

# Making a Case for Reparations

by

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## Introduction

Reparations is one of the most misunderstood topics in recent years, and it is gradually becoming an area where even some angels fear to tread. There are now protagonists and antagonists of reparations all over the world, and it has divided people along racial lines. Most blacks want the payment of reparations to Africans and their descendant in the Diaspora because of the indescribable damages that have been done to the continent by the slave trade that took place over four hundred years ago. The late Chief M.K.O. Abiola belonged to this school of thought, but most whites regard such demands as frivolous, irrelevant and thus, should be ignored.

In view of the above, I intend to define the concept of reparations, highlight some irreparable damages of the Atlantic slave trade, the consequences for the blacks, and provide an analysis of the contentions of the opponents of reparations. I shall then make a case for reparations, and conclude.

It is interesting to note that when the Jews, Japanese, the North American Indians in Canada demanded and received reparations for the injuries inflicted on them, the world was positively silent, but the story was different when the blacks made similar demands. This is because the motives for these demands were misunderstood.

The demand for reparations for blacks is not a phenomenon of the present century, and it was not originated by Africans and their descendants, but rather by William Wilberforce, a devoted Christian who made the first demand for reparations on behalf of Africans on the floor of the British Parliament when the slave trade had not been abolished in Britain. He made this demand in his final speech to his colleagues for the abolition of the slave trade, on the eve of his retirement from the British Parliament.

## **The Concept of Reparations**

As stated above, the concept of reparations had been widely misunderstood, because the motive behind the demand had also been misunderstood, and misinterpreted. The word reparations is derived from the Latin word “repare” and it means to repair, and its present usage has not departed from its original meaning. Thus, reparations is simply a call or demand by the blacks of all nations and their descendant that participated and profited from the Atlantic slave trade that lasted for about four hundreds years, to repair or alleviate the legacies of underdevelopment, miseries, poverty and other problems associated with the trade in Africa and the Diaspora (these damages are enormous and the blacks are unable to carry out the repairs alone).

## **Irreparable Damages: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade**

The trans-Atlantic slave trade has been described as one of the most inhuman events that has ever been recorded in human history; based on injustice, oppression, physical force, and slave owners who had the power of life and death over enslaved (Conrad 1986:22), a point was vividly highlighted by David Barry Gasper, when he said: *...when Antiga enslaved were executed for crimes, or when they were hunted down and killed as fugitives (by their owners), their owners were entitled to compensation from public funds after they had filed claims or petitions to the legislature* (Gasper 1992 : 307).

The unlimited powers of these slave owners in the peak of the slave trade resulted in the death of millions of black enslaved in America, and were once regarded economically as an important means of replenishing the working population on the plantations, and ideologically as a gratifying means of rescuing pagan souls for Christianity (Conrad 1983:3). Thus, it is also relevant to note that historians had not been able to record all the atrocities that were committed during the four decades of the slave trade which could be partly attributed to the fact that even when the slave trade had been officially abolished, some die-hard slave dealers still carried on with the trade because of the enormous profits they realized from this cruel business. Moreover, it was almost impossible for anyone to know and record all the horrors that were committed in the interior areas of Africa and along the coast during the period of the slave trade.

However, I will highlight some of the horrors committed during this trade with the intention of showing the world that the main losers in the slave trade were the African enslaved, and to sensitize the conscience of the international community to the demands for reparations presented by the descendants of the Africans who were enslaved.

Hence, these atrocities have been classified into the various phases of their occurrences as: (1) the long treks to the coast, (2) the embankment stage, (3) the loading of the ships with the enslaved, (4) the trans-Atlantic voyages, and (5) the plantations.

