

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Opposition is mounting to archeological excavations on Caribbean island St. Eustatius**

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### **"LET OUR ENSLAVED ANCESTORS REST" - SAYS UCF CARIBBEAN CHAIR**

Opposition is mounting to archeological excavations carried out on the Dutch Caribbean island of St. Eustatius. Kenneth Cuvalay who is chair of the Caribbean branch of a Dutch political party called Ubuntu Connected Front (UCF) has spoken out against what he calls "the desecration of the human remains of enslaved individuals."

"We are hoping to protect the resting places of our ancestors," he explains, "These sacred soils should not be disturbed by gravediggers whose only motive is to use taxpayer's money to write academic glory into their own job profiles. They claim their motive is scientific but how many bones do they need to disturb if only to describe the suffering of countless tortured souls?"

Cuvalay is working with various organizations on and outside St. Eustatius on behalf of the people of the small Caribbean island where he was born. President of the Brighter Path Foundation, Xiomara Balentina, is teaming up with UCF in the protests. "St. Eustatius has a history of Dutch colonial rule - like all of the other former five Caribbean islands which were once called the Netherlands Antilles," she states.

#### **Descendant community engagement**

A group of international archeologists from the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Finland, Germany and the US has recently excavated the remains of enslaved ancestors in the grounds of the island's airport. "These cultural insensitive foreigners have carried out their toil on our soil. They have done so in a very disrespectful manner without following the protocols for community engagement and properly engaging with the descendant community beforehand as per the international codes of ethics," Cuvalay insists.

"The local government has claimed that it needs the sand within the site for road building purposes. This is an obvious untruth. Sand can be obtained everywhere else on the island. The whole process is marked by unethical and financial irregularities and should be investigated independently."

Cuvalay explains that the same archeological organization (St. Eustatius Center for Archaeological Research, SECAR) conducted a similar excavation at a plantation on the west coast of the island. "They worked in secret, left the site in a deplorable condition and put the remains somewhere without telling the local community where they are or what they did with them. So much for their respect for ancestry and heritage."

### **Decolonize archeological regulations and practices**

"We are now seeking the attention, help and guidance from Afrikan experts within the University of the West Indies to protect the resting places of our ancestors. We are also approaching the offices of CARICOM Reparations Commission to further our case."

The National Agency of Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands has also been approached to enquire about the research protocols that need to be in place. "The research team on St. Eustatius told us that they are working according to the Dutch Archaeology Quality Standard "as much as possible". But in the Netherlands, there are no burial grounds of enslaved Africans, so norms and regulations on how to handle their remains are absent in these standards. These standards don't apply to us and archeological ethics, regulations and practices need to decolonize", Xiomara Balentina points out.

"A so-called Town Hall meeting was held after and not before the latest slave remains were disturbed. Communication at this event was only one way and serious discussion and debate were stifled quickly. Communication is about listening and sharing. The local administration only wants to communicate what they think they should and not what they ought."

Cuvalay also reports that he is lobbying Afrikan scholars, academics, archeologists and anthropologists. He is appealing to "Afrikan Sisters and Brothers, and Afrikan organizations in the diaspora to help us stop this colonial and barbaric attack on our ancestors' spirituality."

### **Local or national government responsibility**

The research team on St. Eustatius and the National Agency of Cultural Heritage is stating that the local government is responsible for the excavations and they will decide what will happen with the remains of the enslaved ancestors. "But it is highly unlikely," Cuvalay remarks, "that the local government has the budget and expertise to supervise

such a research project. The Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs and Kingdom Relations has a responsibility in this as well."

The latter seeing the fact that the Dutch government dissolved in February 2018 the democratic elected island government and since then has put their appointees' in charge of the island. All of this together with the plundering and excavations of our ancestors remains without community engagement is colonialism. SECAR seems to think that giving schoolchildren and adults a tour on the site where they are excavating our ancestors is community engagement. Community engagement means that the people of St. Eustatius are having input in the decision-making, not giving them a tour as if they are tourists visiting the island.

## **Online Petition**

"We have written letters to several government agencies and explained what we think should happen, but no response so far. That is why we started our petition:

<https://www.change.org/LeaveOurAncestorsInPeace>

"As a member of the descendant community we claim respectful treatment and reburial of the remains of our ancestors, structural engagement with us on all matters pertaining to archeological project work and a permanent memorial. This digging is unethical and has to stop!"

## **UCF Black Agenda**

Ubuntu Connected Front (UCF) won an absolute majority (50,5%) on St. Eustatius in the elections to the House of Representatives this spring. It is a grassroots community based movement. Decolonization is on her Black Agenda as part of the party program calling for the decolonization and transformation within structures and systems in the Kingdom to combat systemic racism. The recognition of the impact and legacy of the Dutch transatlantic slave trade and colonization is subject of debate in the Netherlands. Dutch Africans in the diaspora are asking the government for apologies for the slavery past, calling for reparatory justice and declaring 1 July (Emancipation Day) a national holiday.

CAPTION1: Decolonize archeology - Kenneth Cuvalay (pictured) is coordinating the protests to stop further unethical disturbance of his enslaved ancestors

CAPTION2: Enslaved Africans working on a sugar cane plantation on St. Eustatius circa 1760, illustration by Johannes Veltkamp (1733-1818), Amsterdam Maritime Museum A IV - 1 483.

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**Ubuntu** means "humanity" in African Bantu languages. It is often translated as "I am because we are", or "humanity towards others". It is Ubuntu Connected Front's core belief that all people have rights, which promotes equality of treatment and eliminates marginalization and deprivation.

Our 'Black Agenda' can be found in the ["Manifest for NL Transformation"](#) at the UCF website (Chapter 5).