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Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann

## Reparations to Africa and the Group of Eminent Persons\*

In the last ten years, a worldwide movement has emerged for reparations to various previously subordinated groups for past wrongs. This paper discusses the movement for reparations to the continent of Africa. It begins with a discussion of the United Nations-sponsored World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001. It then traces the discussion of reparations to Africa back to the Group of Eminent Persons (GEP) established in the early 1990s by the Organization of African Unity to pursue reparations for slavery and (perhaps) other wrongs perpetrated on Africa. Only three members of this group are still active: they are J. F. Ade Ajayi, Ali A. Mazrui, and Dudley Thompson. The present author interviewed all three in December 2002. An essay by J. F. Ade Ajayi is included in this volume.

After discussion of the GEP, this essay looks at precedents for the demand for reparations to Africa. It closes with an assessment of the likelihood that a large social movement for reparations will develop.

### The Durban Conference against Racism

At the Durban Conference against Racism, it was suggested that the Western world owed reparations to Africa. These reparations would be for the slave trade and colonialism, and even for the post-colonial era. The Declaration issued as the Final Document of the Conference stated: "We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade... are a crime against humanity, and should always have been so, especially the transatlantic slave trade, and are among

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the major sources and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance... We recognize that colonialism has led to racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance"<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the Declaration stated that victims of violations of their human rights as a result of racism and related wrongs should have "the right to seek just and adequate reparation or satisfaction"<sup>2</sup>.

Several African countries supported this claim. For example, Ali Mohamed Osman Yassin, Minister of Justice of Sudan, made a statement explicitly linking the slave trade to the current problems of Africa:

"The slave trade, particularly against Africans, was an appalling tragedy in its abhorrent barbarism, enormous magnitude, institutionalized nature, transnational dimension and particularly in its negation of the essence of the victims. Africa's economic marginalization started with the deprivation of its manpower by the slave trade, followed by uneven exploitation and the siphoning of its natural resources during the colonial era. It is culminating today in economic globalization, where Africa lacks the capacity to compete commercially in the world economy" (United Nations 2001: 8).

Similarly, Enoch Kavindele, Vice-President of Zambia, demanded reparations:

"We have come to Durban to liberate ourselves from the historical injustices of slavery and servitude and now want to emphasize that slavery should be remembered not only as an appalling tragedy, but also as a factor which for centuries deprived Africa of her human and natural resources. Africa requests an audience, so the world can take responsibility for the crimes of slavery and colonialism... [T]he slave trade was the greatest practical evil which has ever afflicted the human race. And though we agree that many other peoples and races have been victims of discrimination and intolerance, the cry on the continent is that while every one of those groups have [sic] been adequately redressed for wrongs committed in the past, Africans continue to suffer" (United Nations 2001: 4).

Both these statements reflected the official viewpoint put forward prior to the Durban Conference by the African Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Conference. This Preparatory Conference affirmed that "[the] slave trade is a unique tragedy in the history of humanity, particularly against Africans—a crime against humanity which is unparalleled". It made an explicit connection between the slave trade and Africa's current problems, noting "the consequence of this tragedy [the slave trade] accentuated by those of colonialism and apartheid have resulted in substantial and lasting economic, political and cultural damage to African peoples and are still present in the form of damage caused to the descendants of the victims, the perpetuation of the prejudice against Africans in the Continent, and

1. World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, 31 August-8 September 2001), "Declaration", pars. 13 and 14, available at [www.unhchr.ch/pdf/Durban.pdf](http://www.unhchr.ch/pdf/Durban.pdf).
2. *Ibid.*, par. 104.

people of African descent in the Diaspora". The Conference also noted that "other groups which were subject to other scourges and injustices have received repeated apologies from different countries as well as ample reparations"<sup>3</sup>.

Not all African leaders supported this viewpoint, however. Just prior to the Durban Conference, the President of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, said that if reparations were to be paid for slavery, then he himself might be liable to pay them, as his ancestors had owned thousands of slaves. He found the proposal for monetary compensation for slavery insulting: "It is absurd... that you could pay up a certain number of dollars and then slavery ceases to exist, is cancelled out and there is the receipt to prove it" (Ba 2001). At the African preparatory Conference, he also angered participants by arguing that there was far more racism and xenophobic violence within Africa than against Africans in Europe (McGreal 2001).

