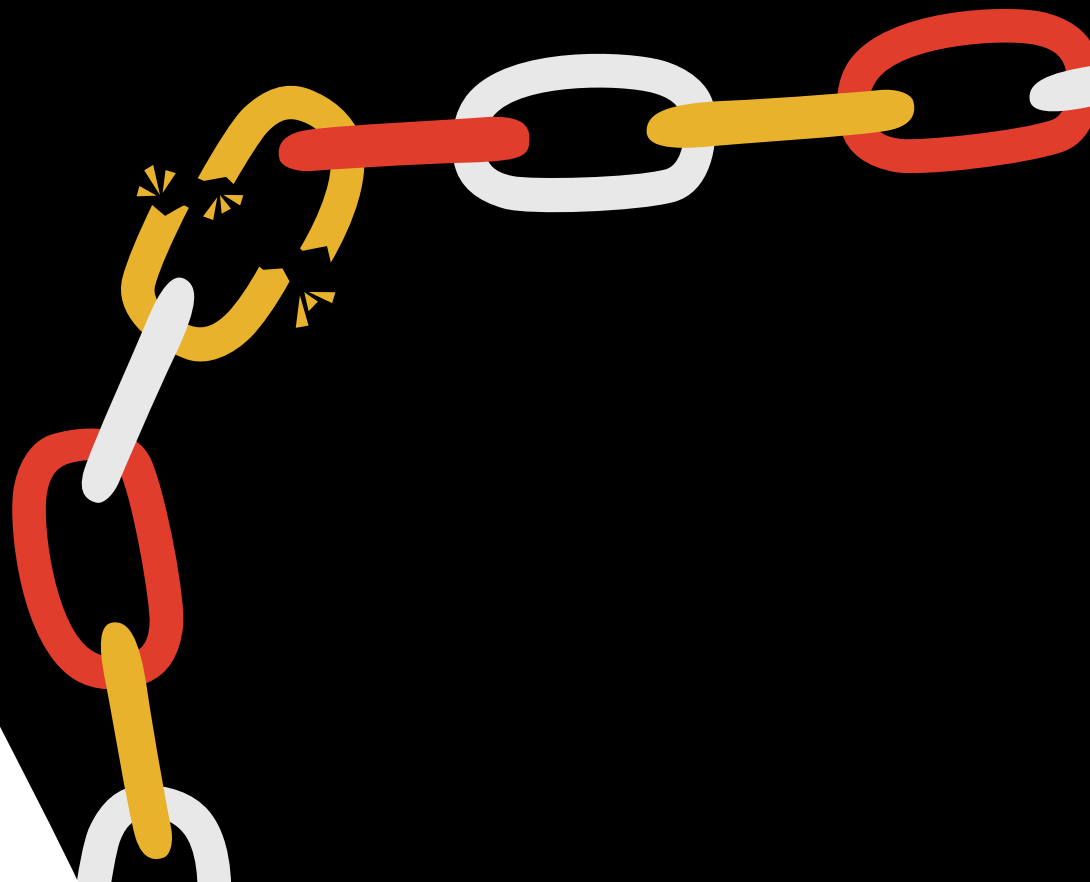




**EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY
TRIBUNAL**
Trinidad & Tobago

AFRICAN EMANCIPATION DAY 2025

BEYOND SLAVERY SHADOWS



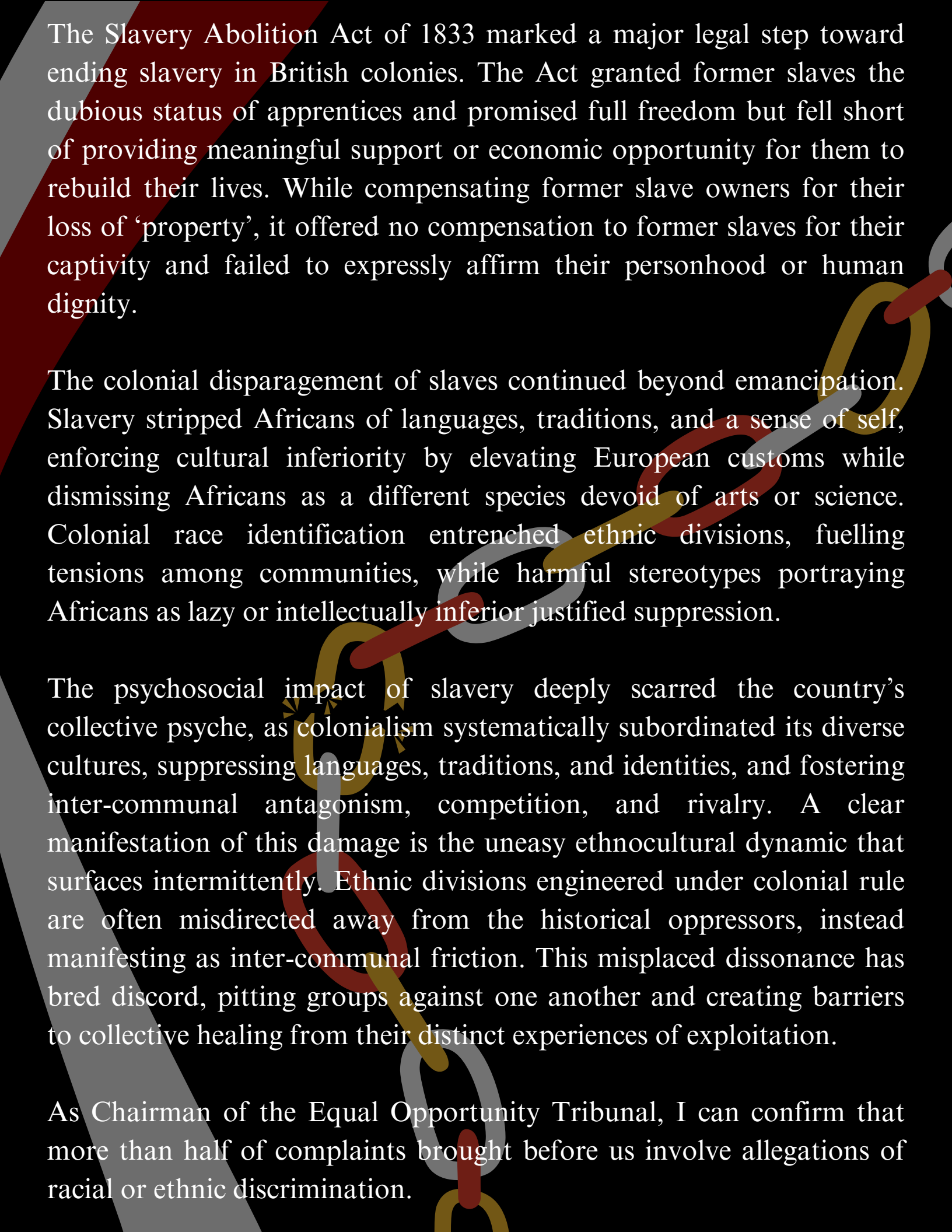


**Her Honour Madame Justice
Donna Prowell-Raphael,
Chairman and Judge
Equal Opportunity
Tribunal**

African Emancipation Day is far more than a commemoration of the legal abolition of African slavery in British colonies in 1833. It can be regarded as a plea for ongoing liberation from the enduring shadows of colonialism.

On African Emancipation Day, August 1st, Trinidad and Tobago salutes the victims of the transatlantic slave trade. As the nation honours their liberation, it pays tribute to generations who endured unimaginable suffering. This celebration stands firmly against narratives that seek to diminish or rewrite the barbaric captivity imposed on enslaved Africans.

