Reparation as an Option in African Foreign Relations.

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Abstract

Discussions in academic circles are replete with debate about the justification or otherwise of African demand for reparations on the ground of decades of slavery and eventual colonization of Africa by European countries. While the debate between the reparationists and their critics rage, the fundamental rationale behind the demand for reparations could not be pushed beyond mere moral persuasions. It is therefore, upon the lack of legal justifications and the complexities in the entire slavery and colonial episodes that this paper attempts to x-ray the debate for and against the demand for reparations. Relying mostly on secondary sources of data collection and analysis, the paper posits that though the two grounds upon which Africans are demanding for reparation (Slavery and colonialism) are huge injustices to the African race, the lack of legal framework, the lukewarm approach to the matter and the precarious situation of African nations in global politics, constitute major setbacks to the actualization of reparation agenda. In the final analysis, the paper recommends that African nations should through the instrumentalities of regional and sub-regional bodies embark on capacity building through massive industrialization, technological and scientific invocations that would give real international powers to Africa in order to compete

favourably with other European states at the global stage. As more and more African nations emerge as world powers in global affairs, they can give a bite to the quest for reparation.

Introduction

The OAU's establishment of the Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) on reparation in 1992 would not have been in vain. If not for any other thing, it has spurred and stimulated some of the appointed members of GEP like Ali Mazrui into developing their interests in the issue of reparation as an academic discourse. It is worth the efforts as the discourse snowballs into fascinating debate on the reparation question among top African academic giants and historians. The subsequent Pan-Africa conference on Reparation which was Put up by the GEP in 1993 was thought-provoking.

While the proponents of reparation led by Ali Mazrui, Chinweizu, Scobie and Gifford were of the view that western countries that had greatly benefited from the Atlantic slave trade and eventual colonization of Africa owe the continent and people of Africa a huge reparation, others considers reparation agenda as an issue too controversial and contradictory to deserve a continental attention.

Besides the controversial nature of the reparation question, attempt to realize it do not have a concerted home front and committed action necessary to firmly entrenching it as a mainstream African agenda[1]. This fact is accentuated by failure of governments in most African nations to entrench a regime of good governance required to fast-track the process of socio-political and economic developments in Africa. This situation that has drastically reduced the African voice in global politics, including its quest for reparation.

It is in the light of the above, coupled with lack of legal framework to justify the reparation question, and the complexities in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism that this paper seeks to push the argument beyond mere quest for reparation; To realize such objective, Africa should look inward to evolve a regime of good governance, capacity

building in technological, scientific and industrial spheres that would enable Africa compete favourably in global affairs. It is only on that platform that Africa's voice would be globally heard and its quest for reparation would no longer be ignored.

The Great Debate on Reparation.

As mentioned earlier, the entire reparation agenda is shrouded in arguments, claims and counter-claims about the justification or otherwise of Africa in demanding reparation for Trans-Atlantic slave trade, European colonization of Africa and current neo-colonization perpetuated by Europe against Africa. The proponents of the reparation agenda and their critics alike, both sides have their arguments to sustain the on-going debate. The proponents led by Ali Mazrui, Bethwel Ogot, Jacob Ajayi Randall all Robinson, and many others, were particular about the trans-Atlantic slave trade as against other forms of slavery that predates trans-Atlantic. Because, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was tied to expansionist global capitalism, the western slave trade itself accelerated dramatically. Millions upon millions of African captives were exported in a very short period. Today in the western hemisphere there are some 150 million people with African blood[2].

For the reparationsits, they are committed to the proposition that the injustices of enslavement and bondage could not have ended with formal emancipation. They can only truly end with the atonement of reparations. Put more succinctly, Mazrui annotates;

> …the inspiration behind the reparations movement was not change but continuity. It was the persistence of deprivation and anguish in the black world arising directly out of the legacies of slavery and colonialism. The consequences of enslavement and colonization are not chapters in history books but pangs of pains in the ghettoes of Washington, D.C, and the anti-black Police brutalities in the street of Los Angeles, Riode Janeiro, London and Paris. These are some of the malevolent continuities of racism[3].

