

THE DIASPORA AND THE AFRICAN THINK TANK: SLAVE REPARATION ISSUES, MATTERS ARISING – A CRITIQUE, VIABILITY AND VALIDITY

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Abstract

Between 1500 AD and the end of the 19th century, millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homes and communities and sold off as slaves in the cruel Transatlantic Slave Trade. This horrendous trade robbed African societies of its vibrant youths, long-term economic growth, the entire cottage industry, and developments. Consequently, there have been many vibrant calls – across the world - for European and American slave trading nations to make significant reparations to Africans and African nations for this immense injustice. This paper would research and examine the concept of reparation, the issue of slave trade, and the role and response of African Diaspora along with the continent's Think Tank in seeking for, and justifying transitional justice. Thus, the paper would present and examine the various arguments and theses advanced to refute reparations and wonder to what extent calls for reparation can be validated and justified. Roles of important movements such as Negritude and Pan Africanism would be critically analyzed towards this critical analysis and evaluation of the reparation campaign.

Keywords: Diaspora, slave trade, reparation, Pan-Africanism, Negritude.

Background:

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was carried on, and lasted for about four centuries with many of the slaves dying on the ships even before getting to the Americas; and many slaves also dying in the plantations as a result of the sheer wickedness of the slave traders. Beginning from about 1500 AD, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade occurred along the coast of West Africa. Millions of Africans were captured in raids and then transported to the coast. The captives, primarily adult males, were assembled on the coast and kept in holding pens until wholesaled to European ship captains who sailed up and down the coast looking for slave cargo. Once a ship was loaded, the trip, known as “the Middle Passage,” usually to Brazil or an island in the Caribbean, was a matter of a few weeks to several months. This vicious Trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted between 1500 and the end of the 19th century. Death rates ranged between 10 and 20 percent on the Middle Passage. More deaths occurred on the slave plantations from harsh treatments and strange diseases.

Arriving in Brazil or the Caribbean islands, the slaves were sold at auction. The slave auctions were elaborate markets in which the prices of the slaves were determined. The auctions told the captains and their superiors what kind of cargo was in demand, usually adult males. After the auction the slave was delivered to the new owner, who then put him to work. That also began the period of “seasoning” for the slave, the period of about a year or so when he either succumbed to the disease environment of the New World or survived it. It was indeed a harrowing experience all the way. The slaves (and their descendants) were NEVER treated nor regarded as human beings at all (Jones, 2023).

Whole communities were emptied and devastated during this horrid centuries of enforced slave trade. According to Rodney (2018) and Jones (2020), the slave trade resulted in massive devastations and emptying of whole African communities – practically leading to the death of the African cottage industry. Waxing poetic, David Diop (1956) lamented:

*Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your work
The work of your slavery
Africa, tell me Africa
Is this your back that is unbent
This back that never breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red scars
And saying no to the whip under the midday sun*

By our unpaid labor and suffering, we have earned the right to the soil, many times over and over, and now we are determined to have it. — ANONYMOUS, 1861

1.0 The Concept of Reparation

What is reparation? Why reparation? Should victims of reparation be compensated? Who or what organization/body should do the reparation? How would the victims of reparation be identified and known? Is there anything as transitional justice (OHCHR, 2023; Otele and Kattah, 2023)? Rodney argues that the transatlantic slave trade robbed African societies of their vibrant youths’ long-term economic growth, the entire cottage industry, and developments (Rodney, 2018). John Locke, the modern British philosopher argues for reparation vividly by postulating that “*Besides the crime which consists in violating the law, and varying from the right rule of reason, whereby a man so far becomes degenerate, and declares himself to quit the principles of human nature, and to be a noxious creature, there is commonly injury done to some person or other, and some other man receives damage by his transgression: in which case he who hath received any damage, has, besides the right of punishment common to him with other men, a particular right to seek reparation*” (JOHN LOCKE, “SECOND TREATISE”).