### **The Long Treks to the Coast**

The African enslaved were purchased in the interior parts of Africa and journeyed to the coast with their enslavers by foot which lasted from one to eight months. Hence this indescribable hardship of the newly enslaved began as soon as they were taken possession of by the slave dealers, and it was not every enslaved person that started the journey from the interior that arrived at the coast because many died during the long journey. In fact, the mortality rates were extremely high, and it was reported that about forty percent of the blacks who were “enslaved in the African interior died before they could reach a costal port” (Miller 1981:413-414). And before any of the journeys began, the enslaved were branded and put in irons. If they were in an expedition in the fields, a heavy iron chain was attached to their necks to prevent them from escaping from their captors; the chain was “half an inch thick and capable of confining a hundred persons” (Conrad: Op. Cit.:40). Thus it was after these precautions that the journeys to the coast began, and enslaved blacks were subjected to all forms of inhuman treatments.

Robert Edgar Conrad (Conrad 1983: 18-19) provides a vivid description of these unfortunate enslaved Africans, he says: *On the way they (the slaves) do not drink water whenever they wish, but only when they reach some pool or pond. They [would] camp whenever the slave master decides. Their bed is the earth, their roof, the sky and the blanket they cover themselves with, the leaves of the trees, which do not cover them completely. The morning dew falls upon them. Their pillows are the trunks of the trees and the bodies of their companions. After the camping site has been selected, the slaves are arranged in a circle, a bon fire is lit to provide heat and light. This lasts until dawn, having warmed the earth with their bodies, their journey is resumed*

This description vividly portray the terrible sufferings which the enslaved were subjected to during their long journeys to the coast, and in contrast, even the convicted criminals of this modern era, had better facilities and treatment than these wretched human beings that were bound in chain and could neither drink water nor rest themselves whenever they wished. It was therefore not a surprise that the casualty rates among these enslaved was very high and the survivors arrived at the coast totally exhausted. But this was just the beginning of their terrible ordeals (Davidson 1968: 97).

## **The Embankment Stage**

The embankment stage took place when the enslaved arrived at the coast. In this regard, Basil Davidson gave vivid descriptions of this humiliation and suffering that the enslaved went through as soon as they arrived at the coast. He said that when the captives got to the coast, they were hoarded into a prison near the beach and later taken to an open space and stripped naked and thus subjected to a thorough medical exam by European surgeons who examined every part of the naked body with the intention of separating those fit for export from those not fit for export (ibid. p. 97).

The chosen were thus those who had been found to be of sound health, good looking, and between the ages of seven and thirty years. And those rejected were over the age of thirty-five years, had grey hair, defective features, had contracted a venereal disease or had some other form of imperfection (ibid. p. 98). Second, those not selected were abandoned and directed to return to their villages (if they still had any energy left in them), and if they were not strong enough to return to their homes, they were left to die (ibid. p. 98).

In contrast, the unfortunate person who was enslaved and found fit were exported abroad, and subjected to more sufferings as European slave dealers placed marks on the breasts of each slave “with a red-hot iron”, hence imprinting the mark of French, English or Dutch companies to distinguish their ownership (ibid. p. 98) and preventing the inhabitants from substituting them with sickly persons (ibid. p. 98).

Yet, the straw that broke the camel’s back at this phase of enslavement was the subjugation of the enslaved to baptism by the Portuguese at the seaport. In a normal circumstance, baptism is a milestone in the life of a newly converted Christian; an occasion for joy because the event symbolizes that the convert is willingly to accept Jesus Christ, and forsaken his/her sins to openly identified with the Lord. However, in the case of the baptism ministered to the enslaved, it was a painful experience, because after they were baptized, a hot iron was used to put a small cross on their chest (Conrad: 1986: 41).

Thus, a very cruel act that had nothing to do with any genuine Christianity, and notwithstanding, after this inhuman conversion, the enslaved were kept in warehouses and open compounds fenced by high earthen walls; exposed to the hot climate of the tropics; poorly fed and clothed; and sometimes chained together in stocks; and left in unhealthy conditions to wait (which could take weeks or months) for the arrival of a ship that would take them abroad (ibid. p. 41).