Wade's minority view suggests that under the populist and rhetorical appeal of a call for reparations to Africa may lie an unwillingness to deal with far more complex issues of the real causes of that continent's severe underdevelopment. Promotion of a bitter call for reparations is an easy way to deflect attention from internal African politics, and the many abuses of human rights by African dictators. The Nigerian Nobel-prize winning writer Wole Soyinka, for example, pointed out that M. K. O. Abiola, the founder of the reparations movement (see below), had himself become a prisoner of the then dictator of Nigeria, Sani Abacha. "Abiola... is today himself enslaved by one of the new breed of slave dealers, who actually boasts of power over the most heavily populated, most talented slave market that the African world has ever known. This mockery of history is complete even down to the underground railroad on which hundreds travel every day, this author [Soyinka] included" (Soyinka 1999: 73). Moreover, Soyinka argued, reparations began at home: "[R]eparations, like charity, should begin at home, and the wealth of the Mobutus, the Babangidas, the Abachas ... should be utilized as down payment" (*ibid.*: 86).

The focus only on Africa's relations with the West, but not on its relations with other regions, also raises some uncomfortable issues. Not only the Western world, but also the Arab world, looked to Africa for slaves. For both Ali Mazrui and J. F. Ade Ajayi, the discomfort of focusing only on the West is easily solved. Mazrui believes that the Arab slave trade was qualitatively different from the Atlantic trade. The Western slavers were the most race-conscious, asserts Mazrui, whereas "Islam went further than others to encourage *emancipation* of slaves", and also had several other customs which made it possible to integrate slaves into free society, for

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3. "Draft Declaration of the African Regional Preparatory Conference for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance", WCR/RCONF/DAKAR/2001/L.1 Rev. 3, 24 January 2001, pars. 19, 20 and 38, available at <http://www.africapolicy.org/docs01/wcar0101.htm>.

example by recognized alliances between free males and slave women (Mazrui 2002: 41, emphasis in original). Ajayi (2002: 8) also argues that the trans-Atlantic slave trade “bred racism that was never a part of the Muslim Arab world as Arabs enslaved both whites and blacks, preached the virtue of manumission, and opened the possibility for some fortunate black slaves to rise to high positions as scholars, or diplomats or successful generals”.

Other commentators are not so forgiving of Arab slavers. Wole Soyinka (1999: 53-55) sees no difference between the two: “Islam... inaugurated the era of slave raids on the black continent for Arab slave markets... Even today, you will encounter ghettos in many Arab countries peopled entirely by descendants of those slaves... [T]he Africa, on behalf of whom reparations are sought, is that Africa that was enslaved under the divine authority of the Islamic and Christian gods, their earthly plenipotentiaries, and commercial stormtroopers... It simply seems to me rather presumptuous to offer absolution to the practitioner of a dehumanizing trade through an exercise in comparative degrees of abuse.”

Yet some thoughtful, scholarly Africans nevertheless argue for reparations from the West, on legal, moral and material grounds. Given the current worldwide interest in apologies and compensation for myriad past wrongs, it is unlikely that the rhetoric of the Durban Conference will disappear.

### The Group of Eminent Persons

The movement for reparations originated in the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now succeeded by the African Union (AU). At a meeting in Abuja, Nigeria on 28 June 1992, the OAU swore in a 12-member Group of Eminent Persons. The Group’s mandate was to pursue the goal of reparations to Africa. The original Chair of the Group was the wealthy Nigerian businessman, Chief Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola, who was later elected President of Nigeria, although never permitted to take office. Other members were the Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi; Professor Samir Amin of Egypt; US Congressman R. Dellums; Professor Josef Ki-Zerbo of Burkina Faso; Mme Gracha Machel, formerly First Lady of Mozambique, and a political activist in her own right (and later the wife of Nelson Mandela); Miriam Makeba, the South African singer; the Kenyan social scientist Ali Mazrui (based in the United States); Professor M. M’Bow, former Director-General of UNESCO; former President A. Pereira of Cape Verde; Ambassador Alex Quaison-Sackey, former foreign minister in the government of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana; and the Jamaican lawyer and diplomat Dudley S. Thompson<sup>4</sup>. It is not clear whether all 12 individuals were present at

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4. This list is taken from MAZRUI *et al.* (2002).

