

10.10.2002

Dear Ali Mazrui,

### **Conference on Reparations for Arab-led Slavery**

I am writing in response to your letter of the 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2002, addressed to Iman Drammeh regarding the scheduled conference on reparations for Arab-led slavery. She passed it on to me. I am generating this response because as Elise Edwards points out in her article of the 8<sup>th</sup> July 2002 (*People's Will*), "news of the conference came after a recent meeting in New York between Kwesi Kwaa Prah ..., Director of the South African based CASAS (Center for Advanced Studies of African Society) and Iman Drammeh ..., Director of the Drammeh Institute whose organizations networked in preparation for the UN World Conference Against Racism last year." (2001). I am a full partner, not a sleeping partner, in the exercise and must take responsibility for my part of the endeavour. We intend to take the work of the Durban conference, in this respect, further.

I gave the contents of your letter a great deal of thought. Indeed, admittedly, my initial reaction was to agree that maybe we needed to postpone the conference in view of the explosiveness of the situation in the Arab world that has been generated in the US by the Bush Administration for war against Iraq, and the blood-letting which we see daily on television screens between Israelis and Palestinians in the region.

The venue of the conference provoked a pointed question from a friend. "Why is this meeting taking place in the US and not on the continent?" In retrospect, preferably, it would have been more logical to convene this meeting on the continent, but the Diaspora belongs to Africa in as much as Africa belongs to the Diaspora, and in any case, the meeting is intended to feed into the global African movement for reparations for slavery. The centre of gravity of this movement, as things stand today, is in the Diaspora.

In your letter you ask; "are you sure you would like to announce an anti-Arab conference at just the time when the Bush Administration is about to bomb an Arab country (Iraq)? Is there not a risk that your honourable plans would be mistaken for part of the Bush Administration's war propaganda? If we included a panel on the history of slavery in Iraq, the Bush Administration might even subsidize our entire conference. Are we sure this is the right time for such a conference"?

After lengthy reflection, and a round of consultations, I came to the conclusion that it would indeed be injudicious to postpone the conference and would for the umpteenth time subordinate African concerns to extraneous considerations, which have little or no direct bearing on strategically advised and enlightened African interests. I am happy you describe our plans as honourable but, I am profoundly surprised and deeply disconcerted by the fact that you think a conference raising the issue of reparations for Arab-led slavery, past and present, is anti-Arab. Does the demand of reparations for the Atlantic slave trade amount to anti-Europeanism? The case you make is disingenuous. Should Africans in perpetuity be silent about Arab slavery in the past and present, (I repeat, "and present"), for fear that raising the issue would be treated as anti-Arab? I am of the view that most Africans will dispute your position. In fact,

many may consider your standpoint anti-African. The! implication of your argument is that "suffer in silence, for you may offend your masters by protesting". For those who are aware of your Arab antecedents, the fundamental weakness of your argument may most unfortunately, prompt people to suggest that it is on account of your Arab background that you make this obviously flawed and inordinately anti-African suggestion.

In the interview the late Philippe Wamba did with you, (Philippe Wamba. An American African Scholar: An Interview with Prof. Ali Mazrui. [http://www.africana.com/DailyArticles/index\\_20000425.htm](http://www.africana.com/DailyArticles/index_20000425.htm)) the argument you made regarding differences between the Atlantic slavery and Arab slavery of Africans was that: "The Arab slave trade ... now that is a different hurdle. That has to be handled entirely differently, because of the lineage system. Many children of slave mothers become Arabs, they move upwards, you see. So the entire system is different from here. There is biological cooptation into the ruling race, which hardly ever happens in the transatlantic case; so the transatlantic context is much more clearly dichotomous, you know who is descended from slaves and they continue to be disadvantaged. So, if you're going to have a second campaign for reparations from the Arabs, you have to think how to deal with this problem, where there is ... where so many of the people descended from slaves become part of the master race. The OAU has not attempted to do that, in fact it would divide the OAU since it is partly Arab anyhow. So we'll do one battle at a time." What you are saying here is that Arab slavery of Africans was not as tragic and as dehumanizing of Africans as the Atlantic slave system was. Who decided that Africans wanted "biological cooptation into the ruling race" or African "slaves become part of the master race"? In whose interest was all this social engineering conducted? Your language chafes and rubs rather badly, with uncomfortable and ghoulish reminders of some ideologues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many will prefer to forget. I am well aware of the fact that "many children of slave mothers become Arabs", but that does not make Arab slavery better, with castration, eunuchs and all. Indeed, we know only too well from the example of the Sudan and parts of the Afro-Arab borderlands that oftentimes, the "coopted" Arabs are more vicious towards Africans than those who coopted them. Is the Arabization of Africans a "move upwards"?