## The Loading of the Ships with Enslaved and the Trans-Atlantic Voyages

Each phase of the black experience with slavery has a sad story to tell. The phase of loading ships with the enslaved and the trans-Atlantic voyages was the worst ordeal for those enslaved. For example, Conrad (1986: 42) reports that:

- There were very limited spaces and provisions in the ships
- The traders were desirous to make very huge profits
- The human cargoes were overcrowded in the ships with inadequate food and water

The ordeal of this phase began when the enslaved were being transported in canoes to the ships and as they arrived at the deck of the ship, each was given a small piece of cloth to tie around his waist (Davidson 1986: 97). And after they had been handed over to the captains of the American and European ships, the enslaved were stripped naked again, branded and loaded into airless under-decks like canned sardines, and chained at their hands and feet (Davidson 1998: 192). Hence it was under these conditions that the enslaved made their long voyages to the plantations in the America continent and the Caribbean (these human cargoes were inhumanly treated), and as a result of this, many died of suffocation and other kinds of ill-treatment (Conrad 1983:15). For example, the enslaved were given very small ration of water (hardly enough to quench the thirst) and poor quality of food, and the dryness of their mouths and thirst often resulted in many types of epidemics that would start with one person and spread to many others, and those who were badly affected and had no hope of survival were thrown into the sea (Ibid., p. 22).

Many have described the pain of this enslavement; hence Thomas Nelson, a British physician, summarized the ordeal of those enslaved while crossing the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil (Nelson: 1846: 43 – 45), and reports that:

*... a few minutes after the vessel dropped her anchor, I went on board of her, and although somewhat prepared by the previous inspection of two full slavers to encounter a scene of disease and wretchedness, still my experience, aided by my imagination fell short of the loathsome spectacle which met my eyes on stepping over the side. Huddled closely on deck, and blocking up the gangways on either side, lowered, or squatted, three hundred and sixty-two Negroes, with disease, want and misery stamped upon them with such painful intensity utterly begs all powers of description. In one corner, apart from the rest, a group of wretched beings lay stretched, many in the last stage of exhaustion and all covered with the pustules of small pox .....*

*On every side, squalid and sunken visages were rendered more hideous by the swollen eyelids and the puriform discharge of a virulent ophthalmic (a dangerous eye inflammation), with which the majority appear to be afflicted, added to this were figures shrivelled to absolute skin and bone, doubled up in a posture which originally want of space had compelled them to adopt, which debility and stiffness of the joints compelled them to retain. On looking more leisurely around, after the first paroxysm of horror, and disgust had subsided, I remarked on ... another wretch group, composed entirely of females. Some were mothers with infants who were endeavouring to such a few drops of moisture from the lank, withered, and skinning breasts of their wretched mothers; others were of very intermediate age, most of them destitute, even of the decency of a rag, and all presenting as woeful a spectacle of misery as it is possible to conceive.*

### **The Plantations: Brazil and Beyond**

The plantations in America and the Caribbean were the final destinations for most of the enslaved transported from Africa, as many arrived in very unhealthy conditions. And according to Conrad (1986), those who finally arrived at their final place in Brazil in a fit state of health “did not greatly outnumber those who perished during the long journey from African homelands”. And second, an observer described the conditions of the newly arrived enslaved (in Brazil) in the following manner: ...[they were] *skinny, to tottering shadows ... their features shrunk, their large eyes appearing as if they would momentarily start from their sockets, and worst of all, their bellies puckered up, forming a perfect hallow, and looking as if they had grown to their back bones* (Conrad 1986:16).

Certainly, the inhuman treatment meted out to the enslaved on the plantations did not in any way improve their health conditions, because there was a deliberate mismanagement of the enslaved by the slave owners that resulted in numerous deaths, although they were constantly replenished from Africa (Davidson: op. cit. p. 71). And in short, the enslaved African was treated worse than most animals, yet their labour was highly valued, and thus in constant demand on the plantations. But cruel treatment was the norm, hence they were: regarded as useless commodities that would easily be disposed of, and replaced; and poorly fed (often given meals without meat, and when given, it was meat derived from animals that were killed by disease) or from flesh spoiled by exposure (Conrad: op. cit. p. 18).