Abuja, or indeed if all were aware of their new role. As of December 2002, three members of the group were still actively pursuing reparations, mainly through their writings and via lectures at academic conferences and institutions. They were J. F. Ajayi, Ali Mazrui, and Dudley Thompson. According to Thompson, they still filed annual reports to the OAU/AU, although this author has not been able to locate any such reports<sup>5</sup>. According to Mazrui, there was very little contact among members of the Group, who acted in their individual capacities rather than as a collective<sup>6</sup>.

The GEP was established at the suggestion of M. K. O. Abiola<sup>7</sup>. Abiola had apparently been influenced to take up this cause both by a chance discussion of the Holocaust with a Jewish businessman, and by his contacts with the Congressional Black Caucus in the United States<sup>8</sup>. In a speech delivered in London in 1992, Abiola said: "Our demand for reparations is based on the tripod of moral, historic, and legal arguments... Who knows what path Africa's social development would have taken if our great centres of civilization had not been razed in search of human cargo? Who knows how our economies would have developed...?" Abiola (1992: 910) went on to argue that international law applied (retroactively) to slavery, the slave trade and colonialism. "It is international law which compels Nigeria to pay her debts to western banks and financial institutions: it is international law which must now demand that the western nations pay us what they have owed us for six centuries."

The then-President of Nigeria, Ibrahim Babangida, promoted the idea of reparations and officially dedicated US\$500,000 to it (although the Group apparently received these funds from Abiola's private purse, not from the Government of Nigeria)<sup>9</sup>. Babangida had discussed the idea of reparations as early as 1991 with the then presidents of Senegal and Togo, the three agreeing that the African debt "should be written off as part of the reparations due for 500 years of slavery of Africans in Western Europe and America"<sup>10</sup>.

From 27 to 29 April 1993, the first (and, as far as this author can ascertain, last) "Pan-African Conference on Reparations" was held in Abuja, Nigeria, sponsored by the GEP and the Commission for Reparations of the Organization of African Unity (Mazrui 2002: 135). An official Proclamation was issued at this Conference. This Proclamation referred to the "moral debt" and "the debt of compensation" owed to Africa by countries

5. Interview, 5 December 2002.

6. Interview, 7 December 2002.

7. Abiola was elected President of Nigeria in 1993, but was imprisoned by President Sani Abacha, the military dictator who succeeded President Babangida. Abiola died in prison in 1998.

8. Interview with Jacob Ade AJAYI, 6 December 2002.

9. Information on establishment of the Group from interview with Jacob Aye Ajayi, 6 December 2002.

10. "Ecowas Defence Commission", *West Africa*, no. 3832, 11-17 February 1991, p. 197, cited in Daniel Tetteh OSABU-KLE (2000: 331).

that engaged in slavery and colonialism, and neo-colonialism<sup>11</sup>. It also called for the return of “stolen goods, artefacts, and other traditional treasures” (such as the campaign by the African Reparations Movement in Britain to have the Benin bronzes presently housed in the British Museum returned to Africa) (Soni n.d.). Compensation was envisaged in the form of “capital transfer and debt cancellation”, as well as in a re-ordering of international relations to give Africa more representation in the “highest decision-making bodies” and, in particular, a permanent seat on the United Nations’ Security Council<sup>12</sup>.

Six years later, in 1999, a “Truth Commission Conference” was held in Accra, Ghana. This Commission was apparently comprised of private individuals from nine African countries, the United States, the United Kingdom and three Caribbean countries (Mazrui 2002: 139). It concluded that “the root causes of Africa’s problems today are the enslavement and colonization of African people over a 400-year period”, that Africans were owed US\$777 trillion in compensation (plus annual interest) and that, presumably in consequence of non-payment, there was no African debt to outsiders<sup>13</sup>. The final Declaration of the Truth Commission Conference does not give any indication of how it came up with the figure of US\$777 trillion, in any case an absurd figure, given that the United States’ Gross Domestic Product in 2001 was estimated at “only” US\$10.082 trillion (CIA 2002).

