

Sir Hilary McD. Beckles: “Rise to Your Responsibility”



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member of the West Indies Cricket Board; founder and inaugural chairman of the High Performance Cricket Academy of the West Indies Cricket Board; vice president of the Commonwealth Sports Ministers advisory body on Sport and Development. He has a Ph.D. and a B.A. (honors) from the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Hull (England), and has received numerous awards including Honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Glasgow, University of Hull, and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Ghana), in recognition of his major contribution to academic research into transatlantic enslavement, popular culture, and sport.

The following is a December 10, 2014 address delivered by professor Sir Hilary McD. Beckles (The University of the West Indies) in New York, NY at the General Assembly of the United Nations (69th President).

H.E., Mr. Sam Kutesa, distinguished President of this United Nations General Assembly, Excellences of the United Nations, colleagues of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent, distinguished members of the General Assembly, colleagues of Civil Society, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

What a beautiful moment we are invited to share by the distinguished President of this assembly this afternoon in this respected Chamber of the United Nations!

What a seminal season it is for women and men of serious disposition to step up and move forward to shape humanity's future in a fashion consistent with its finest values!

Critically, we are assembled here, in this world forum, to choose; we are at the crossroads, and we seek the guidance of Legba, African God of the Intersection, to provide the spiritual content of our choice. The importance of this understanding should not be understated in any way.

We are at the dawn of this 21st century, and once again humanity struggles to come to terms with the legacies of the crimes committed against its African family. Aspects of these legacies are as alive today as they were two centuries ago.

Everywhere that African enchainment and enslavement became the basis of societies and economies, their descendants today cannot assume the human right to breathe the air of freedom and justice.

Plantation slave drivers and overseers have been replaced by public prosecutors and militarized police, and the human right to life, denied Africans during the 400 years of the barbarity called chattel slavery, continues to be contested. The racism that informs that contestation defines and distorts the primary social relations of humanity.

In 1781, the English Law Lord, Judge Mansfield, in an effort to purge African enslavement from his homeland, and to confine its vulgarity to the colonies, insisted that his country folks at home should breathe neither the foul air of slavery nor endure the stench of its stain.

Today, 233 years later, millions of African descendants are still breathing the foul air that blows from the stench of slavery. In their quest to inhale the free air of justice and democracy they are seized by the throat and their breath taken away in a fashion reminiscent of centuries ago.

"I can't breathe" has now become the universal ideology of the African diaspora, most vocal in the USA where African descendants are brutally policed in their pursuit of social justice, economic enfranchisement, and existential dignity.

No longer do we have to watch the construction in movies of the destruction of Black life, nor journey to the journals of history to see and read of this deadly mentality, bred in slavery, legally at work, officially sanctioned, and in triumphant celebration. We see it every day in our streets as they go about our daily business.

Humanity cries for the victims of these crimes; we cry out for humanity's descent, deeper and deeper into the despair of the dungeon that is the legacy of African enslavement – the greatest crime against it, in and before modernity.

There has been a steadfast refusal by the beneficiaries of these crimes to formally recognize their nature and nurture. It is this refusal of recognition that drives the legacies of these crimes into our social realities and facilitates life taking policing in our communities.

This denial stands undiminished in the face of a mountain of evidence that cries out for ownership, responsibility and accountability.

Denial and silence are now the mother and father of a new generation of hate crimes, squeezing Black life from already impaired lungs. They are today's breath takers, as hate and greed were in earlier times.

But the names on the cold, stone-like face of silence and denial must be known and called to account.

Portugal continues to deny its slavery crimes, yet we know that this nation was the largest shippers of enchained African bodies across the Atlantic. To Portugal we say "Rise to your Responsibility".

Great Britain denies, yet we know that it was the greatest profit maximizers and extractor investor in African slavery. To Great Britain we say "Rise to your Responsibility".

France denies, yet we know that it fought the bloodiest war of all to prevent enslaved Blacks from breathing the air of liberty, fraternity. Haiti emerged the leading global symbol of Black freedom, resilient and respected, but covered in the ash of French retribution. To France we say "Rise to your Responsibility".

The Dutch denies, yet we know that they were first to develop the trade in enchained African bodies as a modern, global, corporate enterprise. To the Dutch we say, "Rise to your Responsibility".

Spain denies, yet we know that the Spanish were first conceptualized and practiced the idea that African enslavement should follow the genocide they imposed upon the natives of these Americas.

Norway and Denmark, not to be left behind, joined in and prospered, as did the Royals of Russia and the Aristocracy of Austria who were as financially enriched as the beyond the scenes slave investing Swiss and Swedes.

All of Western Europe combined with their ‘American’ colonies created the cradle of western financial modernization based upon the most lucrative sustainable investment of all times – the enchained, enslaved African body as commercial property.

This silence of the enslaving nations, and their political allies, must be broken and their denials ended. Then, and only then, will African descendants breathe freely the air of life and justice.

Mr. President, I wish on behalf of the forward looking world to express gratitude to this noble and life empowering institution – the UN General Assembly – for its wisdom in finding a way to declare this decade in recognition of African descendant people. Mr. President, and Assembly members, we thank you.

We thank also all those advocates and champions of this cause; those who constitute the Working Group of Experts on African Descendant Peoples, our diplomats especially, for bringing us to this moment. Ms. Fanon, Prof. Shepherd, and Ambassador Rhonda King are entitled to our recognition.

We thank also our colleagues at UNESCO who have worked without rest to ensure that the Slave Routes Project, and the General History of Africa Projects, stayed alive despite life threatening budget cuts.