Thus, no mercy was bestowed on the enslaved African within plantation life, given that (Conrad 1986: 18-19, 60):

- some plantation owners never thought it fit to feed the enslaved and thus regarded such an act as waste of time and money (such owners allowed their enslaved to farms for themselves on Sundays and make use of the proceeds to feed themselves)
- despite their poor diet, the enslaved were subjected to fourteen hours of hard labour a day
- the enslaved were exposed to all forms of bad weather
- the enslaved were never provided with any form of comfort or health care, hence the mortality rate was so high that the rate of death exceeded the births (the constant supply of people from Africa prevented the enslaved population from being destroyed)
- the enslaved were not properly accommodated, they were kept in dirty and drifty living spaces and made to sleep on coarse mats or hides placed on the bare floor
- the enslaved were humiliated by not being allowed to wear shoes because “bare feet symbolized slave status” which also made them vulnerable to snake bites, tetanus and other deadly health circumstances

Continuing, the enslaved were not encouraged to marry and raise families on the plantations of Brazil (ibid. p. 19), and I am of the opinion that the practice was not different on other plantations on the American continent and in the Caribbean islands, because plantation owners were not interested in the working conditions of the enslaved, nor their personal welfare as they did all that was within their power to dehumanize their captives. And ironically, some slave masters went to the extent of sexually assaulting some enslaved females with the intention of increasing their market value if they became pregnant (Wedderburn 1991: 4), because a pregnant enslaved woman was usually sold at a higher price, while others were sold after they had been impregnated by their owners (ibid. p. 46). And more injurious, it was not uncommon for a plantation owner to let out “his prettiest female slave for purpose of lust”; hence enslaved females were sometimes used to entertain male guests (Wedderburn 1991: 46).

Without question the brutalities perpetrated on some of the plantations in Brazil by the slave masters were unprecedented in human history, as the enslaved who had committed some errors during the course of their duties were given two or three hundred lashes each “with a multi-throged leather whip” (Conard: op cit. 21). These punishments were done so that they were intended to eliminate the culprits “since the result in many cases was death, a crippled condition, or reduced ability to work”. Thus the main objective of the slave masters in carrying out these atrocities was the coercion of more labour and a greater level discipline within the enslaved (ibid: 21).

Undoubtedly, the crimes committed against the African enslaved were in every sense cruel and most inhuman, the atrocities was conducted for four hundred years, which left an indelible mark on Africa and those living in the Diaspora. Thus African people have yet to recover from the trauma of these atrocities, and indeed, the descendants of this crime against African humanity deserve an apology from the children of the enslavers who have inherited the wealth of their fore parents.

### **Consequences of the Slave Trade**

The continents of Africa, Europe and America were the main participants in the Trans – Atlantic Slave Trade, a trade that left different legacies with an obvious impact on Africa and black people of the Diaspora as a negative, with a positive effect for Europe and America. In fact the late historian-activist Walter Rodney described the ravages of the slave trade on Africa as “a gale-force wind, which shipwrecked a few societies, set many others off course and generally slowed down the rate of advance” (Rodney 1994:147). Hence, the consequences inflicted on African people by the trans-Atlantic slave trade included:

- The underdevelopment of Africa
- Racism
- The loss of most able-bodied men and women in Africa
- A deprivation of language, culture and normal family ties
- Poverty
- The basis of economic development was greatly undermined
- The introduction of dictatorship and the distortion of democracy
- A decrease in population
- A delay in commercialization



## **Contentions of the Critics of Reparations**

The opponents of reparations, have interestingly enough constructed a few contentions to discount any compensation: (1) the slave trade was a business transaction between the Europeans and the Africans, and that the two parties benefited from it, (2) Europeans obtained the enslaved after they had paid for them with European goods, and (3) Africans willingly sold their brothers and as such, it was inappropriate for the descendants of the victims of the slave trade to ask for compensations from the Western World. Nevertheless, I contend above argument is baseless, although it is true that the slave trade was a business transaction, but in the end Europeans were the sole beneficiaries of this trade; and the transaction was not between people of unequal partners, but rather based on deceit and fraud (Davidson 1968: 43).

