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Widening the reparations debate

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ABSTRACT
The debate on reparations for slavery has entered the mainstream international discourse. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in October 2024 acknowledged the moral imperative to address the historical injustices of trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and associated atrocities. However, these concerns are narrowly focused on claims against a limited number of Western nations. This article argues that such a focus is historically incomplete and morally constrained. Slavery was – and in some cases still is – a far broader phenomenon, involving African, Arab, Ottoman, Indian and other non-European actors over the course of at least 5,000 years.

KEYWORDS
African slavery; European slavery; Arab slavery; Ottoman slavery; Indian slavery

Introduction

The debate on reparations for slavery has entered mainstream international discourse, with the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa in October 2024 acknowledging the moral imperative to address the historical injustices of trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and associated atrocities. However, despite the gathering momentum around reparatory justice, this conversation is narrowly focused on claims against a limited number of Western nations, chiefly those involved in the trans-Atlantic trade. This article argues that such a focus is historically incomplete and morally constrained. Slavery was – and in some cases still is – a far broader phenomenon, involving African, Arab, Ottoman, Indian and other non-European actors over the course of at least 5,000 years.

This article does not rely on original primary research. Rather, it draws on the extensive secondary literature, recent scholarly conferences, and official policy statements to offer a synthesised perspective on the global history of African enslavement. The purpose is not to identify a lacuna in existing academic knowledge, but to widen the scope of the reparations debate. Specifically, it suggests that reparations discussions should expand beyond Western culpability to include Arab, Turkish, Indian and African participation in slavery, and to confront the urgent reality of contemporary chattel slavery in Africa.

The article is structured in three parts. First, it surveys current reparations claims and the states or institutions they target. Second, it contextualises these claims within the broader, more inclusive historical landscape of African enslavement. Finally, it addresses the critical, under-discussed issue of present-day slavery on the African continent and

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recommends alternative paths forward for reparatory justice that are more realistic and potentially more consequential.

Current reparations claims

The question of reparations for slavery is firmly on the international agenda. It was, for example, discussed at the Commonwealth summit in Samoa in October 2024. The Commonwealth Heads of Government communique noted:

> . . . calls for discussions on reparatory justice with regard to the trans-Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans and chattel enslavement and recognising the importance of this matter to member states of the Commonwealth, the majority of which share common historical experiences in relation to this abhorrent trade, chattel enslavement, the debilitation and dispossession of Indigenous People, indentureship, colonialism, blackbirding and their enduring effects, agreed that the time has come for a meaningful, truthful and respectful conversation towards forging a common future based on equity.[1]

The question was raised despite the apparent reluctance of the British delegation.[2]

> UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, who is attending the summit, said he wanted to discuss current challenges, especially climate change, rather than issues of the past . . . 'That's where I'm going to put my focus - rather than what will end up being very, very long endless discussions about reparations', he said. 'Of course, slavery is abhorrent to everybody; the trade and the practice, there's no question about that. But I think from my point of view . . . I'd rather roll up my sleeves and work. . . on the current future-facing challenges'.[3]

The United States has faced similar calls. Some communities are already acting.[4] However, these are small scale and local, nowhere near the reparations being called for. A group of academics calculated that these payments could be between US$12 billion and an eye-watering US$16 quadrillion (Craemer et al., 2020). Others, using different methodologies, have put the figure at US$100 trillion to US$131 trillion.[5]

The French state has faced similar demands. In 2005, the Mouvement International pour les Réparations of Martinique (MIR)[6] and the Conseil mondial de la diaspora panafricaine (CMDP) sued the French state for damages. In 2017, the MIR Guadeloupe and the Comité International des Peuples Noirs filed a similar lawsuit.[7] These legal actions followed the French state's decision in 2001 to become the first in the world to recognise slavery and the slave trade as 'crimes against humanity' with the Taubira Law.[8] The Court of Cassation, France's highest court of appeal, rejected the reparations claim in July 2023.[9]

Reparations have been called for by the Caribbean community of nations, brought together in CARICOM, who lodged a claim for reparations from Spain, Great Britain, Netherlands, France and Portugal at the United Nations in 2013.[10] The claims movement has been led by Sir Hilary Beckles, vice chancellor of the University of the West Indies, who was appointed to chair the CARICOM commission. His book *Britain's Black Debt: Reparations for Caribbean Slavery and Native Genocide* is used by CARICOM as a reference guide (Beckles, 2013). The African Union supported the drive for reparations from the West. It declared 2025 the year of reparations, with the theme: 'Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations'.[11]

Who enslaved whom?

