

# Reparations – A Hidden Agenda?

## A Critical Analysis of the Campaign for Reparations<sup>1</sup>

### *Preface*

Before getting to the article itself, allow me to reproduce some introductory material from our memoirs, *Every Square Inch*.<sup>2</sup>

A major missionary “technique” of mine all along was to address issues that were of current public interest and then shine the light of the Gospel on them, either directly or by inviting others to explore doing so, always in a bid to demonstrate the comprehensive nature of the Christian faith. That was a way to ensure that people would pay attention to my lectures, writings and events and discuss them, including the surprising religious aspect that they never had associated with these so-called “secular” issues. It was always meant as a witness to both Christians and Muslims.

During the early 1990s the topic of reparations was catching international attention once again. It was, of course, a subject not far from that of the External Debt (ED) campaign of the Institute of Church & Society (ICS) with which I was associated.<sup>3</sup> Conferences were held, including a major one in Nigeria, organized by Chief M. K. O Abiola, a Muslim icon among Nigerian politicians and businessmen, and held only three weeks after the ICS’ ED conference. I picked up on that and wrote an article on the subject that was published in the popular Christian magazine *Today’s Challenge (TC)*.

That article drew the attention of a group of lecturers at Unijos, who invited me for a discussion. In a letter to our parents, Fran, my wife, commented, “Being academics of Marxist orientation, they properly tore everything apart. It was so interesting listening to their radically different views on the subject.” But they were also surprised at the radical nature of

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1 Originally published in *Today’s Challenge*, No. 1/1992, pp. 10-13.

2 Vol. 2, pp. 393-394.

3 J. Boer (ed.), *The Church and the External Debt*. Jos: ICS, 1992.

my Christian-oriented stance, something they had seldom, if ever, encountered before. Some were downright shocked.

And now, on to the article itself.

## Introduction

Nigeria's illustrious and colourful Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola has started a movement that could have tremendous implications for Nigeria and for Africa as a whole. I refer to the push for reparations. He is calling for reparations from the West for the damages inflicted upon Africa by the transatlantic slave trade and by colonialism and its aftermath, neocolonialism.

Abiola's campaign started off with a two-day international conference on Reparations to Africa and Africans in the Diaspora, hosted by his own Concord Press and held in December, 1990, only about three weeks after the ICS hosted an ED Conference in Jos. Like almost everything else he does, Abiola's conference was successful in attracting many important Black personalities from various countries – but not, to the best of my knowledge, from the Arab world. I wonder why.

There is no need to restate all the points made at this conference, for these can be gleaned from the various Concord Press published reports as well as from other newspapers. In short, the conference demands that Africa's external debt to Western nations and banks be cancelled as reparation for the violence those nations have let loose on Africa. One speaker, apparently adept in accounting, concluded that Africa's external debt is about equal to the level of damage and suffering inflicted on Africa.

One point emphasized repeatedly in the reports is that there is nothing new about the concept of reparations on an international level. Dudley Thompson, Jamaica's High Commissioner to Nigeria, reminded the participants that "payments of large sums have been offered to the Jews, the Japanese-Americans, the Germans and others to expiate injuries meted out to them." Another speaker made reference to

Japanese reparation payments to North Korea of five billion (dollars?). And, of course, these days we hear much about reparations demanded from Iraq for war damages to Kuwait. So, the principle has been firmly established in the community of nations.

In the rest of this article I want to point to a serious problem that must be overcome if this campaign is going to be successful and receive international credence. *The problem is that this campaign has started off on an extremely one-sided and biased note – and therefore is bound to fail.* There are some indications that would lead one to suspect that this crusade has been launched for the sake of a hidden agenda in the interest of one religion and of one social class.