Slavery and the slave trade are at the core of colonization in Trinidad and the Caribbean. Slave laws grew largely from Euro-Atlantic beliefs in African inferiority, regarding enslaved Africans as 'chattels' subject to owners' absolute authority. The Barbados Slave Code of 1661, the first comprehensive slave law in the British colonies, embodied these views by treating enslaved Africans as property that could be bought, sold, bartered, or inherited, and allowing cruel punishments without legal consequences. Though Spanish slave codes governed Trinidad until the early 19th century, the Barbadian code set harsh precedents for the treatment of slaves across the British Caribbean.

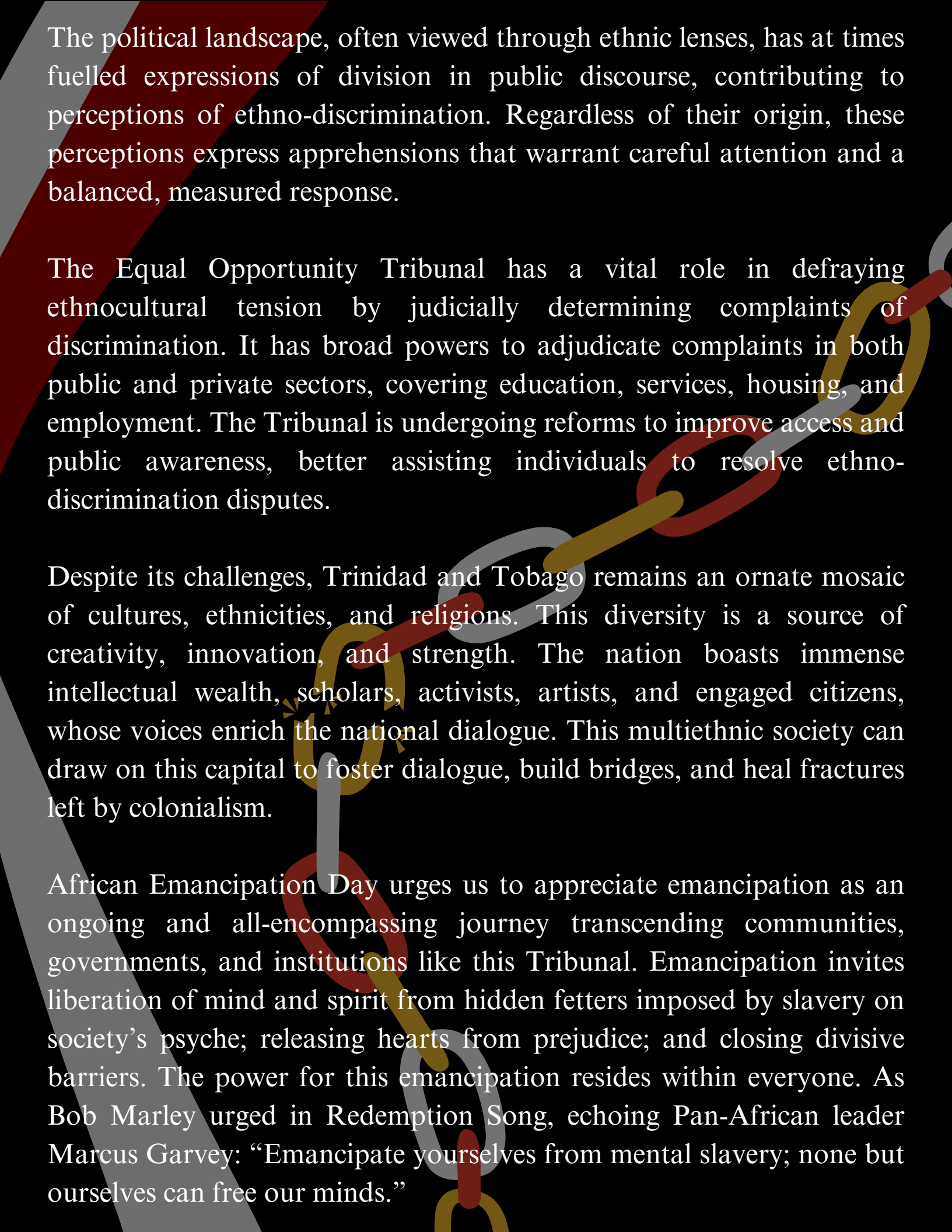


The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 marked a major legal step toward ending slavery in British colonies. The Act granted former slaves the dubious status of apprentices and promised full freedom but fell short of providing meaningful support or economic opportunity for them to rebuild their lives. While compensating former slave owners for their loss of ‘property’, it offered no compensation to former slaves for their captivity and failed to expressly affirm their personhood or human dignity.

The colonial disparagement of slaves continued beyond emancipation. Slavery stripped Africans of languages, traditions, and a sense of self, enforcing cultural inferiority by elevating European customs while dismissing Africans as a different species devoid of arts or science. Colonial race identification entrenched ethnic divisions, fuelling tensions among communities, while harmful stereotypes portraying Africans as lazy or intellectually inferior justified suppression.

The psychosocial impact of slavery deeply scarred the country’s collective psyche, as colonialism systematically subordinated its diverse cultures, suppressing languages, traditions, and identities, and fostering inter-communal antagonism, competition, and rivalry. A clear manifestation of this damage is the uneasy ethnocultural dynamic that surfaces intermittently. Ethnic divisions engineered under colonial rule are often misdirected away from the historical oppressors, instead manifesting as inter-communal friction. This misplaced dissonance has bred discord, pitting groups against one another and creating barriers to collective healing from their distinct experiences of exploitation.

As Chairman of the Equal Opportunity Tribunal, I can confirm that more than half of complaints brought before us involve allegations of racial or ethnic discrimination.