That slavery was, and continues to be, one of the worst practices ever undertaken by mankind requires no further discussion. What is less generally recognised is the scope and longevity of African enslavement. The earliest evidence is to be found on the Nile. Egyptians sailed southwards taking captives as they conquered new territories. 'The first evidence was carved in stone in 2900 BCE at the second cataract depicting a boat on the Nile packed with Nubian captives for enslavement in Egypt', wrote Robert Collins (Collins, 2006, p. 326). Etched onto the rock is an image of a Nubian chief bound to the prow of an Egyptian ship, being carried off to slavery with his followers. Nor was Egypt alone: scholars have pointed out that Ethiopian slavery can be traced through the nation's earliest records. Richard Pankhurst, among the most eminent Ethiopian historians, provided this summary.

> Warfare, which in the Ethiopian region dates back to the dawn of history, led to the capture of slaves of many ethnic groups. A significant proportion of the men, women and children thus seized were taken, however, from the less powerful communities of the periphery of the state, notably from what is now the borderlands of the Sudan, from peoples who, being in many cases culturally distinct, were regarded as morally easier to enslave than other inhabitants of the area. (Pankhurst, 1977, p. 1)

Drawing on a variety of sources, it has been possible to provide a rough estimate of the numbers involved over a portion of this history. These figures are from reputable sources but are of course open to challenge. Measuring slavery is notoriously difficult: the information is partial and fragmentary. Beyond the Trans-Atlantic trade there is still a huge amount of work to do. Even in the Atlantic there are problems with the figures. For example, should one use the number of men and women who were embarked on ships, or the numbers who disembarked at their destination? The issue is further complicated by the fact that the numbers who embarked are lower than the numbers of slaves captured, but who died or escaped before being sold by African elites to European slave traders.

David Eltis and David Richardson, in their highly regarded *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*, show that in the period 1501–1867, 12,521,000 embarked but only 10,703,000 disembarked. Even here, after decades of research, there is a substantial degree of uncertainty, with the authors accepting that between 18% and 19% are estimates (Eltis & Richardson, 2010, Map 11, pp. 18–19). All these figures should therefore be treated ball-park numbers that give an indication of scale and nothing more. With these caveats in mind, this table provides a rough guide to the numbers involved and where the men and women were enslaved in particular periods.[12]

The information suggests that the total probably exceeds 40 million – especially since the data used in the table above begins in 650 and ends in 1900. Nor are the totals for Indian enslavement of Africans included, since they require further investigation. Yet we know that enslavement dates from at least 2,900 BCE and that it continues to the present day. As recently as 2023 the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery reported that 200,000 Malians were living 'under the direct control of their "masters"'. These figures are not included, nor are the slaves held in the Indian subcontinent, since the numbers

Table 1. African slavery from 650 CE to 1900.

Region	Date	Numbers
Indian Ocean	800 to 1900	12,580,000
Trans-Atlantic	1501 to 1867	12,522,570
Trans-Sahara	650 to 1800	9,387,000
Sokoto	1860	4,000,000
Ottoman	1800 to 1900	1,300,000
Barbary Corsairs	1530 – 1869	1,000,000
Iran	19th century	147,000
Ethiopia	1935	300,000
Total		41,236,570

involves appear to vary so substantially. A total figure nearer 50 million may therefore be no exaggeration.[13]

Academics who calculated the Trans-Atlantic trade rather differently indicated that between 1676 and 1850 there were 10,862,700 people were transported across the seas, with Britain responsible for 3,102,000 of the total number (Berg & Hudson, 2023, Table 1, p. 14). The authors point out that the Portuguese were the largest traders across the Atlantic, taking 4,971,000 slaves. British can indeed be held responsible for the slaves it trafficked, but the nation was a smaller actor than is sometimes assumed, especially when seen against the much longer history of enslavement.

If the Egyptians were among the earliest nations to be known to engage in the slave trade on the continent, they are not alone. Indigenous slavery is found across Africa continent, from Cairo to the Cape, with evidence that the BaTswana captured slaves from among the Khoisan (Morton, 1994).[14] This is frequently obscured by the concentration on the Trans-Atlantic trade, an obsession that has been termed the 'tyranny of the Atlantic' (R. B. Allen, 2009, p. 873).

Slavery by other powers

Ethiopia illustrates the scope of the trade well beyond its shores. Its rulers did not just use men and women in their courts and palaces but also sold them as slaves across the Red Sea to Arabia (Bonacci & Mecklenburg, 2017, p. 5). Traders took Ethiopian captives to India. Some may have been among the African slaves imported by China (Jákl, 2017, p. 335; Wyatt, 2010, p. 56). As early as the 14th century the great Berber explorer, Ibn Battuta, witnessed thousands of Ethiopians during his travels across the Indian sub-continent and Ceylon (Gibb, 1929; Pearson, 2003). Some Ethiopians, like Ambar Malik, rose to become among the most illustrious military leaders of the 17th century, resisting two Mogul emperors and whose feats were acknowledged after his death in 1626 by one of his former enemies. In his official memoir, Emperor Jahangir declared that although a slave, Ambar was nonetheless

> an able man. In warfare, in command, in sound judgement, and in administration he had no rival or equal … He maintained his exalted position to the end of his life and closed his career in honour. History records no other instance of an Abyssinian slave arriving at such eminence. (Eaton, 2006, p. 127)

The Africans enslaved in India – or Sidis, as they became known – were mostly male who had to marry local women. They were gradually absorbed into the local populations.