## **Hidden Agenda No. 1 – Religion**

### **Arab Slavery**

No one in his right mind would deny that the transatlantic slave trade caused untold suffering for the victims and incomparable damage to Africa. That point is settled. But the African slave trade had an additional dimension, namely the Arab slave trade. It should puzzle every objective right-thinking person why that dimension is consistently left out of the picture, especially so since it was still going strong well into this century – 50 years after it was outlawed in the USA.

Karl Kumm was the founder of the Sudan United Mission, that large international and interdenominational mission in the north of Nigeria that developed six church denominations and spawned The Fellowship of the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, popularly known by its Hausa-language acronym, TEKAN. Kumm trekked across Africa, from West to East, and wrote two books about his experiences, both published in 1910. Kumm was astonished and horrified at the forms of slavery that he witnessed with his own eyes in this century.

He wrote of emirs sending slave raiders into their territories in order to collect the annual tribute due to him and in the process destroying, killing, enslaving, utterly devastating large areas. “I have known close on five

thousand square miles of territory absolutely depopulated by the ruling emir." He had personally seen "huge walled towns deserted, thousands of acres of farm land relapsing into jungle and an entire population absorbed. And this sort of thing is not done once or twice in a century, but it is absolutely being done somewhere or other every day." The refinements of torture that suggest themselves to the lustful mind of ... (these rulers) ... are many and peculiar."

The impact on individual people was as devastating as it was on the land and society in general. The following conveys the unutterable misery experienced by the hapless victims of this devilish trade: "Real misery is seen written on the faces of those whose families have been destroyed or torn from them. There is the mother who has lost her children; the lover who has seen his sweetheart torn from his arms; the chief who has lost his authority; the slaves on whom privation and disease have set their mark; the woman with sunken eyes, gaping rib spaces, and long skinny breasts and the man with tumid spear – thrust or raw, oozing sword-slash fresh upon him. Behind the shed is the body of a slave who has just drawn his last breath, his thin limbs tangled in the agony of death."

Here we have landed in what Livingstone referred to as "hell," the place where "Satan has his seat."

The side-effects of this terrorism as Kumm described them were astounding. During his trans-Africa safari in 1909, he came across the Sara-Kabba people, who had their women stretch their lower lip to incredible ugliness ... to make them unattractive to Muslim slavers. After centuries of harassment, these peoples had withdrawn themselves into swamps. As soon as a stranger came in sight, in this case Kumm himself, he "heard shrieks, a rush, a rustling in the grass, and there was silence; the population of the village had decamped."

During his trek, Kumm carried on him a photograph of a Bisharin, one that haunted him and refused to release him. "Only a dark-eyed Bisharin, an untaught desert ranger, lithe, sinewy ..., proud, bold, free. He sits there

leaning forward, searching us with unfathomable issues, sunk in a deeper silence, hanging on his relation to us. "The eyes that look at us from that one silent face are eyes innumerable, hopeless eyes of slaves, anguished eyes of tortured women; keen eyes of clever traders and the proud glance of chieftains; others dull, bewildered, shadowed by life's miseries, unlit by any of heaven's rays. The face with its grave question stood for the face of thousands -- faces of slave drivers, of fanatic Imans, rich Emirs, lazy princes ...."<sup>4</sup>

No one wants to defend the transatlantic slave trade, not even Westerners. They are embarrassed by that part of their history. Their churches often bend over backwards to support the descendants of those slaves. But what conspiracy seeks to block the history of Arab slavery from our consciousness? These reports of Muslim slavery are from eyewitnesses, of this 20<sup>th</sup> century, in our own Africa.

Recently, Dr. Yusufu Turaki, General Secretary of ECWA, asked about the descendants of this Muslim slavery. Where are they? Why were there no pictures of them in the reports? The descendants of Western slaves have joined Abiola's campaign. They are here to tell their story and demand reparations. But the others ...?

Abiola is too educated to be unaware of this history. Why is this equally horrible and much more recent story of slavery left out of the campaign for reparation? Is there a hidden agenda?

