

Reparations: A Dream of the Homeland

By Charles J. Ogletree Jr., Africana.com, 8/22/2002

The Reparations movement is succeeding in its two goals of preparing a lawsuit to recover damages from those who profited from slavery, and in provoking a discussion among Americans of all colors on our continuing moral responsibility, as a nation, for the legacy of slavery. As the debates and discussion surrounding Reparations in America develop, more Americans are growing to recognize the international dimensions of the Reparations debate. World pressure for slavery Reparations reached its apex recently at last year's U.N. Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, where slavery as was defined as "a crime against humanity." However, for me, the modern Reparations movement began on a trip to Africa, and gains in profundity every time I return there.

I first became aware of reparations when I was a student at Stanford University in the 1970's. On a trip to the Sixth Pan-African Conference, in Tanzania, I met the matriarch of the American reparations movement, "Queen Mother" Audrey Moore, and it was through her that I became passionately interested in the Reparations movement. I was reminded of the reparations owed Africans once again, when my wife and I recently traveled to Ghana. Accra, the capital, had a great symbolic and emotional importance for me as a member of the African diaspora. Kwame Nkrumah, the former President of Ghana, is buried there. He successfully championed African liberation, becoming leader of Africa's first independent state. While in Accra, we also visited the W.E.B. DuBois Center. DuBois, who is buried in the capital, was African-America's greatest intellectual, and a man who early on recognized the importance of Reparations. Throughout his career, DuBois advocated "group action . . . by earnest people of Negro descent . . . along economic lines" directed against a "white America . . . [that] expect[s] always to be able to crush, insult, ignore, and exploit 12,000,000 individual Negroes." He famously died---I believe of a broken heart at the slow pace of American race reform---on August 27, 1963, the eve of the March On Washington, shortly after becoming a Ghanan citizen.

But to truly understand the need for an international approach to reparations, you only have to visit, as I did in July, Elmira and Cape Coast Castles, two of the castles to which free Africans were brought, and from which they left enslaved. Elmina Castle was built in 1482 by the Portuguese; but was subsequently taken over in 1637 by the Dutch, who controlled it well into the nineteenth century. Cape Coast Castle, which lies only a few miles away, had become a substantial fort by 1627; in 1664 it became a British possession, and the place through which millions of slaves were shipped to the Caribbean and the United States.

These "slave castles" presented a stark differentiation between the Europeans who ran the forts and the Africans enslaved there. These forts function like small towns, presided over by the military and trade commander ensuring the steady progress of the slave trade. It is still possible to marvel at the luxurious apartments for the British and Dutch colonists, and the dank dungeons for the slaves. You can still stand in the cells occupied by our ancestors where, to make them more attractive to the slavers, they were washed and

covered in palm oil before being sold. From these castles on the coast of Ghana, slaves departed to the new world, to places like Brazil, Barbados, Jamaica, and America---all countries that are now seeking reparations for slavery.

Henry Louis Gates has detailed the tremendous damage done by the slave trade, not only to the individuals suffering through the middle passage, but also to those left behind. It is true that some Africans profited in the short term from the slave trade. That fact has engendered a certain ambivalence among members of the Africa diaspora towards those Africans stayed at home, and who were willing to sell their brothers and sisters into slavery.

But the African countries reaped little long term profit from the slave trade. On the contrary, the removal of huge numbers of people from Africa, the taking of raw materials such as gold and rubber, and the colonial administration of the continent condemned Africa to hundreds of years of underdevelopment. The slave trade alone, Gates argues, caused a dramatic net economic loss to the exporting nations as a whole. On the other had, America, Britain, and the other slave-importing nations used slave labor to refine the industrial process necessary for mass production and the industrial revolution. Slavery enabled these Western powers to lay the foundations of their modern economies with free black labor stolen from Africa. Having ravaged Africa of its manpower and its raw materials by engaging in an immoral and illegal trade, the West is understandably wary of the initiative shown in Durban by members of the African diaspora to seek to recover some form of compensation for their loss.

Already, some significant steps are being taken to link the issue of Reparations to the achievement of debt relief for African states. In July, at the United Nations in New York, the UN Economic and Social Council voted to establish a Working Group to consider ways to eliminating racial discrimination. Created pursuant to a resolution passed at the Durban World Conference Against Racism, the group, composed of five "Independent Experts on People of African Descent" will also discuss the sort of reparations required to compensate the various victims of slavery, colonial, and neo-colonial discrimination. Certainly, some form of debt relief will be at the forefront of the discussions.

Too often, our attempts to engage with our African heritage is condemned as backward-looking, as "victimology." I see our common heritage as empowering, for we are faced with common problems flowing from similar sources. Reparations demands a moral and economic accounting for the practices that divided, and continue to divide the world, and our nation, along economic lines that are also racial lines. Reparations for all, Africans as well as Americans, is essential if we are to properly come to terms, not only with our history, but with our present and our future as well.