The OHCHR defines reparation as measures to redress violations of human rights by providing a range of material and symbolic benefits to victims or their families as well as affected communities (OHCHR, 2023; Coates, 2023). Accordingly, reparation must be adequate, effective, prompt, and should be proportional to the gravity of the violations and the harm suffered. Reparation measures should include: restitution, compensation, rehabilitation and satisfaction (Jones, 2020; OHCHR, 2023).

2.0 Why Reparation?

In our case study of Reparation and African Diaspora, there have been questions as to the validity of reparation. Why, at all, should any one, society, organization, or body carry out reparations for any set of people? For instance, was it fair to have asked Germany carry out reparations for Jews whose ancestors were gassed to death by the German Nazi regime? Should Europe and America carry out reparations for African societies whose ancestors were carried away as slaves, and their lands, economies, and cottage industry plundered and destroyed (Mudimbe, 1988; Rodney, 2018; Jones, 2023)? What forms should reparation take? Should the African leaders who sold their own people to the European slave traders not share a significant part of the blame for the transatlantic slave trade? Opponents against reparation, such as American Senator McConnell argue that slavery has been long abolished and “no one currently alive was responsible”. Therefore, why should 21st century Europeans and Americans pay any forms of reparations to African societies, or African-Europeans and African-Americans (Huddleston, 2021)? And if reparations were even justified, how much and in what forms should reparations take? Whom, what organizations which bodies, and what societies get these reparations? Can European and American nations afford the money for the reparations? Therefore, is reparation a feasible project? Have not European and American nations compensated for reparations through their laudable economic aids, grants, and technological transfer projects to African nations and societies? Huddleston (2019) points out that internal American reparations towards African-Americans would cost as much as \$19 trillion “taking into account the amount of free and involuntary labour derived from millions of slaves (24 hours a day, 365 days a year) dating back to the United States' inception”. However, the American government cannot simply afford this huge amount of money.

How can the Diaspora and the African Think Tank validly justify reparation? Reparation for whom? Historical facts seem to indicate that African societies were neck deep in devastating fellow African nations and societies through raids for slaves – and not that Europeans came hinterland to forage for black slaves. Thus, the problem of reparation becomes two-pronged: firstly, the need to identify which African nations/societies devastated fellow Africans – and perhaps exclude them from the benefits of reparation; secondly, should these brother-raiders be also asked to seek for forgiveness from their own brother-societies – along with the Europeans and Americans? Even within African nations, rulers and chiefs were reported to have also raided their own weaker citizens and marketed them to the European slave traders.

In effect, should reparation become an identification parade and issue of whom and whom actually were raided by both Europeans and fellow Africans? The Kunta Kinte Story by Alex Haley and the Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther autobiography, among others, seem to demonstrate this moral and ethical dilemma behind requesting for reparations for Africa and Africans. It was Africans that were raiding fellow Africans as slaves.

2.0 The Diaspora, the African Think Tank and Works on Slave Reparation

Black Americans, West Indies, and African intellectuals in European universities constitute the bulk of Diaspora who have engaged the Western world on the issue of reparation. Arts giants such as Professors Ben Enwonwu, Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, el-Anatsui, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Jimoh Akolo, Okechukwu Odita, and Simon Okeke have used their Art works to depict the inventiveness,

astuteness, and productivity of the glorious African pre-slave trade era. African intellectuals (Think Tank) and Diaspora have embarked upon sensitization of the need for reparation from European and American nations for the evils of slave trade (and even colonialism). Leading lights include Walter Rodney, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ali Mazrui, Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummel, Edward Blyden, Patrice Lumumba, Birago Diop, Julius Nyerere, Jomo Kenyatta, Mamadou Dia, and David Oyano. Their vehicles for their campaigns were Pan Africanism and Negritude (Mudimbe, 1988; Kuryla, 2023). While Pan-Africanism envisioned a unified African nation where all people of the African Diaspora can live, Negritude is a political enterprise which signifies an existential thesis – *I am what I have decided to be*. Negritude is also a political enterprise. The aim is to lead towards cultural re-assessment and socio-political promotion of the African milieu (Mudimbe, 1988). According to its intellectual founder, Leopold Senghor, Negritude (and Marxist humanist) Negritude is “the warmth” of being, living, and participating in a natural, social and spiritual harmony.

