

Speech at the International Day of Remembrance of Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, March 26, 2012

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Mr. President, Madame Deputy Secretary-General, Excellencies, Delegates to the UN, and Distinguished guests.

I want to thank the members of the General Assembly for the invitation to speak today, the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Termed the “Maafa,” which is Kiswahili for the “great tragedy” or what many descendants of enslaved Africans call the “African Holocaust”.

The Middle Passage was the stage of the triangular trade in which millions of enslaved Africans (mainly from west, west central, and eastern Africa) were shipped to the New World, as a part of the Atlantic slave trade.

Voyages on the Middle Passage were a large financial undertaking, and they were generally organized by companies or groups of investors, and in many cases, countries.

Traders from the Americas and the Caribbean received the enslaved Africans. European powers such as Portugal, England, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden, as well as traders in the Caribbean, South America, and of course North America, took part in this trade. The enslaved Africans came mostly from eight regions: Senegambia, Upper Guinea, Windward Coast, Gold Coast, Bight of Benin, Bight of Biafra, West Central Africa and Southeastern Africa.

We know this because this forced kidnapping and free labor was a business and like most businesses, records were kept, at least during the period when it was legal until the mid-1800s.

We have much to thank from all the historians, economists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and geneticists, such as myself, who have studied the history and consequences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade across the African diaspora. I look forward to working with the new generation of young scientists and historians who will advance knowledge and research on the Transatlantic Slave Trade so that millions of descendants of the enslaved recognize that their history did not start with slavery on some plantation in the antebellum south.

The education system is partly to blame for this tragedy where our youth actually believe that their history started with slavery. When I go to middle schools and high schools in around the country to talk with our youth, I can see in their eyes, the

discomfort and pain when discussions lead to slavery. If this is the only time they see themselves in the history books it is no wonder they are not excited about the school systems.

So we have to educate and let them know that their history did not start with slavery but that our ancestors went through that period. They must know that they are the descendants of proud, productive and purposeful people who have resisted and survived the worst holocaust in the history of the world.

It is this history that ties or “connects” Africans in the diaspora. Whether it is the Gullah or “Geechee” people in the sea islands of South Carolina or the Afro Brazilian, they are each bound to this shared history just as the Mende rice-planters from the upper coast of west Africa, now called Sierra Leone, and the Imbangala from Angola were shackled as they were marched to their coasts and placed in holding cells in forts to await the ships for the Middle Passage.

The shackles, the binding, the shared experience is what has brought us all here today. The tie that binds.

It connects people in one of the greatest continents on this planet, the African continent. The African continent is rich in minerals and resources and also cultural and biological diversity. But also one that historically, because of biology and geography, its inhabitants were labeled inferior and then enslaved.

This tie binds shared cultures. One horrible feature of the Transatlantic Slave Trade was the attempt by the enslavers to purge the West African traditions and cultures of the enslaved. In light of their attempts to eradicate the transmission of cultural knowledge of the enslaved to the next generation, there are still remnants of West African culture and languages in the Americas.

The shared culture across the diaspora served as a beacon, alerting lost descendants to homes unknown. African Americans and Africans in the diaspora in the New World have had a unique population history shared by no other group on the planet. This unique history was predicated on the loss of family ties and cultural ties and dehumanization.

Interestingly, it is what binds us in terms of humanity that allows us to infer family history and ancestry. By that I mean DNA, the genetic material that is in every cell of our body. We inherit this genetic material called DNA from both of our parents, 50% from our mother and 50% from our father. Our parents inherited it from their parents and great-grandparents and so on. This chain is like a hierarchy, it links us to family, links us to community. DNA links us to regions on continents. And it is because of this DNA, this genetic material that we pass on to our children, that could not be removed like

languages were, could not be lost like cultures and traditions were. This DNA resisted and survived.

And so when we look at the genetics of African peoples in the diaspora we see the genetics of Mende people, of Temne, of Kru, of Kpelle, of Masa, Mafa, the Akan, the Kwi, the Mandinka and the Wolof in their genetic material because that material has not changed and has not been lost. And it is because of the huge amount of African genetic diversity that we are able to do this.

Humanity started in Africa; I don't think I need to tell you all, scientists have proven that humanity started in Africa. Modern human populations have been in Africa for a very long time (over 150,000 years ago) enough time for high levels of variation to occur in the DNA of African peoples. **We use this genetic information to seek ancestry for descendants of the enslaved Africans throughout the diaspora.**

As I mentioned, Africa is a continent with rich natural resources but also biological resources. This richness in biology codes for survival and resistance in the face of harsh treatment and racism during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It is also the rich variation that produces diversity in physical features, disease resistance, and health.

Scientists have estimated that somewhere between 15-30% of the enslaved Africans did not make it across the Atlantic during the Middle Passage. That is a very high mortality rate. Mortality rates may have been considerably higher within Africa itself due to the process of capturing and transporting the enslaved to the ships. Many died at sea, mainly due to infectious disease or lack of food and water. We need to explore this because the current state of health among Africans in the diaspora is poor. We must focus attention on Health Disparities and it should be a focus at the international level given its impact among people of African descent. When we look at common complex diseases like type 2 diabetes, asthma, cancer, heart disease, hypertension, they are all linked to genes and the environment. Health Disparities must be seen as an issue of social justice along-side the issue of reparations.

I have been blessed to work with a group called African Ancestry where we use and leverage DNA to trace the ancestry of descendants of enslaved Africans to connect them to their lost homeland. Our service has created enormous excitement among African Americans. It changes the psyche of many African Americans when they are successful find their lost ancestral connections.

A friend of mine, an actor, activist by the name of Isaiah Washington once said that "DNA has memory." This is so true. DNA has the memory that led me to the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria in my search for the Hausa people whom I shared a portion of my genetic ancestry with. This was exciting during the summer of 2000, and life changing for myself and many others.

DNA also had the memory that provided insight on ancestry for a group African Americans who shared recent common ancestry in Cameroon. This 'memory' inspired the group to go to Cameroon sponsored by a non-profit organization called the *Ark Jammers* who helped foster personal and community ties between Cameroonians and Africans Americans. These are just a few examples of the excitement and action that African Americans have shown once they have received DNA based information on African ancestry. This is a start of what I believe the descendants of enslaved Africans need to do in order to heal as individuals, families, and communities, from the experiences of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Thank you very much.