



History UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

June 17 2021

Dear Executive Committee,

The name 'Sankofa' was the consensus choice of the Community Advisory Committee on the renaming of City assets named for Henry Dundas, which I co-chaired with Wyandot Elder Catherine Tammara. This was a committee of ordinary citizens, including scholars, Indigenous Elders, Black community leaders and residents who live and work along Dundas Street. The concept of Sankofa is part of a philosophical and artistic tradition that emerged in the Akan language area of the African continent. It is a concept rooted in survival, community-recreation and learning from the past to build a better future. Its adoption signals a willingness to acknowledge the Transatlantic slave trade as part of our collective past and to mourn and remember the terrible and systematic trafficking of human beings that created the Black diaspora in the Americas. It celebrates the contributions of Black Torontonians to the City and represents the historic ties between West Africans and their descendants across the Americas, including in Canada.

Language families have a common ancestor language, from which they have inherited shared structural, lexical and cultural elements. The Akan linguistic cultural subregion of West Africa includes what Europeans called 'The Gold Coast', corresponding roughly to the modern nation state of Ghana, as well as parts of Togo (French and British Togoland in the colonial period) and Côte d'Ivoire. The name 'Gold Coast' originated with the Portuguese in the 15th century, who established castles along the coast, such as the infamous São Jorge da Mina (El Mina) and Cape Coast Castle, seeking gold from West Africa's famed gold mines. What began as a relatively equal trade between Europeans and Africans transformed the economic and political life of the Akan world, as Portuguese traders sought more and more human captives. After Portugal's gold and human trafficking outposts along the coast were captured by the Dutch in the 1630s, the trafficking of human beings to Europe's expanding plantations in the Americas escalated. Over the course of the Atlantic slave trade more than 1.2 million people are known to have been trafficked from the Gold Coast to the Caribbean, South America and the emerging plantation economies of what became the southern United States. Throughout the era of the slave trade in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries European predation on the coast turned millions of Akan speakers into refugees and forced migrants, torn from their homes, fleeing the violence and political instability created by an economic system in which they – men, women, children – were treated as profitable prey. The Akan experience was a microcosm of what befell millions of Africans across much of the coast of West, West Central and southwest Africa.

The number 1.2 million does not include those who were killed in violent raids, who died on forced marches over hundreds of kilometers from the interior to the coast, or who perished in the disease-ridden, fetid conditions of the vast dungeons located under European slave trading castles on the coast, waiting, sometimes for months, to be transferred onto the slave ships that waited offshore. The Atlantic slave trade transformed Europe's ports, ship building and ironworking industries, systems of banking, tastes, cuisine and fashion and fostered enduring, racist attitudes towards Black people as a legitimization for treating them as property. It brought unprecedented wealth into societies such as Britain, France, Holland, Spain and Portugal at the expense of millions of Africans. Almost none of the wealth from slave trading remained on the African continent.

In the midst of this chaos and catastrophe, artists from the Akan region created a philosophical and visual system for communicating powerful ideas and aphorisms. These Adinkra symbols each had a meaning that was at once straightforward and complex, and they were meant to be easily recognisable and quick to reproduce. The concept of ‘Sankofa’ encapsulates this rich tradition of simplicity, beauty and philosophical depth. It might be translated as ‘look back to go forward’ and its Adinkra symbol is either a stylized heart or, more commonly, a bird with its head turned to the rear, beak open to either place or collect a seed off its own back, its chest and feet facing forward. It embodies the longing, call to memory, reclamation and hope for inter-generational survival that looking back to go forward must have meant for millions of Akan people forced from their homes by human trafficking.

