



SPEECH

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

**EVENT: EXHIBITION “THE FORGOTTEN SAINTS” –
INTERNATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE OF
SLAVE TRADE AND ITS ABOLITION**

**VENUE: NELSON MADELA CENTRE FOR AFRICAN
CULTURE TRUST FUND, LESPAS LAR, LA TOUR
KOENIG, POINTE AUX SABLES**

DATE: 20 AUGUST 2026

TIME: 17:30 HOURS

Honourable Mrs Arianne Navarre-Marie, Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare;

Honourable Ministers and Members of the National Assembly,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Mr. Josué Christophe Troylukho, Chairperson of the Nelson Mandela
Centre for African Culture Trust Fund

Mr. Stéphan Karghoo, the Director, and members of the Nelson
Mandela Centre for African Culture Trust Fund

Mr. Emmanuel D'Offay, Artist of The Forgotten Saints,

Distinguished Guests,

Members of the Media,

All Protocols Observed.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, allow me to commend the Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture Trust Fund for organising this exhibition, and to warmly welcome Mr Emmanuel D'Offay and all our distinguished guests, especially from Seychelles and Ghana.

Though distinct, the histories of Mauritius and Seychelles are not isolated. They are interconnected through the movement of people, cultures and traditions across our region.

Today's gathering therefore offers an opportunity to consider a wider Indian Ocean history of slavery, memory and human resilience.

Remembrance

The International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition invites us, each year, to return to a difficult chapter of human history.

But the more pertinent question is: what do we do with remembrance?

On 25 March this year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution led by Ghana, recognising the trans-atlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans and the racialised chattel enslavement of Africans as the “gravest crime against humanity”.

This was followed in June by Ghana’s High-Level Consultative Conference in Accra on the next steps for reparatory justice.

So, if remembrance is to inform questions of justice and reparation, then we must be clear: the history underlying those questions must be properly researched, preserved, narrated and understood.

Who were the people involved? Where did they come from? How did they live, resist and endure? And what remains of their voices?

Reflections

In August last year, and in February this year, while speaking at the Intercontinental Slavery Museum, I underscored the importance of recovering voices that have remained largely silent in our historical narratives.

The stories of Anna de Bengale, Furcy Madeleine and Constance Couronne have each contributed to that endeavour.

I also had the privilege of meeting Mr Nicolas Couronne at the launch of his book, “Le Regard de l’ancêtre esclave”, detailing his search for his ancestor, Constance Couronne.

Following his passing earlier this year, I pay tribute to his commitment to bringing her story into greater public consciousness.

Such work, alongside that of historians such as Joel Edouard and artists such as Mr Emmanuel D'Offay, reminds us that historical recovery does not always begin with a complete narrative.

Sometimes, it begins simply with the determination to discover what more can be recovered.

Dignity, Resilience and Resistance

We must also reconsider how enslaved people are represented in history.

Were they only victims - chained, punished and subjected to suffering?

Or were they people - men, women, children- who resisted, escaped, preserved traditions threatened with erasure, formed communities and sought autonomy?

The history of marronage, and the historical memory surrounding Le Morne Brabant, tell us that resistance could take different forms.

Tragedy and resistance can co-exist within the same historical experience.

A candid reading of the past requires us to recognise its complexity.

Colonial travellers, administrators and naturalists have produced many of the images through which we now encounter enslaved people.

We **must** therefore question what these representations tell us about those depicted, and what they reveal about the observer and the colonial society in which they were produced.

Forgotten Saints

This is precisely where today's exhibition becomes particularly compelling.

Emmanuel D'Offay's longstanding engagement with the history and memory of slavery draws on archival records and historical images of Africans brought to Seychelles, restoring individuality and dignity to people otherwise reduced in colonial documentation to numbers, classifications and administrative entries.

I find the notion of the "Forgotten Saint" particularly significant - an ode to the dignity of those whom history has rendered anonymous.

Paintings such as "The Saint Without a Childhood", "The Unnamed Boy", "The Wound Above the Eyes", and "Eyes That History Could Not Close" place that very tension between documentation and humanity directly before us.

"The Cross She Carried" introduces a beautiful juxtaposition of religious symbolism, suffering and dignity, prompting us to reflect on whose suffering is legitimate, how it enters collective memory, and how it is represented.

These works of Mr D'Offay do not provide definitive answers.

Their strength lies precisely in compelling us to look again, and to question what we thought we already understood.