The political landscape, often viewed through ethnic lenses, has at times fuelled expressions of division in public discourse, contributing to perceptions of ethno-discrimination. Regardless of their origin, these perceptions express apprehensions that warrant careful attention and a balanced, measured response.

The Equal Opportunity Tribunal has a vital role in defraying ethnocultural tension by judicially determining complaints of discrimination. It has broad powers to adjudicate complaints in both public and private sectors, covering education, services, housing, and employment. The Tribunal is undergoing reforms to improve access and public awareness, better assisting individuals to resolve ethno-discrimination disputes.

Despite its challenges, Trinidad and Tobago remains an ornate mosaic of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. This diversity is a source of creativity, innovation, and strength. The nation boasts immense intellectual wealth, scholars, activists, artists, and engaged citizens, whose voices enrich the national dialogue. This multiethnic society can draw on this capital to foster dialogue, build bridges, and heal fractures left by colonialism.

African Emancipation Day urges us to appreciate emancipation as an ongoing and all-encompassing journey transcending communities, governments, and institutions like this Tribunal. Emancipation invites liberation of mind and spirit from hidden fetters imposed by slavery on society's psyche; releasing hearts from prejudice; and closing divisive barriers. The power for this emancipation resides within everyone. As Bob Marley urged in Redemption Song, echoing Pan-African leader Marcus Garvey: "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery; none but ourselves can free our minds."

Dr. Eric Williams, Trinidad and Tobago's first Prime Minister, famously urged the country to rise above ancestral divisions (History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago, 279):

“Together, the various groups in Trinidad and Tobago have suffered, together they have aspired, together they have achieved. Only together can they succeed. And only together can they build a society, can they build a nation, can they build a homeland.” He challenged the nation to realize the words of the National Anthem, that every creed and race should find an equal place, concluding (282) that *“... This will be their final emancipation”*.

May this African Emancipation Day be a moment that honours the past and unlocks the rich intellectual and cultural destiny that distinguishes Trinidad and Tobago.

Happy African Emancipation Day!

August 2025.