The figure of US\$777 trillion is decidedly larger than that proposed by an academic author on reparations, Daniel Tetteh Osabu-Kle. Nevertheless, the figure proposed by Osabu-Kle is also absurd. He believes that Africa is owed US\$100 trillion in compensation. Osabu-Kle bases his estimate on the population difference between Africa and Asia, and on the assumption that without the slave trade and the alleged subsequent population decline in the continent, Africa would now be as heavily populated as Asia. He then assigns a value of US\$75,000 to each “lost” person (on the basis of the Warsaw Convention for assigning value to loss of human life in aircraft crashes) reaching US\$75 trillion for lost Africans, and adds a third of that total for compensation to diaspora Africans (Osabu-Kle 2000: 344-345). The members of the GEP themselves, however, do not assign a value to the reparations they seek. As Thompson argued, “[O]nce you begin to do that you... trivialize reparations and what it stands [for]... It is impossible to put a figure to killing millions of people, our ancestors”<sup>14</sup>.

As did Osabu-Kle, the GEP defined “Africa” broadly, to include both people living in Africa and members of the African diaspora; that is to say, descendants of Africans who lived outside of Africa. As Mazrui (2002: 60) put it, “We define *Global Africa* as the continent of Africa *plus* the

11. “The Abuja Proclamation”, in MAZRUI (2002: 135-38, quotations from p. 136).

12. “The Abuja Proclamation”, in MAZRUI (2002: 137-38).

13. “The Accra Declaration on Reparations and Repatriation”, in MAZRUI (2002: 139-43, quotation from p. 140).

14. Interview, 5 December 2002.

Diaspora of enslavement (descendants of survivors of the Middle Passage) and the Diaspora of colonialism (the dispersal of Africans which continues to occur as a result of colonization and its aftermath).” This was also the view of the British jurist, Lord Anthony Gifford (1993: 10), who spoke at the 1993 conference on reparations in Abuja. “[A]ll Africans, on the continent of Africa and in the Diaspora, who suffer the consequences of the crime of mass kidnap and enslavement, have an interest in this claim... All Africans around the world have been affected in some way by the crime of slavery. Even those who have succeeded in a business or a profession have had to face racial prejudice at the least.”

The idea of a global Africa draws upon the earlier Pan-Africanist tradition, started by the Caribbean-American Marcus Garvey in the 1920s. For Garvey, slavery was a collective trauma, which influenced all succeeding generations of Africans and people of African descent. “Slavery... was more than theft and the loss of freedom in forced labor, it deprived a people of their dreams and stripped them of their civilization” (Eyerman 2001: 91). The Pan-Africanist movement was revitalized in the early post-colonial period by such populist African leaders as Kwame Nkrumah. Dudley Thompson, who was in his mid-1980s when interviewed in December 2002, had long been involved in the Pan-Africanist movement, starting from his days as President of the West Indian Students’ Association in Britain in the 1940s. Thompson knew Nkrumah<sup>15</sup>, and used Nkrumah’s phrase, “We can no longer afford the luxury of delay”, as evidence of his argument for reparations (Thompson 1999). In Thompson’s view, there was a “primordial debt” owed to Africa<sup>16</sup>.

## Precedents

There are two major precedents for reparations to Africa. They are reparations to Jews for the Holocaust, and the movement in the United States for reparations to African-Americans.

The issue of reparations to Jews for the Holocaust resurfaced in international discussion in the 1990s when Jewish groups began to demand that unpaid life insurance policies on victims of the Holocaust be paid, and that monies deposited by Jews in Swiss banks before and during the Second World War be paid to survivors of murdered Jews (Barkan 2000: 3-29, 88-111; Brooks 1999: 13-81). Increasingly, African-Americans and Africans became aware that “some” people—most especially Jews—seemed to be entitled to reparations for their suffering, while others were not. That in the view of many people in the formerly colonized world, Jews had become colonial oppressors of Palestinians merely compounded the problem. In

15. Interview with Dudley Thompson, 5 December 2002.

16. Interview, 5 December 2002.



some African eyes, it appeared that “white” victims of mass atrocities were entitled to compensation, while non-white victims were not. Thus Mazrui (2002: 87) asked: “How do twelve years of Jewish hell... compare to several centuries of Black enslavement?” Abiola (1992: 910) shortened the period of Jewish suffering even further, referring to the “six-year holocaust perpetrated against Jews by Hitler”. Joseph Ndiaye, curator in 1998 of the *Maison des Esclaves* (House of Slaves) on the Island of Goree off Senegal, from which slaves apparently used to be shipped to the Americas, offered a similar opinion. He said: “We never stop hearing about the Holocaust, but how often do we dwell on the tragedy that took place here over 350 years; a tragedy that consumed tens of millions of lives?”<sup>17</sup>.