In pushing home the above demand, the reparationists are convinced that the damage incurred by the African people is not a theory of the past but is painfully manifested in present Africa's underdevelopment. The twin evils of trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent colonization of Africa by Europe is the obvious explanation for Africa's economic backwardness and gross underdevelopment. Again, the reparation movement drew inspirations from historic precedents in reparation payed by Germany as a restitution for the Holocaust perpetrated against the Jews. Also compensation was paid to Japanese-Americans for the injustice of internment by the U.S government under president Roosevelt during the World War II. Other historic examples where reparation was paid include that of Japanese restitution to Koreans for brutally colonizing them and sexually abusing their women (forced prostitution) during World War II; And Payment of compensation to Kuwait by Iraq for the 1990 invasion and exploitation. The above cases provided enough impetus and justification for the reparationists to demand for reparation for Africa and black world generally.

But questions arose as to who is to pay reparation? The successors of private agencies and companies that benefited directly from slavery and colonialism? The colonizing and enslaving states that promoted those systems? The slave raiders? Those who shipped the slaves across the middle passage? Or those who bought the slaves at the other end of the Atlantic in the Americas. What about the role of the Arabs and Africans in the enslavement of Africans? What is the basis upon which the entire guilt of slavery and slave trade in Africa is heaped on the shoulders of Western nations whereas the slave trade was a trip tied arrangement? These questions form the nucleus of the debate between the reparationists and their critics.

Ali Mazrui and his co-reparationist have been on the stance that the West is by far the greater culprit in African enslavement than either the Arabs or Africans. They arrived at this position after exploring the salve of brutalities, the inhuman treatment meted out to the scale and the quantum

of economic deprivation and exploration of Africa in the entire process of trans-Atlantic slave trade. The slave in Africa or Arab context were at least regarded as humans not just as possessions or commodities. And a good number were allowed to own their properties and engaged in personal enterprise after some times.

Pushing the argument further, Walter Rodney argued that at the height of the "East African Slave Trade" or the "Arab slave Trade", the destination of most of the slaves was the European owned plantation economies of Mauritius, Reunion, and Seychelles as well as the Americas, via the cape of Good Hope. Rodney also makes the point that the slaves in the Arab world were also working for the entire capitalist world system. The argument here is that even the Arab countries where the slaves worked, were all ultimately serving the capitalist world order.[4]

Agreed that some Africans participated in enslaving their fellow Africans and were paid for the slaves, but the reparationists argue that Africans did not enjoy equal partnership with the European slavers in terms of bargaining power. The Europeans merely offered to pay what they thought was necessary, leaving the Africans without option or choice. Thus, Rodney argues that the opportunity presented to the African middlemen in the trade was not profitable to Africa[5]. Buttressing the above point, Robinson remarks; unlike the investors, the insurers, the ship-builders, the dealers, and especially the mariners from abroad, the local African providers had little knowledge of the whole Atlantic system… And all the major players and beneficiaries lived in Europe and the Americas[6]. No doubt the partnership between the Africans and European slavers as regards the trans-Atlantic slave trade was not based on equality or free bargaining power; rather, it was based on price imposition, exploitation, deprivation and dispossession of Africans for the enrichment of Europe. Africa therefore has been a victim of enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism of the West, hence the need for reparation as restitution to the Africans.

Another area of argument is to ascertain who is to be repartee. Is it the survivors of the middle passage who are today scattered as Africans in Diaspora? Or is it the African continent and its people who were deprived of valuable sons and daughters? If Africa is to be compensated, which of the present nation states should have the highest compensation? Or should all nations in Africa be compensated equally? How do we assess the quantum of damage suffered by each nation of African and what parameters do we adopt in such assessment? Besides, what form of reparation should be applied in the African context?

