

'Slavery, Colonialism and Christian Memory: Restitution? Compensation? Or Status Quo?'

(By Dr Valentin Dedji)

Talking about the restitution of African historic artefacts, the late President of Senegal, Leopold Sédar Senghor stated:

It is not a matter of reviving the past, or living in a kind of African museum; it is a matter of animating the world, here and now, with the values of our past.¹

In this presentation, I will be focusing on the ethical and moral issues relating to the restitution of items looted during the time of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonisation, now in the possession of museums, galleries, cathedrals, private collectors and churches in Europe and America.

These items, which are originally from Africa and the Caribbean, include priceless artefacts and human remains. Mostly, I will cover the following points:

- What does 'restitution' mean in this context?
- What are the items in question?
- Who has them?
- What would be the economic implications of an eventual 'reparation' or 'compensation'?
- What theological and prophetic roles should the Church play?

¹. L. S. Senghor, 'Elements constructifs d'une civilisation d'inspiration Négro-Africaine,' Presence Africaine, 1959, p. 291. Translated by Gerald Moore.

Earlier Restitution Plans and Process

In 1992, the Organisation of African Unity set up a restitution committee and, few years later Bernie Grant emulated the same idea, on behalf of a number of Caribbean nations. That started an international movement whose objectives were about:

- The Recognition of the injustice that African and Caribbean nations were subjects to, due to slavery and colonialism. This is crucial, because till today, there is no international day to commemorate the memory of African and Caribbean slaves, in the same way that there is a Holocaust Memorial Day.
- The commitment to the principle of Restitution of items illegally taken. This should be followed by a programme of Reparation for the prejudices inflicted.
- The main motif of all this, would be the Relaunch of the African Renaissance movement.

In fact, the debates about the restitution of African and Caribbean cultural, religious and historic properties started as far back to the time of Queen Victoria. In a correspondence dated, 4th July 1850 between King Ghézo, King of Dahomey (present day Benin) and Queen Victoria, King Ghézo wrote:

'...Some years ago I entrusted two girls and one boy to the care of Mr Freeman; I Am anxious they should be returned...'²

The issue here was that, 'Mr Freeman' that King Ghézo was referring to was the British Missionary, Thomas Birch Freeman. Upon his visit to the kingdom of Dahomey in March 1843, King Ghézo entrusted those three children to the care of the British missionary to be educated in British schools in order to gain what King Ghézo believed to be the 'white

². Tim Coates, *King Ghézo of Dahomey, 1850-52* (London: The Stationery Office, 2001), p.81.

man's power'. Clearly, King Ghezo wanted to hold Queen Victoria accountable for the welfare and the safe return of those children.

For the last few decades, the debates about the restitution of all items that belong to Africa has been slowly building up. Recently, the said movement took a radical momentum after the murder in the USA of George Floyd and the toppling down of the statue of the ex-slave owner Edward Colston on 7th June 2020. So, the 'restitution movement' is now more alive and include objects which, far from being mere exotic artefacts, represent powerful and sacred symbols of African and Caribbean people's history, their genius, their belief systems and identity.

We are talking here about items such as:

- The Ethiopian Tabots (looted during the battle of Maqdala in 1867 by an overwhelming army of 13,000 British troops led by General Sir Rupert Napier. For your information, the Tabot is the foundation of the Ethiopian Orthodox church and is what sanctifies and consecrates a church building. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Tabot is the representation of the Ark of the Covenant. Commenting on issues around the restitution of The Ethiopian Tabots, this is what Lord Carey Hol stated few months ago, on 30th March 2022:

'The issue for me is respecting another nation's culture and religious values. In the fact that the Tabots entered the collection of the British Museum after British troops led by Lord Napier in 1868 looted them, following the Battle of Maqdala, would not he agree that Her Majesty's Government bear some basic moral responsibility? As that is surely the case, would the Government give some words of encouragement – and I believe that they have implied something – to the trustees of the British Museum to do the right thing and return the Tabots to Ethiopia?'³

³. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/22876/>

- There is also a vast number of wooden royal chairs and masks, together with ivory items, 'Benin Bronze' and brass-crafted sculptures and plaques.
- In Cambridge, Jesus College returned on 27th October 2021 a bronze sculpture of a cockerel that had stood in the hall since 1905. The statue had been donated by a student's parent who took part in the colonial expedition.
- That has fuelled hopes that other European countries will soon follow suit. Germany and Belgium have taken similar steps, initiating restitution processes with Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But the United Kingdom, whose British Museum houses the world's largest collection of Benin bronzes, is turning a deaf ear to calls for their restitution. About 90% of Africa's cultural heritage are believed to be now in Europe. The Quai Branly Museum in France alone holds some 70,000 African objects. The American cultural institution now plans to begin a repatriation process for 16 pieces identified as objects looted during a British expedition in 1897 – without any formal request from Nigeria.
- According to a former Curator for the British Museum: '**There is a vast number of those precious items in our churches and cathedrals. Also, the sitting rooms, basements and attics of former Church' Mission Partners are full of such objects.**' The reality is that, those objects are not only works of art but also, they bear witness to the pre-colonial history and the mythology of each African and Caribbean country where those items were looted from.
- The emotional and sentimental dimensions of restitution include the ancestral remains of:
 - The Ethiopian Emperor Towodoro who committed suicide during the battle of Maqdala with a gun that Queen Victoria sent him.
 - The remains of King Behanzin of Dahomey who was deported by the French Army and died in Exile in Blidah (Algeria).
 - The human remains of Patrice Lumumba, the first President of DRC killed in 1961 by soldiers of the Belgian army. His body was dissolved in acid (few days ago, on Thursday 23rd June 2022, his tooth was finally returned to his family).