### **Neocolonialism**

I have spent seven and a half years doing research in and writing on the nature of colonialism in Nigeria, especially its relationship to religion, and have published two major books on the subject. Subsequently, for some eight years I spent a considerable part of my time studying the role of multinational corporations in

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in J. Boer, *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Sudan United Mission*, 1979, pp. 126-127. *Missions: Heralds of Capitalism or Christ?* 1984, pp. 36-37.

the era of neocolonialism and a major manuscript on the subject is now under scrutiny by a publisher.<sup>5</sup> I flatter myself to think I know something about both of these movements.

One thing that is sure is that it is not possible to separate colonialism from neocolonialism. The one is largely an extension of the other, though with a different political structure. Whereas the dominant alien structure of the colonial times was the foreign government, this was replaced at “independence” with the multinational corporation, which is shielded by the local heirs of colonial power.

Nigerian writers have applied terms like “devils” to multinationals and have written about the “demonology of multinationals” (*Nigeria Standard*, 11 Sept/79; A. B. Ahmed, *New Nigerian*, 6 Sept/70). Professor Onimode of the University of Ibadan accuses multinationals of misleading consumers, cultivating wrong tastes, wasting scarce resources and of undermining national cultures. Bishop Okullu of Kenya charges that, for the sake of profit, multinationals tempt people to forsake their own culture and to embrace alien social and economic values. There is no space in this article to list all the perversions multinationals introduce into their host countries.<sup>6</sup>

The class that fought colonialism emerged as the rulers of the neocolonial setup. Colonial rulers were replaced by their local trainees who represent them and their interests, according to various Nigerian authors. The anti-apartheid crusader, Patrick Wilmot, charges that multinationals have “created a parasitic native class of compradors and commission agents who serve as a buffer and transmission line between exploiter and exploited.” Bala Usman refers to this group as “gatemen” who collect tolls on behalf of neo-colonial interests. Prof. Onimode talks about “imperialist commission agents” and of a “pliant domestic comprador bourgeoisie, who can be relied upon as intermediaries to suppress the mass-

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5 J. Boer, *Caught in the Middle: Christians in Transnational Corporations*. Jos: ICS, 1992.

6 See above for details.

majority, secure corrupt contracts, licences, concessions and other favours for the imperialist looting of Nigeria.” These represent the interests of multinationals and other neocolonial parties at the expense of the masses in Nigeria.

The direct relationship between colonialism and neocolonialism has been clearly affirmed in documents supporting the call for reparations. An editorial in the *New Nigerian* (27 Mar/91) supporting the call states, “The result of all this monumental debauchery, which ... is still continuing in the form of neocolonialism, explains Africa’s prostrate condition today.” In fact, Abiola himself, in an address to the African Bar Association during March, 1991, spoke of the “crimes of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism” (*National Concord*, 28 Mar/91).

One multinational that has evoked more cries of anger than most is ITT. That corporation is held responsible by many for the overthrow of the government of Chili. That is also the corporation that has helped Abiola to the top of the economic, political and social ladder in Nigeria. While he was ITT’s chief in Nigeria, that corporation won huge contracts from the Nigerian government to improve our telephone system. But after expenditures of what in today’s naira would probably amount to billions, it remains almost impossible for me to call Kano from Jos.

The purpose of this article is by no means to accuse Abiola of corruption. However, his participation at the top of the neocolonial class in Nigeria requires that he clear himself and demonstrate beyond doubt that he has not served as a typical neocolonial gateman, so that no one can call into question his qualification as a crusader against neocolonialism. It would be interesting to know what kind of pension he continues to receive from ITT and what dividends from his investment in that corporation. Or, for that matter, what advice he gives his company even today and what influential strings he continues to pull on their behalf with Nigerian governments. I do not know the religion of ITT directors – most likely a typical bunch of secular western humanists – but we all do know the religion of Abiola: Islam.

