

## The Meaning of Reparation

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For the African people a full and correct understanding of the term ‘reparation’ demands that this notion be applied to the specific historical experience and the related contemporary condition of the great majority of our people across this planet. It will then be seen clearly that the meaning of this term transcends repayment for past and continuing wrong, to embrace self-rehabilitation through education, organisation and mobilisation.

Ultimately, reparation means redressing the poverty of the people of Africa and the African Diaspora. There is a vulgar contradiction in the fact that the first civilisation of this planet is now the most backward in technology and social infrastructure, that the continent richest in resources has the poorest people with the least control over our lives. All of this is a direct result of centuries of destruction, subjugation and continuing exploitation of the African people and our resources. This meaning of reparation offers an end to this condition, as well as posing some fundamental questions of self-liberation.

### Etymology

The term ‘reparation’ has its origin in Latin, but reached the English language through Old French. There are a number of meanings or shades of meaning associated with this concept. Its line of development is through one of the meanings of Modern English ‘repair’: to restore to good condition, after damage or wear; to set right, or make amends for (loss, wrong, error). This has come from the Latin *reparare* via Old French *reparer*. The Late Latin noun *reparatio*, from the verb *reparare*, gives rise, via Old French *réparation*, to Modern English ‘reparation’: the act, or instance of making amends; compensation.

It is timely to mention the other meaning of Modern English ‘repair’, for it sheds light on current confusions about exactly what forms reparation might take. Ironically, in the context of twentieth century racism in Britain, the second meaning of ‘repair’ (to resort to, have recourse; go often, or in great numbers, or for a specific purpose) has a quite different etymology from the first, deriving via Old French *reparer*, from Late Latin *repatriare* - to repatriate. Originally bearing a benign association (and still recorded as such in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*) in the intransitive mode (to return to one’s native land), and even in the transitive (to restore (a person) to his or her native land), it has come to bear a malign denotation (to force ‘unwanted’ people back to their supposed native land, whether they were born there or not). ‘Repatriation’ now has clinging to it, even

moulding its central meaning, this sort of racist wishful thinking; so this sense of forcible ousting from a country or territory is conjured up with the use of the word, but it also hides under the benign shade of the original sense, that of an altruistic act of restoring someone to their native land. How often have we heard racists claim that, if black people are not happy in this country (the UK), they should 'go back to where they came from'? It is difficult to use the word 'repatriation' today without its operating as a euphemism for this sentiment.

Discussion about reparation within the African Diaspora has tended to include the possibility of claiming payment for voluntary 'repatriation' from the nation states who have historically wronged us. However, the unfortunate visual similarity between the words 'reparation' and 'repatriation', and their coincidence in their Modern English manifestation ('repair'), should serve to remind us of the dangers of easy elision, for to include repatriation in our discussions about reparation could well open the way for a sort of slippage, or telescoping, so that reparation comes to signify, and even mean, repatriation in its malign sense.

With this caveat in mind, it is of the utmost importance for all Africans to consciously define this term in accordance with our own perceptions and practice. We have to be capable of employing the etymology of the languages of our oppressors in achieving our own ends. This means that whenever necessary we must turn around the use of these languages, which we first encountered as tools of our oppression, and deploy them as weapons for our liberation.

It is also important to enrich our understanding of this notion of reparation by employing similar concepts from African languages. But above all we must recognise very clearly that the proper role of our scholars can only be to help, educate and advise us. In the final analysis it must be the African masses, the great majority of us, who decide on the meaning of the concept of reparation for Africans.

### **The Great Holocaust**

Africans cannot understand the meaning of reparation unless we understand why we are owed reparations, and by whom. The importance to us of this term lies both in the horrendous pain and suffering that have been inflicted upon us in the Great Holocaust, which is still continuing, and more particularly in our restoration of ourselves as a vibrant and united people who make our own history - free from the evil impositions of those who oppress us. Many reams of paper could be covered by this and undoubtedly many reams of paper need to be devoted to it, but for the moment only the outline of this case can be presented because of the need for brevity.

The term 'holocaust' means general or complete destruction, especially of a large number of persons. In modern times this term conjures up only the suffering inflicted upon the Jews by the Nazis in the period around 1930 to 1945. It is not a pleasant task to compare the suffering of peoples and highlight the differences in duration, extent, impact, restitution, and so on. However, in today's world such

comparisons have been made imperative by the continuing racism and insensitivity of the western world and their wicked and utter disregard for the African people as well as the continuing impoverishment and endangering of our people by these very interests.

