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Editorial: Former Sen. Sarauw Reflects on 175th Emancipation Celebration: Missed Opportunities, St. Croix's Rich Legacy of Uprising

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Emancipation Day holds great historical significance, as it commemorates the end of slavery in the Danish West Indies. The St. Croix Uprising that took place on July 2nd-3rd, 1848 is a remarkable historical event. It is vital to recognize the importance of this rebellion and its aftermath, which ultimately led to the emancipation of the enslaved. However, as we reflect on the recent celebrations of the 175th Emancipation Day, it becomes evident that missed opportunities and a diluted understanding of history have hindered our ability to properly educate and honor this crucial moment.

The St. Croix Uprising:

The uprising of the enslaved on St. Croix in 1848 is an extraordinary example of one of the few successful rebellions in the Caribbean. On the night of July 2nd, signal fires were lit, bells rang, and conch shells were blown across the estates of western St. Croix. By the morning of July 3rd, approximately 8,000 slaves had gathered in front of the Frederiksted fort, demanding their freedom. Governor General Peter von Scholten, who had recently returned from a visit to St. Thomas, called for a meeting with his advisers. Despite suggestions of using force to suppress the uprising, von Scholten took a different approach. He addressed the gathering crowd and declared their freedom, abruptly ending the riotous activity without bloodshed. This distinguishing feature sets the St. Croix rebellion apart from other slave revolts in the Caribbean, which often resulted in violence, but failed to bring immediate changes in the slaves' legal status.

The Path to Emancipation:

The uprising on St. Croix did not occur in isolation but emerged from a conflation of global and territorial forces. Beginning with the rebellion in St. John in 1733; a global shift in Europe's view of slavery included the end of the transatlantic slave trade in 1803 by the Danes, Britain's ending of enslavement in the BVI in 1834, fourteen years before Danish West Indies; and successful rebellions in the French West Indies in 1793—specifically Haiti. It was also as a result of the reforms and amelioration efforts implemented by Governor General von Scholten since 1828. These changes included the strict regulation of work hours, the reduction of slave owners' punitive powers, the banning of public auctions, and improvements in slave housing. In the 1840s, Saturday was recognized as a free day, providing an opportunity for religious observance, secular instruction, and market activities. Wage payments were introduced for plantation work on this designated free day. Additionally, the establishment of publicly supported elementary schools for slave children, formalized through an ordinance in 1846, further demonstrated a progressive trajectory towards emancipation.

Missed Opportunities and Diluted History:

Despite the historical significance of the St. Croix rebellion and the subsequent reforms, the recent celebrations of the 175th Emancipation Day have fallen short in educating the community and honoring the full depth of this history. The Emancipation Committee, responsible for organizing the events, missed crucial opportunities. Substandard marketing efforts and the appointment of committee members based on political affiliations or personal connections have resulted in a diluted narrative surrounding the significance of Emancipation Day. This has undermined the recognition of heroes beyond General Buddhoe, including among many things the neglected contributions of the United Caribbean Association, led by Mario Moorehead, in advocating for Emancipation Day as an official holiday.

Seizing the Moment for Discourse and Decolonization:

The 175th Emancipation Day celebration should have been a platform to elevate the discourse on decolonization and its relevance to the Virgin Islands community. The history of enslavement, Danish rule, and American colonialism holds vital lessons that should have been openly explored. It is crucial to recognize that the struggle for freedom did not end with the abolition of slavery, but continued throughout these periods of oppression. By missed opportunities to engage in meaningful dialogue, the Emancipation Committee failed to raise awareness and empower the community regarding their shared history and ongoing journey towards decolonization.

Conclusion:

As we reflect on the 175th Emancipation Day, it becomes clear that the Committee missed the mark. Instead of utilizing the vast resources and time given to properly acknowledge our unique history, and honor the St. Croix slave uprising and the subsequent journey towards emancipation, they created forums that fell short of this incredible historical moment. The Emancipation Committee's shortcomings in marketing and presenting a comprehensive narrative have marginalized the heroes of the movement and neglected the contributions of key advocates. It is crucial that we acknowledge and rectify these shortcomings to ensure that the significance of Emancipation Day is properly understood, celebrated, and used as a catalyst for ongoing conversations on decolonization and the shaping of our collective future.

Submitted by: Janelle K. Sarauw is a former educator, political scientist, Senator and candidate for Lt. Governor.

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