## **Arab Petrodollars**

The major reparation demanded is the cancellation of Africa's external debt. Well enough. At the ICS we are well aware of this debt, in view of our recent conference on the subject. A large part of the money that was lent to African countries by Western banks was not Western money. These were surplus funds that flooded Western banks, but that were deposited by Arab governments. This fact ought to raise the question in our minds what Arab governments are doing, collecting interest from their investments in capitalist banks, when Islam is against the notion of interest. But apart from that question, *it is simply impossible for many of these banks to cancel these huge debts – unless the Arabs are prepared to forfeit these deposits.*

The potential leverage Arab countries have over Western banks was illustrated in a recent report about Kuwaiti threats to these banks that they will withdraw their funds if the banks refuse to freeze Iraqi accounts (*New Nigerian*, 23 March '91).

Well, over to Abiola! Can *he* persuade them? There would not be many Nigerians who would have more clout with Arab governments than he does. If he is successful at that front, the question of cancellation of debts would become much easier. But why is he quiet at this front? He surely is not ignorant about this aspect of the question. The suspicion of a hidden agenda will not be suppressed.

## **Hidden Agenda No 2: Class and Corruption**

I have already referred to the possibility of potential class interests that seem to conflict with the call for the demise of neocolonialism. There is, however, another aspect of potential class interest that would favour reparations and the related question of debt cancellation.

No responsible discussion about the external debt and reparations can avoid the problem of corruption. The speakers at the ICS' ED Conference repeatedly pointed out this complicating factor. Much of the borrowed funds were said to be siphoned off to the secret foreign accounts of the officials in charge. In some

cases, it was alleged, the funds never left the bank, but were simply transferred to another account within the same bank! And where are the projects that were supposed to be carried out with these loans? Which ones can be said to benefit the public? Which ones are finished? Of course, in the case of Nigeria, the people voted a loud “No!” to such loans.

The above factors lead one to ask: reparation for whose sake? It would seem to be a crusade to let those who benefited from the loans, who diverted or wasted them, off the hook. One cannot help but suspect that a major reason for the crusade is that the powers that be want the pressure taken off from themselves. They want to lay the matter to rest so that no one will ever again make these beneficiaries uncomfortable by raising such disturbing questions. The organizers had enough money, power and prestige to gather an international host of prominent personalities to lend respectability and clout to this crusade, but all the while the suspicion of a hidden agenda remains. *There are too many factors at work here to simply dismiss such suspicions as baseless – unless the call for reparations is also directed to those who have diverted or mismanaged those funds.*

All the allegations about past abuses of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism, valid as they are, cannot get around this problem of corruption. That must be addressed in this crusade. Without seriously addressing this aspect, the entire crusade loses its credibility and will become a mere laughing stock.

## **Conclusion**

The point of this article is not to counteract the call for reparations or the idea of cancellation of external debts. The purpose is to redeem the crusade by pointing to certain obvious defects that must be taken care of at this early stage. This crusade, to gain credibility, must be totally above board without any suspicion of a hidden agenda. Its extreme one-sidedness must be corrected by considering the role Arabs have played and continue to play in the devastation of Africa as well as the role of the West. Of course, I have not even mentioned the suppression of the

original native populations of countries now considered Arab Africans. *As it now stands, the crusade appears too obviously an effort to exploit the common feelings of the Black race for the advancement of the interests of one religion and one class.*

One final word of positive advice to the organizers. Investigate who might be your potential allies. One sympathetic friend would be the World Council of Churches (WCC), based in Geneva, with several Nigerian churches as their members. Others would be the council of churches in various Western nations. You might be surprised how sympathetic these organizations would be towards your campaign. I would be prepared to help you make contact. Of course, if the suspicion of a hidden religious and class agenda is true, then you will brush this advice aside as irrelevant to your *real though unstated* concerns. Abiola's response to this offer of the service of a middleman will help the skeptics among us either to retain or correct the suspicion of a hidden agenda.