So, though comparisons are usually invidious, one needs at least to question why there is seen to be only **one** holocaust. Most estimates of the number of Jews murdered by the Nazis arrive at a figure of about six million. In contrast, even Eurocentric apologists for the destruction of Africa and Africans put the figure of murdered Africans at eleven million for the European aspect of this Great Holocaust. A much more realistic estimate put this number at over two hundred million. Besides, although pogroms had been organised against the Jews for many generations, the sustained intensity of the attack upon Africa and Africans has been much greater - not witnessed in the history of this planet. No other nation has been so obliterated, save perhaps for the native American people.

Eurocentrism in particular has attempted to construct a false and demeaning identity for us. We Africans have the longest history in the world, for we are the first People, the only real *autochthones* of Mother Earth. Yet we are told that we have no history. We invented history, science, architecture, the first civilisations; and we civilised Europe. Yet this false identity tries to say that we have never developed anything. African civilisation was constructed on the principles of Humanism, Matriarchy (gender equality), Collectivism, a profound respect for the environment, and a great desire to live in harmony with it (today called environmentalism), on Spirituality and on a trajectory towards Pan-Africanism. The highest expression of these fundamental principles is in *Ma'at*, the philosophy of Kemet (Ancient Egypt). Today, our centres of learning (the first universities in the world), including great libraries, have been destroyed. Much of our civilisation, and therefore the history and achievements of the world, have been obliterated and our artefacts shipped to many parts of the European world. Our very culture is under relentless attack. Many of us have believed the lies told about us and have accepted a status inferior to that of our despoilers.

The full meaning of reparations for us rests with a complete understanding of this history by all Africans. We must come to understand ourselves - both our riches and our losses. Africans everywhere have a sacred duty to understand and put into the popular consciousness of the world the fact that we Africans are the victims of the largest holocaust which has ever been perpetrated in the history of this planet, and that we have **never** been given reparations, not even an apology.

The African holocaust has unfolded under the twin catastrophes of the Arab invasion, destruction and subjugation of Africa, and the European invasion, subjugation and destruction of Africa. This Great Holocaust has resulted in the imposition of foreign values which do not serve the interests of Africa. It has also caused consequent confusion among many generations of us about who we are and what are our real interests.

The Arabs employed warfare and the religion of Islam as their chief weapons. Two major outcomes are the enslavement of millions of Africans and an increase in the African Diaspora in the East. (Historically, there have been large migrations from Africa to the East; Africans founded many civilisations and states there.) The Europeans employed warfare and the religion of Euro-Christianity as their chief weapons. Major outcomes are the enslavement of millions of Africans, an African Diaspora in the west, and the continuing presence of settler colonialism in Africa - the most notorious example having been apartheid in Azania. The foreign attack upon Africa continues to this day. All Africans must know this history.

### **How Long? How Many?: Detecting and Quantifying our Injuries and Loss**

Much work still needs to be devoted to detecting and quantifying all our injuries. Here are some of the questions we must be able to answer fully or in part:

- \* How many Africans died as a result of the practices of enslavement and trading in enslaved Africans?
- \* How many Africans died in the Great Holocaust? The figure we arrive at must include all who went to join our ancestors as a result of Arab and European activity - both directly and indirectly. It must therefore include all the murders inflicted upon us, as well as those who left this side of reality from the famines, hunger and starvation promoted by our tormentors, those who were driven to suicide, infanticide, patricide, matricide; those who died through overwork, disease, etc.
- \* How many Africans were enslaved in Arab countries and in the European-controlled west? What is the total number of hours we have been labouring in these places for lashes instead of wages in the largest pogroms of forced labour in history?
- \* How many of us have been overworked, underpaid, refused promotion, refused employment, under-employed, and otherwise discriminated against - and for how long?
- \* How many of us have lost life or limb in the pursuit of our basic human right to resist enslavement, to be free, to associate with whomsoever we choose? How many of us were mutilated, both physically and mentally, in these places? How many of us were raped, beaten, used as studs, etc.?
- \* Has there been another people whose environment was made dangerously hostile through being thrown out on our own at 'emancipation', untrained, unsupported by any programme of public assistance, ejected into this vast plantation of prejudice? Has there ever been a people who have had to climb up from these vast depths of deprivation, overcome such sustained hostility in order to enjoy basic human rights - which are still denied us?
- \* How many of us were lynched in the USA, that bastion of civilisation and epitome of the 'advanced free world'?
- \* How many of us have been sent to join our ancestors or maimed (physically or psychologically) in imperialist wars into which we have been forcibly deployed?
- \* How many of us have been discriminated against on racial grounds? What has been the total impact of this upon us - psychologically, economically, socially?

