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Emancipation and Self-determination in the U.S Virgin Islands: A Sojourn of our Past Struggles with a Vision for a Brighter Society

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Where does the term emancipation originate? Emancipation comes from the Latinate term emancipare- to emancipate or mancipium- slave. Translated literally, emancipium and mancipium mean to free the enslaved. Emancipation for scores of us in the U.S Virgin Islands and the rest of the Caribbean, symbolizes freedom from the shackles and bondage of African enslavement. Who does not want to be free to live his or her life as freely as he or she possibly can? While the same might be true, there are critical aspects of our cultural and political states of being that disallow us from enjoying the high levels of freedom of which we envision or dream. Here in the U.S Virgin Islands our Emancipation from the Danish Empire and Danish Rule occurred in the 1800s. Our territory was fully under Danish Rule since the 1670s. For example, Fort Christian and The Great

House here on St. Thomas, is one major symbol that evidences the Danish presence. Likewise, Fort Frederick and Estate Whim on St. Croix, is another major symbol that evidences Danish Rule. Additionally, Fortsberg on St. John, is yet another symbol that is representative of Danish Rule and Danish colonialism in the U.S Virgin Islands Community.

Now, why might emancipation be so significant to our Virgin Islands' people? Well, it was emancipatory acts that led to the freedom of our ancestors from the chains of enslavement in the latter 1800s. Perhaps it is also important to note that meanwhile African enslavement ended in the British West Indies in 1838, it continued in the United States and some of its territories until 1865. Similarly, in our unique case in the U.S Virgin islands, our territory remained under Danish Rule, until its purchase by the United States of America in 1912. The Danes sold their colony [the U.S Virgin Islands] to the United States of America for \$1,000,000 in gold. Ever since, the transition process from Danish Rule to U.S Rule, the U.S Virgin Islands has remained a territory of the United States. Simultaneously, what does a colonial status mean for us in the U.S Virgin Islands? Simply, it means that we must remain in compliance with the citizenship responsibilities of our country, America, The Great Nation.

However, one must also be mindful that in addition to being U.S citizens, U.S Virgin Islanders are also citizens of the Caribbean Region, and the world. Hence, we should also attempt to be both ambassadors of the U.S Virgin Islands and the Caribbean Region, the geo-political space that we love and call home. What the latter comment necessitates, is a call for us to be aware of ourselves in relation to our Caribbean neighbors not merely geographically and politically, but culturally, spiritually, ecologically, financially and otherwise. To be more specific, we should also be willing to engage in a sitting down, articulation, and articulation exercises, that are designed for us to ideate and share experiences and goals, for example- that can ultimately foster better relationships and cultural ties with our Caribbean neighbors. Perhaps, I should point out that the view that I am presenting in this missive, is not a new one. Rather, it is the age old view that our ancestors, who were liberated either in 1838, 1865, or in the early 1900s respectively, sought to unite- and it is the spirits of communalism, togetherness, and selflessness, which matched the spirit and practice of struggle, that guaranteed their physical release from the chains of enslavement.

Furthermore, one should ask: how far have we come since the physical release of our ancestors from the chains of enslavement? Have we sought to take these emancipatory acts to the next level? Have we continued in the veins of communalism, togetherness and selflessness? Have we forgotten the Great Fya,bun? Have we forgotten the defiant acts of Queens Mary, Agnes and Mathilda our Triple Queens? Have we forgotten the historic event and the tale of Buddhoe, Anne Haeggard, and the enslaved Africans, who collaborated to have justice served on the island of St. Croix, during Governor Van Scholten's governorship? Besides, have we continued to look out for our 'neybas' and managed to live harmoniously with each other? Or, have we digressed and lost sight of our past struggles and accomplishments? Are we also considering the kind of U.S Virgin Islands and Caribbean that we wish for our daughters, sons, brothers and sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins and friends to live in? Are we considering that meanwhile the rest of the world sleeps, scores of our youth continue to be incarcerated and in the worst case scenario, die to violent activity? Are we willing to continue being silent bystanders in the face of strife and violence? Are we considering that each of us can seek to brighten the corner where we are? Or are we considering that "any small goodness" we do, can help to make the world a better place in which to live? The foregoing questions are not only thought-provoking, but echo a challenge on the part of our people- to examine our indifferent attitudes, to be more attentive to some of our social ills, and be more willing to challenge aspects of the status quo, which denies us opportunities- to access material resources and simultaneously, debunk our ideological capital, which could help shed more light on our attempts at progress and societal enhancement. Frankly, each time we drive

by past Fort Christian, Fort Frederick, Fortsberg or any of the other colonial symbols that are found in our islands, we should be reminded of the mammoth struggles of our ancestors and of some of their accomplishments. Shouldn't our present-day generation and people follow suite, and acquire more sovereignty in our islands?

As I approach my final lines, I should add that the emancipatory struggles are both symbolic and did not occur serendipitously. Instead, they occurred as a result of ongoing struggle until results were evident and in clear view for our ancestors and the liberationist movements of the past. Therefore, as we continue to analyze our achievements and embrace our present and future challenges, we should memorialize our past challenges and triumphs. Accordingly, Derek Walcott, a literary giant from the island of St. Lucia, has suggested that colonized peoples memorialize their past struggles variously in his writings. In a similar vein, Ama Ata Aidoo, a Contemporary Feminist African Writer and thinker, has maintained in concert with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, that Memory is one of the gateways to freedom. Moreover, Alice Walker has maintained in her essay: *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, that for oppressed women and men to overcome some of their present-day challenges and tribulations- they should return to their mothers' gardens- and discover some of the survival strategies that the said mothers utilized. Thus, memorialization of past struggles seems necessary, and Marcus Garvey's classic quote: "Know thyself," might be vital for the masses of our Virgin Islanders as well as our Caribbean Bretheren and Sistren to bear in mind, since knowledge of oneself is potentially empowering and liberatory.

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