Over time, the communities, which had once been so significant, gradually faded from memory, although they did not vanish. The Sidis ruled two Indian states: Janjira, in today's Maharashtra, from 1618 and Sachin, in modern day's Gujarat from 1791 (Jayasuriya, 2015, p. 9). Both were absorbed into India at independence in 1947. Janjira was a base for African traders and for free African migrants, with the democratic system of electing Sidi leaders. As late as 1851 the traveller, Richard Burton, commented on the strong African character of the people of the Sind (Finneran, 2011, p. 239) How many slaves there were on the Indian sub-continent is impossible to say. Estimates range from 6 to 8 million (the 1840 World Anti-Slave Convention figure) to 16 million (Sir Bartle Frere, a figure that included all the British protectorates and princely states) (Temperley, 2000, p. 177). Perhaps 100,000 Indians continue to identify themselves as Sidis to this day, living in Gujarat, Karnataka and other states – a tiny fraction of India's 1.2 billion people (Jayasuriya, p.11). Elderly Sidis continued to speak Kiswahili into the 20th century, while the musical instruments and drumming characteristic of Swahili culture can still be found in India. A further 150,000 Sidis live in neighbouring Pakistan, where they face discrimination and racism (Saif, n.d.).

Indian Ocean slavery was a trade in which both Arabs and Europeans participated, with both exporting approximately the same number of slaves from eastern Africa once the Europeans began trading in the Indian Ocean in the 16th century. Between 1500 and 1873 it has been calculated that Arabs, Muslims and Swahilis exported around 937,000 Africans while the Europeans exported between 755,500 and 1,156,000 slaves (R. Allen, 2014, Table 1, p. 24). Oman was a major Indian Ocean slaving state before the Portuguese rounded the Cape in 1497. It came to dominate the trade, moving the Sultanate from Muscat to Zanzibar to capitalise on slaves, ivory and cloves. They were only finally dissuaded from the practice in Zanzibar after being threatened with a bombardment by the Royal Navy in 1873 (Howell, 1987, p. 94), and fighting a war with the Belgians for control of the African interior in 1891 (Ewans, 2002; Harms, 2019). Oman only terminated enslavement in its home territory in 1970 (Miers, 2003, pp. 346–347). This was a decade after Saudi Arabia took a similar step (Miers, 2003, pp. 348–349).

On the other side of the African continent, the Sokoto Caliphate (1804–1903) was also a major practitioner of indigenous enslavement, with Fulani primarily taking captives from the Hausa community. The scale was enormous.

> As the history of the Sokoto Caliphate demonstrates, slavery was a byproduct of jihad and an ideology of subordination that subsequently was subjected to reform and ultimately suppression under European colonialism. Slavery was a long-established institution in the Central Sudan before the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate after 1804. Under the Caliphate, however, slavery became even more prevalent, to the extent that it can been argued that slavery was the backbone of this economy and society . . . It is even possible that there were as many slaves in the Sokoto Caliphate in the middle of the nineteenth century as in the United States at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860, when there were 4 million slaves in the United States. Certainly, the Caliphate was one of the largest slave societies in modern history, probably more than there were in Brazil or in all the colonies of the Caribbean at the time, either in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, certainly in excess of 2 million and perhaps more than 4.5 million. (Lovejoy, 2005, pp. 1–3)

These are by no means the only participants in the enslavement of Africans: across the continent there are examples of slavery before, during and after European colonialism.

The Ottoman empire, and its colonies along the North African coast, the Barbary states, were also major participants in the trade. The Ottomans enslaved some 1,167,000 Africans, whom they brought to various parts of their empire, while the Barbary corsairs took at least 1,000,000 Europeans to North Africa. Algiers alone is said to have imported 625,000 Europeans between 1520 and 1830 (Clarence-Smith & Eltis, 2011, p. 153).[15] Once on African shores, unless the Europeans were exceptionally lucky and were ransomed, they became African slaves and were generally treated as cruelly as any other enslaved person. They were worked to death in galleys, sent to work on the fields, or in the home, including the harems of the corsairs. It is important to remember that captives were transported in both directions: to and from Africa. Slaves from Africa were used extensively across Europe, although far fewer than the numbers that were transported to European colonies. Nations such as Portugal, France, Spain and the Netherlands used slaves at home, as well as on their tropical plantations. Slave caravans across the Sahara continued to be received by the Barbary states throughout this period.