- \* How many of us have been the victims of false diagnosis, incomplete treatment, etc.?
- \* How many of us have been falsely imprisoned in the mental hospitals of the west, or have been deliberately exposed to diseases, or have had our wombs wrongfully removed?
- \* How many of our children have been psychologically damaged through being alienated, deliberately held back, held in low esteem by teachers, etc. in the racist education system of the west?
- \* How many of our cultural artefacts were stolen, damaged or destroyed in these processes?
- \* How many of our inventions were stolen or used without our permission?
- \* How much of our property, including our lands, has been stolen, destroyed or abused by our oppressors?
- \* What is the total sum misappropriated from us through that reprehensible notion of 'free' trade and the operation of those western institutions which serve its purpose: GATT (now WTO), IMF, 'World' Bank, the so-called charitable institutions, Aid, etc., etc.?
- \* How many Africans have been rendered poorer or murdered by the 'World' Bank and IMF 'remedies', such as Structural Adjustment Programmes, Restructuring, etc.?

### **Assessing the Damages, Counting the Cost**

The three tasks here are these:

- \* Assessing how far (that is, how developed) we would have been as a people if these wrongs had not been perpetrated. This seems the same as finding out how much these atrocities have prevented and distorted our development.
- \* Assessing how much (or what) it will take to restore us to where we would have been but for these injuries.
- \* Assessing the **entire** cost of restoration, plus compensation for our injuries.

There are some problems which appear to arise here. For example, how do we count the cost of human lives? Our oppressors can be made to return all our artefacts, but they cannot return the creative talent, the vision and the energy lost to us with the lives they took from us. How will they pay? How do you count the cost of the generations of disconnection from our history and our culture? How does one calculate in monetary terms the loss of tongues, the retreat of learning and the word? How do you count the cost of the identity crisis, self hate, confusion and the other forms of psychological damage we have sustained as a result of the destruction and distortion of our history and our culture?

We could go on to mention a number of other things here, but also have to establish **how** those who have wronged us may correct their historical mistakes. What action must they undertake to atone for the inhumanities they have been inflicting upon us?

They must guarantee to cease these injustices totally and immediately. They must pay a sum of money, to be agreed upon by us, for all the injuries they have inflicted upon us, including the social disorganisation of Africa and the cost of the consequent disruption and the distortion of the rate of development and patterns of development we were unfolding on our continent before their wicked interventions.

This sum must include the interest which would have accrued to the time of payment if the damages were paid promptly, as well as a further sum which results from the cost of further injuries sustained as a result of the delay in compensation and the consequent deprivation of collective health. (It is perhaps useful to note here in passing that when, in the last century, the European bourgeois class recognised that it was in their interest to terminate the system of chattel enslavement, they ‘compensated’ our enslavers, who were another group of Europeans. They did not compensate us, though in the USA, they ‘promised’ each of us forty acres of land and a mule.)

This sum must also include a quantification of the negative impact on Africa of the loss of millions of our ‘most virile and productive’ sons and daughters (in the words of Walter Rodney), as well as the positive impact of the labour, both physical and mental, of the survivors among us in the Arab and European controlled lands; for it is we who built these ‘shining cities of the damned’. (The Industrial Revolution and the processes of Western development consequent upon it, were all made possible mainly because of the vast accumulation of the bourgeois class of Europe. African labour, and other resources, were by far the major factor in this accumulation.)

All the cultural artefacts stolen from us over the centuries must be returned. Damages must be paid for the deprivation of our people of the use of these items. Damages must be paid for those artefacts damaged, destroyed or otherwise lost as a result of these nefarious interventions.

The centuries of lies, misrepresentation and distortion of our history, and therefore of world history, must be corrected. This process of correction must begin immediately, must take place throughout the world, especially among Europeans, who were also the victims, but also among us. They must not be permitted to undertake this process among us. We must do it for ourselves, but they must provide the resources.

Compensation and damages must be paid for these centuries of lies and falsification and for the loss of positive self concept, for the collective amnesia, the neurosis, the psychosis and other harmful developments which arose from the conditions of captivity imposed upon us.

### **Beyond ‘Repayment’**

It must be emphasised here that reparations mean more than ‘repayment’ and compensation for the wholesale theft, destruction and falsification visited upon Africa and all Africans. We have seen that the law dictionaries define reparation

to mean the recovery of rights to a country as though one was born in that country. This is a very important aspect of reparation which should also be well understood by all Africans. For many generations the notion of 'Back to Africa', especially as articulated in the doctrine and practice of Rastafari, has sought to concretise this very meaning of reparation.

Many Rastafari use the term 'repatriation' to express this longing for Africa, and a determination to return physically. However, when we examine the practice of Rastafari, we can see that the idea of a return to Africa goes beyond just repatriation, the physical resettlement on the continent of our ancestors. It also means a return to the values, culture and history of Africa, and a particular Africentric way of seeing the world.