These statements reveal an understandable lack of knowledge of the situation of Jews in Europe. If one were to bring together their entire history of expulsions, mass murders and discrimination, one could argue that the Jews, like Africans, suffered for centuries, if not millennia, not for only six or twelve years. But the historical “truth” of the situation of European Jews is unlikely to affect such opinions as are expressed above. More important is the sense that white Jews take up an inordinate amount of the Western world’s attention and sympathy, while black African suffering is ignored. Thus Jakaya Kikwete, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania, speaking at the Durban Conference, angrily made an explicit comparison of attention to the Holocaust, and neglect, as he saw it, of Africa’s situation. “The Jews are being compensated for crimes committed against them during the Holocaust. There are many such examples. We do not understand why there is total hostility to the idea of reparation and compensation to Africa. What is it that is so blasphemous about it? Is it because Africa does not deserve it?... Africans deserve this. It is a matter of principle” (United Nations 2001: 5).

The GEP also drew upon the growing movement for reparations to African-Americans. A popular spokesperson calling for reparations to African-Americans was the eminent activist, Randall Robinson. Like Ali Mazrui, he too referred to the Jewish example. “As Germany and other interests that profited *owe* reparations to Jews following the holocaust of Nazi persecution, America and other interests that profited *owe* reparations to blacks following the holocaust of African slavery” (Robinson 2000: 9, emphasis in original). Therefore, said Robinson, “white society... must own up to slavery and acknowledge its debt to slavery’s contemporary victims. It must, at long last, pay that debt in massive restitutions made to America’s only involuntary members” (*ibid.*: 107). Further, Robinson believed strongly that Europe and America owed reparations to the continent of Africa. Again, he drew upon the Jewish example to make his point. “For

17. Quoted in Howard W. FRENCH, “The Atlantic Slave Trade: On Both Sides, Reason for Remorse”, *New York Times*, April 5, 1998, sec. 4 (Week in Review), p. 1, reprinted in BROOKS (1999: 355-357).

twelve years Nazi Germany inflicted horrors upon European Jews. And Germany paid. It paid Jews individually. It paid the state of Israel. For two and a half centuries, Europe and America inflicted unimaginable horrors upon Africa and its people. Europe not only paid nothing to Africa in compensation, but followed the slave trade with the remapping of Africa for further economic exploitation" (*ibid.*: 204).

Within the United States, the demand for reparations takes several forms. One is a demand for an apology to African-Americans, as represented by a Bill unsuccessfully introduced into the US House of Representatives by a white Congressman, Tony Hall, in 1997<sup>18</sup>. Another is the movement to bring class-action civil lawsuits against corporations that have allegedly profited from the enslavement of African-Americans, such as the suit against Aetna Insurance, which in the 1990s apologized to blacks for underwriting insurance policies on slaves before 1863 (Hitt 2000: 41; Mazrui 2002: 8-9). Finally, there is the claim that the United States of America, as a country, owes some remedy to its African-American citizens. This is the claim made by Representative John Conyers, sponsor of H. R. 40, a Bill to establish a "Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans", introduced in the House of Representatives on 6 January 1999<sup>19</sup>. In the early twenty-first century the most active group in the United States seeking reparations was N'COBRA, The National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America.

Aside from these two larger precedents, activists for reparations were aware of many other historic cases. Abiola, for example, cited reparations paid by Germany to its former enemies after the First World War, United States' reparations to Japanese-Americans interned during the Second World War, and American, Canadian and Australian reparations to indigenous peoples. He also noted reparations demanded of Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War (Abiola 1992: 910). Thompson added to these Poland's demands on Germany for compensation to Polish slave-labourers. Thompson also noted the irony that when slaves were freed in the British empire, compensation was paid not to the ex-slaves, but to their ex-owners, as compensation for lost property (a fact also alluded to by Ajayi, in his contribution to this volume). All of these cases, according to Thompson, were precedents for a legal claim of unjust enrichment (Thompson 1999: 2-3).

There are also quite recent precedents for reparations to Africa. There is a great deal of international interest in various forms of truth-telling, forgiveness, and possibilities for reconciliation, stemming from the innovative Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South

18. Congressman Tony P. HALL (Ohio), "Defense of Congressional Resolution Apologizing for Slavery", 143 Congressional Record H3890-H3891, 105th Congress, 1st Session (June 18, 1997), in BROOKS (1999: 350-351).