These are the two programs that have made an enormous impact and difference. I celebrate the effort of Madam Irina Bokova, UNESCO’s leader, and urge that she continues to find creative ways to ensure that they remain as UNESCO’s flagship projects during the decade.

UNESCO has determined that the 9th volume of the *General History of Africa*, to be published in three monographs, be dedicated to the study of African descendants, and that it should carry the title “Global Africa”.

Going forward, the African descendant people of Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and Latin America especially will have a voice and a venue to express their vision.

This decade will provide millions of African descendants, hitherto silenced and buried in denial, with opportunities to rise without shame and guilt to claim their African heritage without fear of reprisals.

To offer these hitherto ‘invisibles’ an opportunity of engagement and participation must be a major goal of this decade.

In this regard I wish to invite you to celebrate the government of Brazil for its enlightened policy that African history must be taught at all levels of the Education system – primary to tertiary. This policy should be emulated by all countries that have built their economies and societies upon African labor and intellect.

The Transglobal slave trade was more than a criminal movement of enchained African bodies. It was a transfer of African cosmologies and epistemologies to slaving societies that were enriched by African minds and hands.

The violent recruitment of enchained bodies also enabled the mobilization of intellectual and cultural resources that gave rise to the ‘West’ as a recipient of Africa’s best.

In this decade resources must be provided UNESCO, NGO’s, universities, and museums to research and discuss these traditions of labor and intellectual exploitation, and to illustrate the true role of the African in the making of modernity.

Finally, there is the imperative of reparatory justice.

Dr. Martin Luther King in his iconic “I have a dream speech” – said the following:

“We have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check America has given the Negro people a bad check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’.

Mr. President, we have been taught to rehearse and recant the ‘dream’ part of this powerful message to modernity, and to forget or ignore the ‘reparatory justice’ plea.

Today, I call upon the world to take notice that Dr. King’s reparatory justice claim is as alive as the power of his dream.

This 21st Century will be the century in which the world will be called upon to atone with reparatory justice for the crimes against Africans and their descendants. These legacies continue to cripple, and squeeze the air from their lungs!

It took all of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries to establish and globalize these crimes of enchainment and enslavement.

It took all of the 19th century, from Toussaint’s Haiti in the 1790s to Lincoln’s USA in the 1860, to Brazil and Cuba in the 1880s, to uproot chattel slavery from the modern world.

It then took all of the 20th century for African descendants to convert their legal freedom into citizenship and institutional leadership – gains continually threatened by forced rooted in slavery’s enduring legacies.

Now, if it will take all of the 21st century to achieve reparatory justice, we shall not retreat but will mobilize this decade and begin again to move speedily along the journey to reparatory justice.

Our finest and treasured values – peace, justice, respect, and reconciliation require that we attain reparatory justice. It will be the basis, the only sustainable foundation upon which 21st century humanity will rebuild this world with peace and prosperity for all.

The CARICOM nations, ancestral homes to the world’s first complete slave-based economies, have established National and Regional Commissions in order to engage the nations of Europe, the owners and operators of these slave economies, in a diplomatic dialogue designed to rebuild trust and respect within the framework of reparatory justice. CARICOM has endorsed the Ten Point Action Plan for Reparatory Justice submitted by its Commission.

It calls for reparatory justice around issues such as healthcare, education, cultural development, food security, and critically a formal apology as well as debt cancellation. It’s a plan which says that the legacies of slavery, and the enduring elements of colonialism, constitute the greatest single drag upon the development efforts of citizens.

It calls upon the nations of Europe to return to the scene of these crimes and to participate in remedial development work that will enable African descendants to free themselves of the cultural and economic shackles that remained in place after the formalities of Emancipation. This is the only path that can lead to an end of the shame and guilt that result from the silence and denial.

We urge all countries to establish National Reparations Commissions. We intend that this decade will see these National Commissions coming together as a Global Commission for Reparatory Justice.

A war of terror is being waged against reparation advocates. They continue to experience the terrorism of intimidation. Black nations and civil society advocate alike are threatened when supportive of reparatory justice.

U.N agencies are denied funding for supporting projects that are reparatory of these legacies. The double speak of open mouth lip support and budget butchery is the strategy of subversion. The financial power of rich countries, built upon slavery, is used to intimidate and punish Black nations into silence.

This strategy, this attitude of anger, is not sustainable in this 21st century. Many Black nations cannot breathe as a result, but they must find strength to say “No More” – and to say it in here, in this the United Nations.

In the name of Toussaint, Mandela, Harriett Tubman,

Malcolm and Dr. King, and Maya Angelou, let us all say in this decade: “The demand for Reparatory Justice will be taken through every diplomatic door, or taken down the corridors of every court.”

We are survivors of the African Holocaust. Into these Americas were dragged in chains some 12 million enslaved ancestors. At the end of the barbarity only 6 million had survived. Survivors have a right to Reparatory Justice. The powerful have no right to deprive them.

Let us all, then, raise our hands [speaker raises his hands] in opposition to the violence that denies us the right to breathe, and to have justice.

Let us all resolve to make decent this decade as the door to a century that must witness the triumph of our collective and shared conception of humanity at its best.

Let us all resolve furthermore to clean up the mess left by slavery and colonization – and move on as one humanity in peace and with Love.

Mr. President, be assured of my respect, cooperation, and my gratitude. Your generosity this day is acknowledged, and I thank you for your gracious endurance of my intervention in your General Assembly.

I thank you.