Many of these ideas have also been expressed in the work of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah and other leading fighters for the rights of Africans at home and abroad. In the Diaspora, the increasing preoccupation of our youth with the history and culture of Africa amounts to a very clear statement that the idea of a return to Africa also means a return to ourselves: to our history, our values, our institutions, our culture. For it is clear that our oppressors did not only physically separate Africans from Africa. They also separated Africans from our traditions, our values, our history. Africans at home and abroad have been dispossessed of our traditional role as makers of history and dumped outside of the process of history. We have become the objects rather than the subjects of history. We cannot win our freedom if we have lost our culture. Reparation must therefore mean a return to ourselves as the makers of our own culture and history. We cannot expect to transform our reality without being willing to transform ourselves.

Africans must be equally clear about the context in which the subversion of Africa unfolded. This was the loss of African sovereignty to the Arabs and Europeans. The historical process of African underdevelopment is expressed in particular eras as enslavement, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and all their ramifications, such as racism, the creation of dependency and self hate. These are all different aspects of the same thing: the subversion and destruction of African civilisation, our loss of sovereignty and the continuing exploitation of our people and resources in a system organised by our exploiters for their own benefit. The 'International' Monetary Fund, 'World' Bank, Aid agencies and Charities are mostly successors to the terrorists who kidnapped and enslaved Africans, thereby taking away the human rights of our people.

These rights have never been returned. Today millions of Africans continue to be impoverished and our lives fundamentally endangered by Structural Adjustment Programmes and other 'medicines' of those western institutions. The western media continue to distort and misrepresent Africa and Africans, sometimes even to ourselves. These activities constitute a continuing, organised, violation of our human and people's rights, which is a violation of international law. Africans must know that, unless there is an end to the domination of our continent, its resources and the lives of our people by those foreign agencies and their African

accomplices, the notion of reparation will be incomplete and ultimately meaningless. Another meaning of reparation for us must therefore be the withdrawal of these vampires and their system so that Africans can take responsibility for our own lives and organise our own freedom.

But even all of this must not be the complete meaning of reparation. To fully realise all which this historical moment offers, we must recognise the initial meaning of reparations as return, restoration, etc., which is part of our objective, perhaps the initial, or most visible one to many of us. That is right, righteous and in total harmony with any decent and civilised notion of justice. But we must be very clear that merely to achieve the repayment for the centuries of wrong, perhaps in some form of cash, would be both an incomplete and a misleading idea of reparation. For the meaning of reparation also includes the notion of restoring our people - collectively and individually - to where we would have been had we not suffered from this Great Holocaust. This means that reparation must include the restoration of our shattered African society. We must be very clear that it is virtually impossible to remake the past, or to predict where we Africans as a people would have been today if we had not suffered from this Great Holocaust. However, after more than 500 years of destabilisation inside and outside Africa, it is equally clear that there are certain things African to which we need to return, which make the idea of return much more than just a physical journey. It is also patently clear that we are the ones who have to undertake our own rehabilitation. We cannot leave this to our oppressors. Only we can free ourselves.

### **Organisation: Strategies and Tactics**

Once the objectives of reparation have been established, it is also then necessary to contemplate the practice which is essential for the achievement of these objectives, for it is our practice which will give the best meaning to this term.

One of the first things we can observe about practice is that it recognises the notion of process. It is not an event. We must be guided by our best minds as well as the lessons of our history. Frederick Douglas, notable fighter for African rights in the USA, and Antonio Maceo, the pre-eminent commander in the Cuban war of independence, both observed that we have to engage in struggle to achieve our ends. This is because our oppressors will not surrender their power and privileges without a fight. We must therefore be prepared for a long struggle. In some ways this has already been begun - that is why we are here.

Perhaps the worst thing our oppressors can do to us right now is to repay us, for we are in a state of unreadiness. Where is the representative organisation of all Africans on this planet? What are its objectives? What are our strategies and tactics for the way forward out of domination and impoverishment? It is important that the meaning of reparation also embodies a highly disciplined movement, supremely conscious of its historical role of self restoration.



Some features of this Reparations Movement appear self evident at this point. As our struggle develops we may see the need to modify some and implement completely new ones. It is clear, though, that the mobilisation of all Africans is necessary to achieve our goals. It is also necessary to unite all of our diverse groups into one vast community of interests governed by the principles of African self determination, collectivism and internal democracy.

W.E.B. Dubois, one of our foremost intellectuals, said that the twentieth century would be the century of the 'colour line', that we would decide on this question of segregation and racial discrimination. We stand at the close of this century now, surveying the opening of the twenty-first century. We ought to be careful to check to see if we Africans have fulfilled or failed this challenge, and why. But whatever answers we find let us ensure that the challenge of the twenty-first century is the challenge of self-organisation and self-rehabilitation offered by this issue of Reparation.

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