19. Rep John CONYERS, Jr., "Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African-Americans Act", <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d106:h.r.00040>. Also in BROOKS (1999: 367-369).

Africa. Ajayi cites the TRC in his essay in this volume. He also cites a French law of 2001 that recognizes the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a crime against humanity, and the admission by the Belgians in 2002 of their role in the murder of Patrice Lumumba, first President of independent Congo. All of these cases reflect a growing international social movement to recognize historic injustices.

### The Wider Social Movement

The GEP used the term “reparations” to mean financial compensation. In international law, reparations include a variety of activities meant to repair or “make whole” relations between two groups, one of whom has victimized the other, including symbolic reparations such as apologies<sup>20</sup>. This more encompassing meaning of reparations was of little interest to the GEP: without financial compensation, all other forms of reparation were meaningless. As suggested above, the final form of financial compensation was not yet decided by the GEP. While cancellation of all of Africa’s foreign debt (apparently to both governmental and private creditors) was advocated by NGOs at the Durban Conference, both Mazrui and Thompson felt that this was not a necessary claim, as the debt was unlikely to be paid in any case. The members of the GEP did advocate capital transfer in the form of a Marshall Plan for Africa, harkening back to the Marshall Plan that assisted Europe after the Second World War. Mazrui (2002: 67) referred to such a plan as the Middle Passage Plan, after the notorious Middle Passage voyage across the Atlantic endured by all Africans brought to the Americas as slaves.

Nor was the GEP interested in the finer points of legality of compensation. In his case for reparations, Abiola (1992: 910) claimed that there was a principle that “a state is liable for any injury suffered by another or by the other’s nationals, such injury arising from the breach of any international obligations or from the breach of any principle of international customary law”. But this is an anachronistic attribution of contemporary international law—and the contemporary world structure of states—to a period when neither existed. Slavery and the slave trade were not actually abolished in law until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Robertson 1999: 209). As Max Du Plessis (2003: 636, emphasis in original) notes, it is very difficult in law to argue that “the acts of slavery committed *then* amount to

20. M. Cherif BASSIOUNI, rapporteur, “The Right to Restitution, Compensation and Rehabilitation for Victims of Gross Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”, United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights, 56th Session, E/CN/4/2000/62, 18 January 2000, pp. 9-12. Bassiouni’s definition contrasts with the definition of reparations in *Black’s Law Dictionary*, 6th edition, 1990, p. 1298, as “payment made by one country to another for damages during war”. Cited in BAZYLER (2001: 21, 42 n. 75).

a violation of fundamental norms of international law *now*". It is even more difficult to argue that the law requires reparation for colonialism, which was legal under international law until 1945 at earliest (*ibid.*: 657). In the light of the weakness of legal claims for reparations, the case will have to be made via international political and moral debate.

As of 2003, the members of the GEP had had little success in starting a widespread movement for reparations to Africa, beyond the level of rhetoric. Many African non-governmental organizations and African-American organizations, supported the idea of reparations to Africa in principle, and participated in the NGO discussions of this topic at Durban and before<sup>21</sup>. More than this, the international NGO Forum at the World Conference against Racism also supported the idea of reparations to Africa. "Slave-holder nations, colonizers and occupying countries have unjustly enriched themselves at the expense of those people that they enslaved and colonized and whose land they have occupied. As these nations largely owe their political, economic and social domination to the exploitation of Africa, Africans and Africans in the Diaspora they should recognize their obligation to provide these victims just and equitable reparations"<sup>22</sup>.

Nevertheless, by 2003 there were few groups actively dedicated to this issue. A group in Britain called the African Reparations Movement (ARM) had been very active on the Net, but was less active in 2003 as a consequence of the death of a financial benefactor who apparently had supported its website, which disappeared. There were small groups demanding reparations in Ghana and Kenya (Mazrui 2002). A "Jamaican Reparations Movement", naming Dudley Thompson as its Patron and connected to the Rastafarian religious movement, issued statements at the time of the Durban conference and beyond, but this author could not find any further evidence of its existence (JRM 2003). Up to 2002, and presumably beyond, the three active members of the GEP gave lectures, especially at universities, and tried to encourage students to form their own branches, for example, in Brazil<sup>23</sup>.