Within America, Black Americans have recorded various successes at the local levels to project the case for reparation. Court Cases have been instituted against State governments, corporations, universities, churches, the US Army, and even identified families of slave owners (Jones, 2023). Historically, enslaved Africans in America have been demanding reparation right from the beginning of the slave trade in 1500 AD. One of the earliest “recorded cases of reparations in the US dates to 1783 when the State of Massachusetts ordered that a formerly enslaved woman, Belinda Royall, should receive a pension from the proceeds of her enslaver’s estate, in acknowledgment of her unpaid labour (Otele and Kattah, 2023).

Therefore, the thesis is that it is incumbent that the governments of Europe and America whose nations benefited, and were built, from slave trade should compensate the descendants of former slaves to atone for their countries' legacies of slavery, in the form of reparations. Reparation means the offering of restitution by European and American governments to all Black peoples and communities for the centuries of servitude, unpaid forced labour and suffering enslaved people endured (Huddleston, 2021; Coates, 2023). Reparations would compensate the Diaspora and Africans who have felt the negative effects of slavery's legacy. Reparation is something that is necessary for Africans “to be made whole.”

Consequently, as the intellectual counterpart of Negritude, the African Think Tank movement, Pan-Africanism is the intellectual movement of the Diaspora. Thus, on its part, Pan Africanism is the thesis that peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified (Kuryla, 2023). Historically, Pan-Africanism has often taken the shape of a political or cultural movement. Pan-Africanists envision a unified African nation where all people of the African Diaspora can live. In more-general terms, Pan-Africanism is the sentiment that people of African descent have a great deal in common, a fact that deserves notice and even celebration. Pan-Africanist ideas first began to circulate in the mid-19th century in the United States, led by Africans from the Western Hemisphere. The most important early Pan-Africanists were Martin Delany and Alexander Crummel, both African Americans, and Edward Blyden, a West Indian.

Those early voices for Pan-Africanism emphasized the commonalities between Africans and Black people in the United States. Delany, who believed that Black

people could not prosper alongside whites, advocated the idea that African Americans should separate from the United States and establish their own nation. Crummel and Blyden, both contemporaries of Delany, thought that Africa was the best place for that new nation. Motivated by Christian missionary zeal, the two believed that Africans in the New World should return to their homelands and convert and civilize the inhabitants there.

Although the ideas of Delany, Crummel, and Blyden are important, the true father of modern Pan-Africanism was the influential thinker W.E.B. Du Bois. Throughout his long career, Du Bois was a consistent advocate for the study of African history and culture. In the early 20th century, he was most prominent among the few scholars who studied Africa. His statement, made at the turn of the 20th century, that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” was made with Pan-Africanist sentiments in mind. For Du Bois, “the problem of the color line” was not confined merely to the United States and its “Negro Problem.” Du Bois’ famous statement was made with the clear knowledge that many Africans living on the African continent suffered under the yoke of European colonial rule. Among the more-important Pan-Africanist thinkers of the first decades of the 20th century was Jamaican-born Black nationalist Marcus Garvey. In the years after World War I, Garvey championed the cause of African independence, emphasizing the positive attributes of Black people’s collective past. His organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), boasted millions of members, envisioning and then making plans for a return “back to Africa.” (Kuryla, 2023).

3.0 The Diaspora and the Viability of Reparation

What is Diaspora? How can the African Diaspora fight for the reparation cause? Generically, Diaspora refers to the dispersion of a people among other people. In effect, Diaspora is a term that refers to groups of persons of the same ethno-national origin who themselves, or their ancestors, voluntarily or under coercion migrated from one place to another, or to several other places, settled in these other places, and maintain their identity and various kinds of contacts with their place of origin (Princeton, 2023).