In answer to the above questions, the reparationist insist that both the African people and the continent of Africa are entitled to reparation by the West for the damaged governance, institutions and economy of Africa throughout the slave trade and colonialism. No doubt the slave-labour of Africans constitutes a fundamental ingredient of the economic advancement of the Western world. It may not be possible to ascertain what region of Africa suffered the highest damage, but Africans both at home and in diaspora and the region of Africa as an entity deserve reparation.

On the mode of reparation to Africa, Mazrui advocated two forms of reparation in principle; non-monetary empowerment of African people in relation to new states, and empowerment of the new states in relation to the world system[7]. To empower African people in relation to the new states involves helping to dismantle the obstacles to democratization of nations in Africa. These new African states were products of western creation. Therefore, assisting these states to imbibe democratic norms, granting them assistance to break fundamental socio-political and economic impediments is of great necessity. Such help should be rendered in such a way that the West does not catch on the opportunity to intrude into the internal or domestic affairs of the African nations.

On the other hand, there is the urgent need to empower the new African states in relation to the world system. African states emerged from colonialism with series of socio-political and economic challenges. As such their voices were not heard within the international community. As part of

the politics of reparation, the separationists advocate a reduction of African's marginalization in order to enhance its global leverage. To achieve this end, the western world is expected to transfer capital for the reconstruction of both Africa and its Diaspora, after the devastation of enslavement and colonialism. Added to the above is the need for skill transfer to help transform the managerial and skill infrastructure of Global Africa. This is what Mazrui refers to as Middle Passage Plans which is required to lead to a true managerial and skill revolution in Africa.[8]

Power sharing at the global level is yet another form of reparation as advocated by the separationist. This is to allow Africa greater voice and voting power both at the world's apex body (UN), and at the level of Bretton Woods's institutions (World Bank and IMF). Such power transfer modus would be compensation to Africans for being deprived, exploited and denied the capacity to utilize its enormous resources to become independently wealthy. The result of this is that African nations have been reduced to second feedle at the Bretton Woods institutions and at the UN. Africa has been hankering for a veto power at the Security Council of the United Nations, not because Africa has emerged as a super power, but to accommodate Africa's interest in the mainstream global politics. All of these constitutions are integral part of the agitations and demands by the separationists which have formed major issues at the level of OAU/AU.

However, despite the very laudable ideas of reparation as canvassed by the proponents of reparation, some critics, even among African scholars still view the entire reparation agenda as too controversial, contradictory and not worth the effort. critics of the reparation agenda like Wade (Former president of Senegal), Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and a host of others hold a contrary view that Africans were as culpable as the Europeans in both the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. They argued that African middle men participated in selling their fellow Africans and were duly paid for the slaves they willingly sold to Europeans. Asking for additional reparation on that ground is untenable.

In the light of the above, African nobles, chiefs and rulers who were themselves slave raiders actively participated and benefited from the slave trade. Therefore, if reparation is anything to come by, these Africans are equally entitled to pay reparation to Africans in Diaspora for the injustices meted out to them by their fellow Africans.

As regards the negative impact of colonialism and neo colonialism on African's development, the critics of reparation argue that the conquest of territories and imposition of colonial rule was not new in history and that compensations had not been paid in any part of the world on the ground of colonialism. Similarly, the neocolonial exploitation of Africa by the West is carried out in collaboration with African leaders. The Europeans created comprader types of leadership before granting independence to African nations. They are therefore in partnership with African leaders in their bid to carry out neocolonial exploitation of African nations. This explains why some African leaders are paying lip services to the issue of reparation which hardly feature as mainstream agenda of the regional body (OAU/AU) as most leaders view such exercise on reparation as diversionary. All of these constitute major challenges to the reparation agenda of Africa.

