that is truly just, united,** and unshakable - As One People, As One Nation.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To conclude, I thank the ISM and all its partners once again, and I wish you fruitful deliberations during your upcoming round-table discussion.

I shall be very attentive to the outcomes of this discussion, and I look forward to the recommendations.

Merci et bonne continuation

Thank you for your attention.