Reparation and its economic dimensions

The call for reparation is based on the Biblical and theological principle of a 'Restorative Justice'. It is a fundamental ethical issue. What is at stake is about setting up a mechanism of accountability towards nations whose natural wealth and national heritage have been unjustly plundered. Therefore, status quo is not an option.

More precisely, it is becoming increasingly clear that the multi-layer consequences of slavery and colonialism are parts of the main causes of the economic underdevelopment of many African and Caribbean countries. Consequently, it would be very difficult for those African and Caribbean nations to emerge from their socio-economic turmoil without a conscientious programme of reparation or compensation from Western highly developed countries. To back that theory, the New York Times has published recently (starting from 25th May 2022), a series of articles showing how, after 64 years of their independence, Haiti was forced to pay the equivalent of 115 Billions of Dollars to France because of the uprising of Haitian slaves led by Toussaint Louverture against their French colonial masters (1787-1799)⁴. Also, by the end of the 19th century, French authorities vandalised the National Bank of Haiti by withdrawing illegally millions of Us Dollars that were used to build the Eiffel Tour! You have to remember that, at that time, no one came to help Haiti.

Haiti was the only Black free country in the Americas, and it was a pariah. The British didn't want to recognize it because they had Jamaica and Barbados as colonies. The Americans most certainly did not want to recognize it; they still hadn't ended slavery.

On the other hand, on the African continent, On 11 August 2015, speaking at the celebrations marking the 55th anniversary of the independence of Chad, the late President Idriss Deby declared, ***'we must have the courage to say there is a cord preventing development in Africa that must be cut off.'***

The 'cord' he was referring to is now over 76 years old. It is known by the acronym 'CFA franc'. The CFA franc – originally the French African Colonial franc – was officially created on 26 December 1945 by a decree of General de Gaulle. It is a colonial currency, born of France's need to

⁴. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>

foster economic integration among the colonies under its administration, and thus control their resources, economic structures and political systems. Thus, the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) and the Bank of Central African States (BEAC) – have been required to deposit 50 per cent of their foreign exchange reserves in a special French Treasury 'operating account'. From 1973 to 2005, the said figure has been raised to 65 per cent. Think about that!

Theological and Prophetic role for the Church

So, in the face of all this, what should be the role of Churches and Church' institutions?

Let us remember that slavery and colonialism took place according the rule of 'the 3 Ms': Missionaries – Merchants – Military. Therefore, because right from the beginning, church' institutions were part of the problem, they also have to be part of the solution. So, my suggestion is that Churches' role should be:

1)- **Educational**: Indeed, we know the historic opposition of the Methodist Church to Slavery and I have always been inspired by John Wesley's life-long fight against slavery. More particularly, Wesley's booklet '*Thoughts upon Slavery*'⁵ had a profound impact on me, well before I came to England. It was one of the first documents that I translated into French. Wesley's point was always that all slavery is as irreconcilable to justice as to mercy. Therefore today, unless we educate our Church' ministers, theological students and church' members to understand the moral and psychological effects of slavery on the descendants of ex-slaves, we would still have a long way to go. It was interesting to hear Prince Charles suggesting recently during the Common Wealth summit in Rwanda that education about slavery should be included in school's curriculum.

2)- **Pastoral**: This includes what I call 'Respectful listening and Reciprocal learning'.

3)- **Prophetic**: This is the moment, more than ever for churches and church' institutions to embrace more resolutely the legacy of John

⁵ . John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (published in the year 1774).

Wesley's fight against slavery. More crucially, we need to be more assertive about our theological and prophetic voice in that matter. It is timely that, the whole Methodist Church in Great Britain is currently engaging with the study of the book of prophet Micah through 'the Micah project'. I fully support the work that Rachel Lampard is doing in that field. This should be the right moment to reflect profoundly on what it means to be a Justice-seeking church.

Additionally, at the heart of the book of Leviticus 25, is the Biblical mandate of the Jubilee. Jubilee provides the Church with a template where the concepts of 'restitution', 'restoration' and 'reparation' should become a life-style, not waiting for fifty years. Authentic restitution, restoration and reparation should stem from our theological integrity. Biblically, Israel's identity, or what it means to belong to the Hebrew people, consists in doing justice to the poor and to all those who have been abused and restoring their rights that have been trampled. Our God whom we serve is revealed as the one who does justice on behalf of His people. Consequently, when the Jewish people do not do justice to the poor, and the vulnerable, they are traitors to themselves. Therefore, today, the true identity of our Christian communities and institutions would be genuinely established only by how we do justice towards the downtrodden of this world; otherwise, there is a contradiction of the very essence of the ecclesial community.

Short Bibliography

Coates, Tim, *King Ghézo of Dahomey, 1850-52* (London: The Stationery Office, 2001).

Senghor, L. S. '*Elements constructifs d'une civilisation d'inspiration Négro-Africaine,*' *Présence Africaine*, 1959, p. 291. Translated by Gerald Moore.

Wesley, John, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, (published in the year 1774).

Websites

<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/22876/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html>