In this wise, Black Americans (African-Americans) and Black Europeans (African Europeans) can be considered to be African Diaspora.

However, the African Union defines the African Diaspora as "Consisting of people of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union." (Khier, 2023). Its constitutive act declares that it shall "invite and encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of our continent, in the building of the African Union." The African Union seeks to manage and coordinate other forms of interaction between the AU and Diaspora organizations worldwide. This includes collaboration on policy and advocacy efforts of Diaspora networks and coalitions, technical support and assistance, enabling framework of cooperation and working relations (Khier, 2023).

Mixing the two definitions of Diaspora together, we can argue that firstly, African-Americans should vigorously champion the slave reparation campaign. More so, they

(African-Americans) are the living proofs and evidences of the transatlantic slave trade. Thus Jones (2020) traced the literature of the fight for slave reparation by Black Americans over the past two centuries. Accordingly, African-Americans have called for a policy to be implemented and for the American government to enact a law that might offer financial restitution to the descendants of enslaved people. Groups of Black Americans have found success pursuing restitution at the local level. At the local level, activists have more immediate access to institutional pressure points, while decision-makers are often less shielded from criticism and thus more likely to yield (Jones, 2020).

At the international level, it is incumbent upon us African intellectuals and think tank to constitute ourselves as a formidable and well-informed body to partner with our home countries in particular and with the African Union in general to fight the just and laudable cause of slave reparation. We must encourage and support our African Diaspora (as defined by the African Union) to win the just war of slave reparation – even though reparation is not enough compensation for the transatlantic slave trade. It is an inadequate compensation because Rodney (2018) rightly argued that ancient African societies were boisterous, robust, well-developed and industrious. The backbone of African development was the nurturing, growth and development of the cottage industry – scattered across the entire African continent, and among all African peoples (Hausa, Kongo, Masai, Zulu, Yoruba/Oyo, Bantu, Benin, Fulani, Maghreb, Songhai, Abomey/Dahomey, and Mali). This meant significant production and a well-developed trade system, and diverse goods and services.

It is not enough compensation because through the unfortunate transatlantic slave trade which was imposed on African societies by the European nations, African societies were practically irreversibly robbed of its long-term economic growth and developments. Millions of its vibrant young men and women were forcibly uprooted, enslaved, and deported to the Americas. Growth, economic development, and the entire cottage industry were all destroyed (Rodney, 2018).

Thirdly, it is not enough compensation because as a result of the colonial experience brought about by the 1883 Berlin Conference, African societies were partitioned into countries and states for massive exploitation and a deliberate under-development project/programme was foisted upon African nations and societies. Conceptually, Walter Rodney equated colonialism with underdevelopment. Colonialism meant underdevelopment, and underdevelopment meant colonialism. With colonialism, all African natural resources were greedily exploited and an intense underdeveloped project was imposed on all African societies and countries. Railways and all other so-called developments were only created simply to foster the exploitation of our natural resources to serve as raw materials to the British industries.

Thus, African societies moved from its rich history of development to stagnation (during the slave trade) and finally to comprehensive and deliberate underdevelopment (Rodney).

However, slave reparation championed by the African Diaspora is a starting point.

4.0 Concluding Reflections – The Devil’s advocate

However, if as demonstrated earlier, Africans themselves were complicit in the slave trade, then reparation will become a heavy burden on the back of Africans and African nations. Why should Africans themselves escape from the guilt of slave raiding and trading of their fellow brothers, mothers, and sisters to Europeans? Who among Africans should also be tasked with paying reparation? Should descendants of royal families in African empires and known slave-raiding families be asked to make reparations to their fellow brothers and sisters? Would not this be the full restitution and transitional justice being asked for with regards to slave trade? For instance, can the descendants of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther ask the descendants of identified Africans to pay reparations to them for the sufferings of their fathers and ancestors?

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