

'Breaking the Chains'



Unesco Jury led by Prof. Hal Weaver announcing breaking th chains award at 10th Ziff Festival of Dhow. (Courtesy: Peter Bennett)



500 Years Later
(Unesco Award winner)

'Breaking the Chains'

Unesco Prize

Jury Statement – ZIFF, 5th July, 2007

General Introduction

The slave trade represents one of the most tragic and dehumanising events in human history. This tragedy, which Africans describe as *Maafa*, is a catastrophe of immense proportions. It is a crime against humanity that wreaked havoc on Africa and dispersed its people across a wide geographic area encompassing the great oceans and all the continents. In order to bring this tragedy to the conscience of humanity, UNESCO launched the Slave Route Project in 1994. This 'Breaking the Chains' Prize embodies the spirit of the Slave Route Project. The prize awards \$10,000 to the makers of a recent film on slavery; a film that breaks the silence and speaks to the social, historical, economic and psychological impact of the slave trade; a film that raises public awareness of slavery's historical and contemporary manifestations; a film that gives voice to the dispossessed, reflects their perspectives and articulates their resistance to this dehumanisation.

Film and cinematic-based media represent a powerful means of education, socialisation, information and entertainment in the contemporary world. The 'Breaking the Chains' Prize is the first international initiative to recognise audio-visual and media professionals whose work addresses the topic of slavery in honest and creative ways. The award seeks to encourage this work and contribute to the process of healing by sensitising audiences, invoking the cultural memory and voice of dispersed communities, and revealing the full scope of this human tragedy by exploring repressed aspects of slavery in Europe and the Americas as well as regions that have received little attention, such as the Arab world, Asia and Andean America.

Analysis

The works in competition come from the Middle East, North America, South America, Europe and the Caribbean. They include feature films, personal narratives, Public Television documentaries as well as independent films. But they all have a common theme: they represent the work of filmmakers who dare to speak of the unspeakable and the unsayable; whether it is a personal narrative that excavates African ancestry in places of historical denial, or a film that functions to break down the institutional barriers of national public television and commercial film companies.

Tribute to the Pioneers

Although the 'Breaking the Chains' Prize is the first international award to recognise filmmakers whose work explores enslavement and resistance, this is not the first time that filmmakers have addressed this subject. It is important to pay tribute to those who kept the flame burning – pioneers such as Med Hondo, Sembene Ousmane,

Mohammed 'Johnson' Traore, Sarah Maladoror, Tomas Gutierrez-Alea, Yousef Chahine, Alex Haley, Gordon Parks, Dr. Ayoub Mohammed, Haile Gerima and Euzhan Palcy.

Special Mention

In the tradition of these visionaries who used the camera to remind the world of the forgotten tragedy, we want to make special mention of two films in competition that dare to break the silence in countries where discussion of the slave trade is still taboo. *Baa Baa Black Girl* (Turkey) uncovers the enslavement of Africans in the Ottoman Empire and *Film Class* (Israel) reveals the story of the unspoken history of Afro-Bedouin women in Israel. It is also important to continue to support works such as *Bitter Tropics* (France) and *Slavery and the Making of America* (USA).

Recommendations

Several of the films were produced for public and private television in North America and Europe. We want to see more financing, distribution and exhibition of these films, which are making a lasting contribution to the process of national and international healing as well as foregrounding the economic and cultural interests of African diasporic peoples. Certainly, African and Caribbean film and audio-visual institutions also have an obligation to contribute to this historic process. Institutional broadcasters and film companies in Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East have an obligation to their popular audiences and a responsibility to foster cultural diversity and promote economic democracy and justice for all their citizens. All of us share in that obligation. We recommend the following:

- ZIFF should institutionalise a festival section and prize dealing with the slave trade and forms of enslavement.
- FESPACO should formally address the theme of slavery and institute a programmatic focus that recognises the importance of this issue to the pan-African world.
- UNESCO should support the continued documentation and compilation of a collection of films that have contributed to the cinematic representation of slavery and make them available for distribution and viewing by communities, schools, and libraries who may wish to present educational programmes on slavery, but who do not have the resources to do so on their own.
- Filmmakers and organisations of filmmakers should create films, web-sites and networks to help the public to better understand the tragic consequences of slavery.
- Unions, schools, universities and research institutes should organise seminars and workshops for their constituents.
- Corporations, foundations and national authorities should provide support and help create infrastructure to assist artists in their mission to document and create a progressive, liberating and humanising iconography.
- Society must position slavery and anti-slavery work as an important item at the personal, community, national and international levels.

The Award

Members of the jury unanimously find that the independent film *500 Years Later* by Owen Alik Shehadad represents excellence in fulfilling the criteria of the 'Breaking the Chains' Prize. *500 Years Later* not only reviews the historical record, it goes on to construct an important narrative of healing and cultural memory using rich, poetic imagery. This film integrates archival material, cogent interviews and powerful cinematography to examine slavery and its impact through historical time and across geographical boundaries. Importantly, *500 Years Later* chronicles the resistance of the historically dispossessed and empowers them to tell their own stories from the African diasporic perspective. It is an engaged film that addresses the ethical and moral dimensions of the system of slavery. The jury wishes to award the 'Breaking the Chains' Prize to *500 Years Later*. Congratulations. Thanks to Ziff and its organisers.