One difficulty in starting an international movement for reparations to Africa is the problem of how to frame the question. The three active members of the GEP referred frequently to the work of Walter Rodney (1972)<sup>24</sup>, a very influential member of the "underdevelopment" school of thought of the 1960s and 1970s. This school of thought, started by Andre Gunder Frank in 1967, argued that the lower level of development of the then "Third

21. See e.g. Joint Statement by African NGOs *et al.*, "Oral Intervention at the Informal Consultation of the Preparatory Committee for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance", 15-16 January 2001, Geneva.

22. "WCAR NGO Forum Declaration", 3 September 2001, par. 71.

23. Interview with Dudley THOMPSON, 5 December 2002.

24. This is a very learned volume, taking a Marxist perspective on underdevelopment in Africa, and thoroughly grounded in African history. Rodney was assassinated by a car bomb in Guyana, his native country, in 1980.

World” regions of the world was not a natural state, but a consequence of the *process* of underdevelopment caused by exploitative relations with the Western colonizers (Frank 1967). As Rodney (1972: 149) put it, “what was a slight difference [in levels of development] when the Portuguese sailed to West Africa in 1444 was a huge gap by the time that European robber statesmen sat down in Berlin 440 years later to decide who should steal which parts of Africa”.

The idea that African underdevelopment was and is caused by its relations with the West has powerful rhetorical appeal. So does the idea that Western development, conversely, was a result of African exploitation and underdevelopment. The early work of Eric Williams (1966), a Caribbean historian, arguing that the slavery was the basis of Britain’s wealth, still has resonance among contemporary commentators (Edmonson 2001).

These ideas provide a relatively simple—although, in this author’s opinion, also partially correct (Howard 1978)—explanation for the tragic economic and political state of much of Africa today. For example, Osabu-Kle (2000: 333, 340) argued that “super profits from the labor of African slaves made possible the investments that resulted in the industrial revolution... African resources made the West rich and great! If Europeans were [sic] not greedy, Africa would have had the peace to develop on its own without being underdeveloped by anyone”. Mazrui (1999: 1) also argued that “Africa Developed the West”. “[T]he labor of Africa’s sons and daughters was what the West needed for its industrial take-off”, he believed, referring also to the “extractive imperative” as Africa’s agricultural and mineral wealth were removed for Western use. In Thompson’s view, “The debt is to do with the adjustment of the racial... situation... [T]he highly industrialized nations of the West... interrupted normal historical development, indigenous development by the Africans, and particularly West Africa. They interrupted it by the heinous crime of slavery. With over four centuries they abducted the strongest and the best and some of the youngest life blood for coming generations... They debilitated Africa”<sup>25</sup>.

But even if one agrees with Rodney’s controversial approach, there is a very long causal chain between slavery, colonialism and the current situation of Africans. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) explain that social movements for human rights are most likely to be successful when there is a short and recognizable connection between cause and effect. The evidence and logic needed to show how the slave trade caused underdevelopment in Africa today is detailed and complex. This is especially so because the slave trade was abolished by the British in 1807 and by the United States in 1808. Moreover, argue Keck and Sikkink (*ibid.*: 195), social movements are successful when direct harm can be demonstrated. While in retrospect, the direct harms of slavery endured by those enslaved are easy to identify, the direct harm visited upon their descendants is far

25. Interview, 5 December 2002.

less clear. It is, therefore, difficult to persuade those Western states (and their citizens) who might be expected to pay compensation that the often tragic situation of Africans and members of the African Diaspora alive today is a consequence in part of the actions of the West's own forebears.

The GEP also had some difficulty agreeing on an appropriate "frame" for the reparations claims. Without a clear frame, indicating precisely what is at issue, it is difficult for any nascent social movement to attract allies to its cause (*ibid.*: 2 sq). The Group proposed, at minimum, reparations to Africa for the slave trade. However, there was disagreement among the Group's members as to whether reparations were also owed for colonialism or post-colonial relations. Mazrui felt that to extend the claim beyond slavery to colonialism would weaken the case for reparations: "It makes it difficult to win on both by mixing the two"<sup>26</sup>. Ajayi, by contrast, believed that reparations were also due for colonialism. As he argues in this volume, colonialism continued the worst characteristics of the slave trade. "Features of the slave trade and American slavery that characterized colonialism in Africa included racism, excessive violence and gross abuse of human rights. It was part of the propaganda of empire that Africans were lazy and had to be flogged to make them work... [R]acist colonialism... exploited, rather than developed, Africa" (Ajayi 2002: 3). Moreover, according to Ajayi, only Africans endured the double burden of both being enslaved and colonized, as compared to other parts of the world such as India<sup>27</sup>. Thompson saw a case for reparations not only for colonialism, but also for the post-colonial period. "Colonialism", he said, "is just a half step from slavery." As for the post-colonial period, "they gave us a crown but they kept the jewels". Moreover, in Thompson's view even the present era of globalization is characterized by international relations that require reparations. "Globalization is a crime... [U]s, I mean slaves and ex-slaves, we're far behind... and the technological age is moving us further and further away..."<sup>28</sup>. On balance, however, Thompson preferred to keep to the more restricted claim for reparations for slavery.