First, the European business men were the senior partners, and most were armed while transacting their business in Africa. Yet few Africans who participated in this sordid trade were the junior partners, and of course, unarmed. Second, the senior partners dictated the tune of the business and deceived their African partners by purchasing some of the enslaved with worthless European goods. And third, the Africans were not familiar with European products, and as a result, they were easily deceived with fake and worthless goods.

Basil Davidson described the goods used as medium of exchange as “mere baubles or the weapons of war” (Davidson 1998: 273), used for destructive purposes. And likewise, Walter Rodney portrayed them as “items to be rapidly consumed or stored away uselessly” (Rodney 1994: 140), and further highlighted them as cheap and archaic products that were full of holes and “other assorted rubbish”(ibid: 140). Henceforth, some slave dealers even used mirrors, beads, alcoholic drinks, and faded clothes to purchase slaves. Similarly, these payments were non-productive to the African, since they did not result in the kind of capital accumulation that would have led to a more advanced economy (Davidson 1968: 274). Moreover, the Europeans also obtained some African slaves by raiding the coast of West Africa, thus they were not paid for, even though they could have been obtained cheaply (although slave dealers profited enormously from such acts).

Considering the above, it would be appropriate for the descendants of those captured in the process of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to demand compensations. However, the opponents continue to argue. For example, some opponents advocate that African kingdoms like Benin, Oyo, Dahomey and Asante became strong economically and politically during the era of the slave trade. Hence in view of this, Africans cannot claim to be losers in the slave trade, and thus the descendant of the enslaved had no right to ask for restitution.

In contrast, we must remember that Oyo and Benin were great long before making contact with Europeans, and while both Dahomey and Asante grew strong during the period of the European slave trade, the roots of their achievements went back to much earlier years (Rodney 1994: 140). Plus, the fact that certain African kingdoms grew powerful at the era of selling people to Europeans, could not be automatically attributed “to the credit of the trade in enslaved”. And to illustrate simplistically, Rodney uses and following analogy: *a cholera epidemic may kill thousands in a country and yet the population increases. The increase obviously came about in spite of and not because of the cholera. This simple logic escapes those who speak about the European slave trade benefiting Africa* (Rodney 1994: 141).

And even with the above evidence, those opposed to reparations argue no based on race, legal grounds, death, and via the *Bible*. Accordingly, they claim that the demand for reparations by black people is simply a call for racial war. Such a contention is untrue and misleading and could be attributed to the total misconception of reparations whence in short, the reparations request by black people is a basic demand for justice, an apology and compensation for the injustices suffered by the African enslaved forcefully transported to work and develop in the Western Hemisphere. To illustrate the falsehood of the opponents, we can review a quote by the late Chief M.K.O. Abiola, chairman of the Group of Eminent Personalities appointed by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in his examination of the question of reparations, thus stating:

*We have not been assembled to create new tensions, but to heal old wounds; we have not been asked to seek vengeance, but to demand justice, we have been called upon, not to divide the world once again, but to bring it together. We invite all men of good will, irrespective of their colour, their creed, their class and their circumstances, to join us and to work with us, to make this world a better place for all* (Reparations Newsletter 1993: 7).