Breaking the Chains Jury

Abdulkadir A. Said – Member (South Africa)

Ally Saleh – Member (Zanzibar)

Dr. Gladstone Yearwood – Member (Barbados)

Dr. Ali Moussa Iye – Member (UNESCO)

Dr. Harold Weaver – President (USA)



Lest we forget Exhibition inaugurated by Ali Moussa, from UNESCO flanked by CEO Martin Mhando (left)
(Courtesy Peter Bennett)

History and Commemoration: Marketing the Slave Trade in Contemporary Zanzibar*

By Jan-Georg Deutsch, University of Oxford

Reconstructing the past on the basis of evidence (in the following history) and the purposeful remembrance of that past (in the following commemoration) have obviously a lot in common. They often concern the same events or processes and frequently fulfil similar functions, that is reminding people of the past in order to allow them to better understand their present or to enable them to make better-informed decision about their future. However, history and commemoration are not the same. They use different devices (such as the academic footnote or the memorial) to achieve the desired result. They also follow different rules and regulations. Historians, for instance, are required to critically explore historical sources, while those who organise memorials have to specifically address contemporary moral or political concerns, if either want to be taken seriously by the academic community or the wider public in general.

Arguably, history and commemoration are mutually interdependent - they cannot exist without each other - but there is always a tension between the two. These tensions can however be stretched to the braking point. Without an element of purposeful remembrance, historical writing becomes irrelevant to most people, while commemoration without an element of history easily becomes mere myth making and sheer fantasy. It is my contention here that what happens in Zanzibar with regard to the commemoration of the Indian Ocean slave trade is fast approaching the latter.

While attending the Zanzibar International Film Festival this year, I used the occasion to participate in the officially sponsored Mangapwani 'slave chambers' tour. I also visited the Anglican Cathedral in Mkunazini in Stone Town with its historic 'slave chamber' and modern slave trade memorial. On both occasions I recorded the introductory speeches by the guides. In each case the visitors were given a brief account of the Indian Ocean slave trade and its manifestations on the sites concerned. Leaving aside the fact that their rendering of the history of the Indian Ocean slave trade was largely inaccurate, revealing a shocking lack of historical knowledge on the subject, the guides freely indulged in embellishing their 'histories' with lurid details about suffocating slaves, asserting that hundred if not thousands of 'African' slaves had died in these chambers on account of the brutal treatment they had received from their 'Arab' owners or from 'Arab' slave traders.



Mangapwani 'Slave' Chamber
(Courtesy: Peter Bennet)



Mangapwani 'Slave' Chambers
(Courtesy: A. Sheriff)



Mangapwani Cave
(Courtesy: A. Sheriff)



'Slave Chamber' at the Anglican Cathedral.
(Courtesy: G. Deutsch)

The problem here is that there is not a shred of historical evidence that the chambers in Mangapwani or those on the Cathedral site were actually used for the purpose of holding slaves, let alone any evidence for the suffering of slaves supposedly held in them. The purpose of the Mangapwani chamber is unclear. So far no written documentation has been found concerning its origin or use. Oral historical sources have it that the chamber was used for a variety of purposes, one of which might or might not been slave holding. In any case, what needs to be explained here is why in the second half of the nineteenth century slaves should be held in an underground chamber, if slavery itself was legally recognised by the government of the day. While the export of slaves was outlawed by Sultan Barghash in June 1873, the institution of slavery was after all only finally abolished in July 1909. There was no need to keep slaves in hidden places, even if their owners intended to export them. On the contrary, holding slaves in confined spaces would have only attracted the interest of the authorities. Similarly, there is no evidence that slaves were ever held in the chamber on the Cathedral site. The chamber belonged to a hospital building (today's St Monica's Hostel), which was constructed in the 1890s, a good twenty years after the Mkunazini slave market in Stone Town was closed. These rooms seem to have served as storage room for the hospital and no picturesquely scattered chains and fetters in these rooms (see the picture above) will change that.

One could, of course, ask whether this actually matters. Perhaps not as far as foreigners are concerned who simply want to commemorate slavery and the slave trade in East Africa and for this purpose any place is probably as good as any other. Moreover, there is a distinct danger that by insisting on a minimum degree of historical accuracy one runs uncomfortably close to being perceived as bent on denying the actual horrors of slavery and the slave trade in Zanzibar, which undoubtedly existed.

However, this author believes that on this occasion historical accuracy truly matters, not least because the guides' myths and fantasies about suffocating African slaves reinforce a partisan reading of Zanzibar's recent past. It plays into the emotions and feelings which were running particularly high immediately before and during the revolution of 1964, when politics in Zanzibar developed into a perceived contest between the island's supposedly 'Arab' and 'African' inhabitants. The tourist guides' discourse about slavery and the slave trade in Zanzibar is arguably feeding into these perceptions and deadly arguments. Whipping up emotions and communal hatred is a dangerous political strategy for the country and the film festival.

The issue is also relevant to a consideration of the representation of the whole topic in a film festival. It may be necessary to ask whether representing slavery and the slave trade in this way helps to bring about tolerance and social reconciliation, or on the contrary deepens the antagonisms in societies where the perpetrators and victims did not belong to fixed ethnic groups. Reducing complex class divisions to simply racial categories is a travesty of the historical record. One may also ask whether the specific transatlantic perspective on the issue help to illuminate the historical realities of slavery in Zanzibar and the 'dhow countries', or blinds us to the significant

differences about the institution in an area with a much longer but different histories of the institution. Finally, one might ask whether the actual scale of the horrors of slavery and the slave trade not only in Zanzibar but also elsewhere in East Africa does not demand a more respectful and serious treatment of the subject than is currently provided by marketing agencies and tourist operators in their quest to lure wealthy American tourists to the island.

* I would like to acknowledge that some of the ideas expressed in this polemic emanated from a conversation I recently had with Professor Jonathan Glassman (North-Western University, Illinois), who should be considered the true expert on the subject. The errors and omissions in the text are of course my own.



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