Arab slavery of Africans, unfortunately, continues to the present day, and every day it continues, is a day too long. Africans cannot wait for other people's problems to be resolved before our problems are resolved. We have waited too long. When we ask for reparations, we are not asking for revenge. We are not asking for retribution. We are not even in the first instance asking for monetary returns. We are asking for, firstly, acknowledgement of the barbarities wreaked on African people by Arabs. We are asking for open and public apologies for past and continuing wrongs. We are asking for the trade in Africans to stop. To stop immediately. If by asking for our freedom and the acknowledgement of centuries of dehumanization some accuse us of being anti those you describe as the master race, then unfortunately some of us will say you are holding brief for the constituency you defend. I am not anti-anybody. I am pro-African. To love others, I must first love and value my own ! humanity. Anybody who hates a people and stereotypes them is in fact anti-human and a fascist. Two million Africans have lost their lives in the Southern Sudan since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Civil War commenced in 1983. Sudanese Africans are currently being sold. Must we postpone saying that this must stop?

I for one, will have no truck with the war-mongers in the USA baying for the blood of Saddam Hussein. I am not convinced that there are grounds for going to attack Iraq with the inevitable and consequent killing of hapless humanity. Fortunately, we see that there are increasingly many Americans who do not want war. I am repeatedly shocked and deeply pained by the effects of Israeli occupation of Palestine. The pictures of stone-throwing children having to vent their anger against the iron and brutality of Israeli armour is cruelly pathetic. Israeli oppression of Palestinians is morally untenable. But so also is the suicide bombing of innocent Israelis. Bombing innocent Israeli citizens does not invest moral superiority. That is equally indefensible. I am sure I speak for many, when I say that peace is long over-due. Peace will come, we hope, sooner rather than later. It is sad to see people who have within the last century seen so much pain and suffering at the hands of Hitlerian brutes, in turn become so callous about the suffering of others.

The ideal of *el wantan el arabi*, the emergence, consolidation and unity of the Arab nation is, as I have on many occasions said, a noble ideal which for as long as it is democratically pursued must be supported by all democrats. But, the same is true for our wish for African unity, based not on crude and simplistic geographical definitions which end up logically excluding the African Diaspora, but unity based on Africans as historical and cultural products.

The OAU/AU, you are right, is partly Arab. True enough. The OAU/AU is a geographical organisation. It is a regional body. It does not define Africans as historical and cultural entities. It is more like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Organisation of American States (OAS) than China or the European Union (EU). The Arab League defines Arabs as a historical and cultural group, and today, whatever its weaknesses it represents the most strongly articulated expression of Arabism in the institutional lives of Arabs as a collectivity. I think ultimately Africans also need a similar organisation.

You say the demand for reparations for Arab-led slavery will split the OAU/AU. If it does, then the OAU/AU has historically proven to be unable to see through greater freedom, emancipation and unity for Africans in our times. We hope this does not happen, but we cannot, because of fear for this, postpone and defer a dream for freedom, unity and development. We cannot acquiesce in our bondage in order to nurse the sensibilities of our bondsmen. There we seriously part ways.

What I call *continentalism* is the bane of Pan-Africanism. The geographical definition of Africans simply means that everybody in Africa is an African, even where some of such people insist they are not Africans. Everybody becomes an African, and therefore nobody is an African. The dialectic takes its course. *Continentalism* means those who are not on the continent are not Africans, therefore, the Diaspora is not African, (quod erat demonstrandum). This is the sort of bizarre direction *continentalism* logically takes us. Equally unhelpful is the crude colour-based definition. Because most Africans are black does not mean that all Africans are blacks, or that all blacks are Africans.

We shall go forward with our meeting and will make sure that we are as considered, morally upright, humane and open-minded as democrats and progressives should be. We shall not flinch from calling a spade a spade even if this makes some people

uncomfortable. Some time ago, I pointed out that "I think it is useful to remember that, Africans both on the continent and in the Diaspora, are capable of expressing themselves and speaking for themselves and must be given platforms and a chance to do so in all instances where issues affecting them are concerned. I hope my short note helps you to understand that it is possible to be in favour of the Arab cause . . . , and at the same time, oppose Arab racism against Africans in the Afro-Arab Borderlands."

*Kwesi Kwaa Prah*

*Cape Town*

*10/10/02*