Second, the critics of reparations have also put forward legal arguments to stop the claims for reparations, thus they say it had taken the descendants of the enslaved too long to make demands for reparations; and argue that there was a statutory limitation to such claims, and concluded that the claims would not succeed in any law court. Yet, in response to that argument, a U.S. attorney Theodore Eagan maintained that there was no statute of limitation to the crime of slavery. He was of the opinion that “when time is allowed to pass between crime and the repair of the crime, damage is increased” (Hakim 1994: 127). Also, a renowned Jamaican attorney hold that the long duration of time since slavery was abolished would not be of any hindrance to the claims of African people in any law court, “provided that it can be proved the consequences of the crime continue to manifest themselves to the prejudice of Africans now living in Africa and the Diaspora” (Gifford 1993:8). Correspondingly, similar views were expressed by the OAU Group of Eminent Personalities as they contended that there was no law that would limit the claim for murder and genocide as what was perpetrated in the Atlantic slavery experience (*Facts on Reparations* 1995:7).

Third, the critics of reparations claimed that the Europeans involved in the Atlantic slave trade are not dead, thus their descendants could not be held responsible for the atrocities that were committed by their fore parents, and further there is no evidence to substantiate any claim for reparations. But, I contend that such arguments cannot stop any demand for the payment of reparations, because the maritime nations and colonialists that benefited from the slave trade can still be easily identified and made to pay reparations since the governments of these nations are still in existence (Gifford 1993: 12). And moreover claims could be made on the descendants of the slave owners who had benefited from the wealth of the slave trade (plus, it would be morally wrong for them to claim the assets of their fore parents and reject the liabilities). And should we forget, The Federal Republic of Germany was willing to pay compensation to the Jews after the Second World War for crimes committed during the Nazi era (Cohen 1968: 271).

Clearly, there is an abundance of evidence to authenticate any claim for reparations that can be found in writings, letters, artefacts, bill of sales, in some cases details such as the names of slave buyer and sellers (*Facts on Reparations*: 8) stocked away in various archives, museums and libraries in the developed and developing countries of the world.

And fourth, the antagonist of reparations have even used the *Bible* to justify the enslavement of black people, and thus repudiated all claims for reparations. Their contention is that black people descended from Ham (the second son of Noah via Genesis 6:10 that was cursed by his father to be the servant of his brothers via Genesis 9:21-27), hence the offence of Ham was that he saw the nakedness of his father who was drunk and slept carelessly, and was nude via Genesis 9:21- 27.

Thus the critics of reparations maintained that since Ham was cursed to serve his brothers forever, it therefore meant that all his off-spring would also be servants (hewers of wood and fetchers of water) to the rest of the world, and then concluded that black enslavement was an act of God and should be accepted by black people in good faith. In view of this, black people should not request for the payment of reparations.

Indeed, the last four arguments and those above that excuse or ignore the horrors of the enslavement process conducted against African people are spurious, even in their use of the *Bible* and legal discourse. The demand for reparations by African people and nations is a basic request for historical justice.

### **The Justification for Reparations**

The evidence and facts in this paper justify the demand for reparations. Moreover, a successful demand for the payment of reparations should also result in:

- the cancellation of the debt burdens of black nations
- the development and modernization of black nations with the funds provided by the beneficiaries of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the West.
- the establishment of an African ‘Marshal Plan’ by the Western world to alleviate the poverty and suffering of African people in Africa and her Diaspora (similar to the Marshal Plan that was established by the United States to alleviate the destruction and suffering that took place in Europe at the end of WWII)
- the appointment of a black nation as a permanent member of the UN Security Council that would monitor the interests of other black nations of the world
- a demand that all the artefacts pilfered from Africa by the developed nations during the era of the slave trade and colonialism be returned to Africa.
- an apology from fore children of the participants in the Atlantic slave trade to the off-springs of the African enslaved (this may help heal the wounds of black people, hence a symbol of admission and repentance)

In concluding this paper, I am convinced that black people all over the world should be persistent and steadfast in making their demands for reparations. There had been precedents in the payment of reparations, and as a result, black people everywhere should be reminded that victories are never won on a platter of gold.

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