In the Americas the Akan were known by many names, including ‘Mina’ and ‘Coromantee’/Coromantyn(e). Akan people were the ‘charter generation’ that put a lasting cultural stamp on many plantation societies in the Americas, even if people with backgrounds from other nations and cultures later came to predominate. In the British Caribbean they were associated with resistance to enslavement, as both Maroons and as leaders of slave rebellions, such as 1760’s Tacky’s Revolt in Jamaica and the 1762 rebellion in Demerara (now in Guyana). Akan linguistic heritage is at the root of the similarities, for example, between Jamaican patois, Ghanaian indigenous languages and Ghanaian English. Cultural practices, art, music and ideas from the Akan region have had an outsized impact across the Americas, including in Toronto. It is likely that there were enslaved people of Akan heritage in Upper Canada and many of the descendants of Akan survivors of the slave trade are now citizens of Canada. Members of Toronto’s Jamaican and wider Caribbean diaspora, but also people of Latin American and southern American ancestry, have Akan ancestry. Tens of thousands of Ghanaians live, work and study in Toronto, making this city a crucial global site where the descendants of the survivors of the catastrophe that befell the Akan, who hail from both sides of the Atlantic, can come together.

I offer this short history of Sankofa to explain to councillors of what this name - Sankofa Square – means for the city of Toronto. The kindest thing that I can say about those who claim that the Akan people were slave traders, or that the name is not relevant to Toronto, is that their ignorance represents precisely why educating ordinary people about the history of the Atlantic slave trade is so important. To suggest that Akan people were responsible for their own enslavement is to perpetuate the racist myth – which Henry Dundas himself also propagated in speeches in the House of Commons – that Africans were responsible for their own enslavement. It is a form of historical denialism associated with racism and antisemitism, seeking to blame victims of genocidal violence for their own suffering and deny the importance and contributions of the survivors’ descendants to the communities where they live. This is not the sort of historical analysis with which the City should associate itself and not the way that City councillors should treat the Black community.

Unqualified individuals who appear to be animated by a personal sense of racially-motivated grievance have been unrelenting in their opposition to the adoption of the name ‘Sankofa Square’. Some of these individuals, who do not and have never lived in Toronto, associate themselves with the Dundas family. In contrast to some other elite families in Britain with historic ties to human trafficking and slavery, such as the Trevelyan, certain members of the Dundas family have reacted with defensiveness and a determined commitment to self-interested ignorance. Unlike other families who have reflected deeply on this past and engaged constructively in public discussion in Britain and the Caribbean, acknowledging and encouraging real research, people associated with the pro-Dundas campaign spread racist misinformation designed to vindicate the family name at the expense of public education.

An individual (or individuals) associated with this disinformation campaign has sought to discredit and attack scholars who are experts in this area of history and who have made it clear that Dundas was a powerful supporter of the slave trade. I and others have been harassed by them and some of their allies, including other groups associated with residential school denialism. These tactics have included making frivolous and disruptive complaints about academics' scholarship that have been dismissed by the universities where these scholars are employed. In the world of academic debate people may disagree, but efforts to try to harass people and try to destroy their careers because they don't share your interpretations of the evidence demonstrate a lack of respect for or understanding of principles of academic freedom or freedom of speech. This kind of behaviour is associated with efforts to make it dangerous for scholars to give their time and expertise to public-facing, democratic endeavours, especially if they are women, Indigenous people, people of colour or members of the LGBTQ2+ community.

These same people have publicly made outrageously historical inaccurate claims, for example, that Dundas's sanctioning of the use of Black soldiers by the imperial military was evidence of abolitionist sentiment (it was not, any more than the use of prisoners as firefighters is evidence of prison abolitionist thought). They have also wrongly claimed that Henry Dundas was responsible for the abolition of slavery in Canada, an assertion for which there is no evidence. They have propagated the racist myth that Akan people were a nation of slave traders. They have claimed in their online writing that I am somehow intellectually compromised because, as the descendant of enslaved people, I am too personally tied to this history. This implies that racial background is more important than training and that Black experts on any issues concerning race should always have their work corroborated by a white and supposedly disinterested person. These baseless and racist statements have no place in a serious public conversation.

In contrast to this kind of hateful, ill-informed and dishonest rhetoric, the Community Advisory Committee devoted their time and expertise, through the pandemic and through two administrations in City Hall, to a careful process. This diverse committee offered a concept both simple and profound, mournful and celebratory, as a gift to the City of Toronto and its people, regardless of their background. They did so in the face of racist attacks on their integrity from opponents of this change. I leave it to council to determine what kinds of voices they wish to listen to, what type of public engagement they wish to encourage and what kind of City they would like to inhabit.

Sincerely,

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