One must ask, therefore, what the future of a movement for reparations to Africa is likely to be, once the three still active members of the GEP are no longer able to continue their work for reparations. There does not seem to be any active group willing and able to take on their labours. The African Union, successor to the Organization of African States, does not appear to have taken up the idea of reparations as a focus of its activities. Moreover, as Thompson himself noted, reparations is not an issue that is of concern for most ordinary Africans, who are concerned with more mundane matters of day-to-day survival. "There's a vast majority, a large part... who feel that this is a matter of such a long time ago... that we should forget

26. Interview, 7 December 2002.

27. Interview, 6 December 2002.

28. Interview, 5 December 2002.

about it”<sup>29</sup>. The genesis and activities of the GEP may be remembered as a mere comment on Western-African relations, absent the organizational resources to enlarge upon their activities.

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## ABSTRACT

This article begins with a discussion of the claims for reparations to Africa made at the United Nations-sponsored World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. It then traces the claim back to the Eminent Persons Group established in the early 1990s by the Organization of African Unity to pursue reparations for slavery, and perhaps for other wrongs perpetrated on Africa, including colonialism and 'neo-colonialism'. In 2002 only three members of the Eminent Persons Group were still active: they were Jacob Ade Ajayi, Ali A. Mazrui, and Dudley Thompson. The author interviewed all three in December 2002, and presents their views in this article. The article also considers precedents for the demand for reparations to Africa, especially reparations to Jews for the Holocaust, and the demand for reparations to African-Americans. The article closes with an assessment of the likelihood that a large social movement for reparations to Africa will develop. Although the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Forum at Durban supported reparations to Africa, there has been little or no follow-up. As of 2003 there were

very few groups dedicated to reparations. Moreover, the Group of Eminent Persons has not been able to frame its claim in a manner that would be persuasive to those from whom reparations are demanded.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Les réparations pour l'Afrique et le Groupe de personnalités éminentes.* — Cet article débute par une discussion sur les revendications de réparations pour l'Afrique présentées lors de la Conférence internationale des Nations Unies contre le racisme qui s'est tenue à Durban en septembre 2001. Ces revendications émanent, à l'origine, du Groupe de personnalités éminentes mis en place au début des années 1990 par l'Organisation de l'unité africaine (OUA) dans le but de demander réparation pour l'esclavage et peut-être pour d'autres torts commis contre l'Afrique, notamment le colonialisme et le "néo-colonialisme". En 2002, seuls trois membres de ce groupe étaient encore actifs: Jacob Ade Ajayi, Ali A. Mazrui et Dudley Thompson. Nous les avons interviewés en décembre 2002 et exposons ici leurs points de vue. Nous abordons également les précédents en matière de réparation, notamment les réparations offertes aux Juifs pour l'Holocauste et les demandes de réparations pour les Afro-Américains. Nous terminons par une évaluation des chances de développement d'un grand mouvement social en faveur des réparations pour l'Afrique. Le Forum des organisations non gouvernementales à Durban a affiché son soutien à une telle démarche, mais cette position n'a pas ou peu été suivi d'effets. Depuis 2003, très peu de groupes se consacrent à la question des réparations. Par ailleurs, le Groupe des personnalités éminentes n'a pas réussi à formuler ses revendications d'une manière convaincante pour ceux à qui elles s'adressent.

**Keywords/Mots-clés :** Jacob Ade Ajayi, Ali Mazrui, Dudley Thompson, colonialism, Durban Conference against Racism, Group of Eminent Persons, reparations, slave trade/Jacob Ade Ajayi, Ali Mazrui, Dudley Thompson, colonialisme, Conférence contre le racisme de Durban, Groupe de personnalités éminentes, réparations, traite négrière.