The Role of the Artist

This is also where Emmanuel D'Offay's contribution becomes a testament to the power of artists as educators, witnesses and custodians of truth.

Indeed, his achievements cannot be reduced simply to his artistic career.

He began as a teacher and later served as CEO of the National Arts Council, Special Advisor to three Ministers responsible for culture, and Executive Director of Creative Seychelles Agency, before retiring and devoting himself fully to his artistic mission.

An artist cannot replace the historian, and an artwork is not archival evidence.

But art **can** make us look again.

“Forgotten Saints” creates this very meeting point between historical evidence and contemporary memory.

The paintings do not close the historical discussion; rather, they open it.

I therefore commend Mr D’Offay for this important body of work, particularly for bringing it from Seychelles to Mauritius, and for his continued engagement towards keeping the memory of slavery alive through art, education and human conscience.

Mauritius, Seychelles and the Wider Indian Ocean

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The history of Venn’s Town in Seychelles offers another important reminder of this shared regional past.

Established by the Church Missionary Society between 1876 and 1889 as an industrial school for children of liberated Africans, it forms part of the wider history of emancipation and the emergence of a new generation in Seychelles in the post-abolition period.

The legacy of slavery was therefore regional.

The Indian Ocean that connects us today, was also once a space of forced displacement, migration and cultural exchange.

The journey of today’s exhibition is thus, in itself, a form of historical dialogue - connecting places of origin, displacement and memory.

It is therefore fitting that this exhibition should travel beyond Mauritius and Seychelles, including Ghana, whose own history is so deeply connected to the history of the trans-atlantic slave trade.

Memory and the Responsibility of Cultural Institutions

This also underscores the importance of institutions such as the Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture Trust Fund, which marks its 40th anniversary this year.

For four decades, it has contributed to preserving and promoting African and Creole arts, culture, history and heritage.

The recovery of forgotten histories, the preservation of archives, and the restoration of names, faces and stories to those historically rendered invisible are meaningful acts of remembrance and recognition.

I encourage the Centre to continue strengthening its partnerships across Africa and the Indian Ocean, in furtherance of this important mission.

Memory in the Digital Age

There is another dimension I would like you all to reflect on: how history is communicated and understood today.

The Reuters Institute's "Digital News Report 2026" has found that global trust in news has fallen to 37 per cent, its lowest level since measurement began in 2015.

Social media, video networks and AI chatbots are playing an increasingly important role in how audiences encounter news.

This matters for history as much as it does for current affairs.

We should ask, for example, how stories of migration and conflict are being reported; whose accounts are considered credible; whose voices are being amplified; and whose experiences are too easily overlooked or questioned.

Digital platforms are making history accessible to audiences on a scale previously unimaginable.

But we must be clear: accessibility cannot come at the expense of accuracy, context or evidence.

The responsibility to preserve all three is therefore one that must be shared by all of us: the media, cultural institutions, educators, artists, policymakers and those developing new technologies.

Lessons for the Present

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We meet at a time when conflict, uncertainty, instability and rapid change have become defining features of the international environment.

The lessons of histories such as the slave trade and its abolition are not confined to the past.

They remind us of the consequences of denying human dignity, reducing people to categories, and allowing systems of power to silence individual humanity.

But they also remind us of resilience, resistance and the enduring human search for freedom and dignity.

We must therefore not give up on the values that these histories have taught us to defend.

I have previously spoken of the danger of “**parallel histories**” - where communities learn their own histories without sufficiently encountering those of others.

Yes, slavery has its own history. Indentured labour has its own history. Migration, colonialism and other forms of unfree labour have their own histories.

But they intersect. They shaped the same island and contributed, in different ways, to the society we are today.

Our young people deserve a history that is neither selective nor artificially divided, but one that enables them to examine evidence, encounter different experiences and understand complexity without turning it into division.

Historical truth and national unity cannot be opposing ideas.

So, let us all acknowledge difficult chapters of our past while continuing to build a common Mauritian future - As One People, As One Nation.

Closing Remarks.

We cannot recover every lost voice. But we can continue to search, preserve, research and, perhaps most importantly, ask better questions.

On this realistic yet hopeful note, I once again congratulate Mr Emmanuel D'Offay, the Nelson Mandela Centre for African Culture Trust Fund, and all those associated with this important exhibition.

I trust that you have had fruitful deliberations during the roundtable organised this week, and I shall be attentive to the recommendations and ideas that emerge from all your activities.

It is now my pleasure to officially declare the exhibition “Forgotten Saints” open.

Thank you, merci et bonne continuation.