Challenges to African Reparation Agenda:

Beyond the argument for and against the African reparation agenda are thorny issues that constitute real hindrances to the actualization of reparation for African. Such major hindrances could be seen from the lack of consensus among even the Africans themselves on the justification of the reparation issue. The divided opinion among Africans has culminated in lip service exercises on the matter. The lack of consensus has further hindered collective projection of the matter into the international arena in the face of African complexity in the entire Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Again, the lack of legal or even constitutional framework upon which reparation agenda could be galvanized at the global level has made its actualization almost impossible. The whole idea could at best be

explained on moral ground as against justifiable and legitimate demand on point of legality. Thus, Usman and Wuam posited that the case for reparations again is weakened on the basis that it is largely dependent on the call for moral suasion, such as, you did us wrong, now acknowledge and remedy it through fiscal consideration.[9] In most cases, it has mostly been victors or stronger side who had been able to extract reparation. For instance, the post-world wars reparation paid by Germany was enforced by the victorious Allied powers. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case in the African context as none of the world powers have joined forces with Africans in their current demand for reparation.

Worst still, Africa is currently relegated to the background in global politics. The low status occupied by African nations on the world stage is accentuated by their low level of technological, scientific and industrial attainment. As such, Africa does not possess any ingredient of international power to push for reparation at the international level. Thus, the hues and cries about reparation agenda is viewed by the world powers as a 'story told by a fool, full of sounds and fury, but signifying nothing'. It is in the light of the above that Fanon argues that the political imperative is not a call for reparations but the question should be how to rebuild African society and create strong states that promote the generation of wealth and prosperity for their citizens. He further advocates for the mental liberation and the ability to operate independently without cowering like slaves and abject mendicants seeking crumbs from the rich man's table[10]. Africa should first seek to develop itself scientifically industrially, and technological in order to emerge as a world power, and every other things, including reparation will follow.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the greatest constraint to the actualization of reparation agenda is bad leadership. There is obviously the lack of political will in Africa to undertake the onerous process of reparation. The political instability in Africa accentuated by poor leadership perpetuated through embezzlement misappropriation, corruption, ethno religious sentiment and lots of leadership problems have kept African

nations backward, more than any other thing. Most current African leaders lack the moral justification to demand for reparation on the ground of slavery or colonialism and dehumanization associated with it. What about the post-colonial enslavement of African states by various national leaders who engage in wanton misdeeds, systematic looting of state coffers, economic mismanagement, and widespread human right abuses? Who compensate for them? As a matter of fact, the Jewish state of Israel, the Japanese-Americans and most other places where reparations were paid were able to extract it because they are better organized and have a more functional, proactive and responsible national governments in place. Assuming reparation is paid to Africa in monetary terms for instance, the possibility that the fund be looted by African leaders is quite obvious. These are fundamental challenges and constraints to the actualization of the reparation agenda for Africa.

Conclusion

The crusade on reparation is a phenomenon with which Africans and African diaspora is reaching out to the world, to persuade people and groups of the criminality of the slave trade, eventual colonization and neo-colonialism, all of which combined to under develop Africa. As such, the proponents make case for atonement in terms of western nations' compensating Africa either in capital transfer, skill transfer and power transfer/power sharing at the global level or all of the above. The crusade has elicited series of argument for and against the reparation agenda. Going by the standard by which other nations and people (like Jews, Japanese-Americans etc) have justified the reparations that was paid to them, the Africans have a good case.

But its successful prosecution remains a big challenge for African politicians and diplomats. Thus, the reparation struggle is good to the extent that it provide a platform as a relaying point for Africans to galvanize closer ties and co-operation for the bigger task of evolving a new paradigm for Africa's socio-political and economic development. This new paradigm

is necessary in transforming Africa into industrialization, technological and scientific upliftment, required to give Africa a voice at the international arena. It is only in this that Africa will become a force to reckon with in global politics, and the case for reparation will become a reality.

Endnote

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