Arab reparations

While European nations have begun to confront their past, the same cannot be said of the Arab and Muslim states. The African Union has begun to tackle some of the questions relating to contemporary African slavery. It is difficult to find any similar acknowledgement from the Arab League although the League has 10 African member states, ranging from Mauritania to the Comoros. There also appears to be little appetite in Egypt, Africa's oldest confirmed slaving nation, to discuss its role or responsibility, while the Saudi response has been to close its archives and discourage research (Bsheer, 2020, pp. 20–22). The problem does not just lie with the Saudis and a narrow group of academics. 'There is a rich and rapidly developing historiography in the Western academies on slavery and abolition in the Muslim world. Yet discussion and understanding among Muslims outside these academies remains deeply impoverished and shockingly uninformed', Bernard Freamon found (Freamon, 2013, p. 62). This has not prevented the question of Arab responsibility for enslavement from being raised sporadically. The Caribbean scholar, Shaun Flores, argued that: 'The Arab world owes us reparations as well'.[16]

The most concerted attempt to discuss Arab involvement in the slave trade came at a conference arranged by Professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah, founding director of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. The conference, held in February 2003, concluded with a declaration (Prah, 2005, pp. ix–xi).[17] The statement began by describing the legacy of African slavery as 'one of the most vexatious problem areas in the conscience of the human community. At a time when people of African descent, particularly in the Diaspora, are calling for reparations for the chattel slavery of Africans in the western hemisphere and its effects, Africans on the continent are making similar demands for Ottoman and Arab-led slavery and its outstanding historical and sociological implications.' The declaration continued by remarking that other forms of African slavery were relatively well known, but that:

> Arab-led slavery of Africans continues to be an area of silence and darkness in African and non-African perceptions of African society and history. The painful reality of this history is

> profoundly aggravated by the fact that slavery continues to the present day in the Afro-Arab borderlands, an area that encompasses the broad stretch of Africa running roughly between the 10th and 30th degrees of latitude across the African continent, and particularly in Mauritania and the Sudan. (Prah, 2005, p. xi)

The conference then proceeded to condemn Arab slavery in the strongest terms and to call for the whole subject to be more intensively researched. There was also a call for reparations from the Arab world, while resisting suggestions that this was in any way an anti-Arab position. 'Does the demand of reparations for the Atlantic slave trade amount to anti-Europeanism?' Kwesi Kwaa Prah asked rhetorically (Prah, 2005, p. 4).

If these questions could be posed of the Arab world, how should indigenous slavery be treated? Might Egypt pay reparations to the Nubians and Sudanese? Should the Ethiopian highland elite pay reparations to the people they enslaved in the south and in the periphery of their empire? Where would the line be drawn?

Alternative solutions to real problems

The question of reparations is unquestionably fraught. It has been blocked in the courts in France and is receiving a similarly cold reception in Britain. At the Commonwealth summit in October 2024, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves told the BBC that the UK is 'not going to be paying out' reparations for the transatlantic slave trade. Her comments came as diplomatic sources told the BBC that the Commonwealth heads of government were preparing to begin a 'meaningful conversation' about an issue which could potentially mean the UK owing billions of pounds.[18] Meanwhile, there is little appetite to even broach the question in the Arab or Muslim world. So, what are the alternatives?

Two options suggest themselves. First, that the international community should concentrate its attention on eradicating chattel slavery that is currently to be found in at least five African nations. Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya and Sudan all have tens, if not hundreds of thousands of Africans who can be still classed as slaves in the traditional meaning of the term, even if it has largely been hidden.

> [S]ince the independence of African countries in the 1960s and 1970s, slavery has become largely a subterranean force, no longer legal in most countries but continuing in various contexts, just as slavery has persisted elsewhere in the world. Some countries that include territory in the Sahara, such as Mauritania, Niger, and elsewhere, have been particularly reticent in ending slavery, and when slavery has been suppressed, dependent relationships arising from former servitude have persisted, limiting the access of the descendants of slaves to land and other resources . . . A preoccupation with trans-Atlantic slavery or the African diaspora in the Americas risks losing perspective on the long trajectory of slavery in Africa and indeed the Indian Ocean. (Lovejoy, 2012, p. 283)

The veracity of this has been attested to by the work of Tomoya Okokata, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery.[19] There have been numerous reports on all the countries mentioned above. Libya is a case in point. Africans attempting to reach Europe frequently end up in official detention centres, after having risked everything by crossing the Sahara. There is evidence that the slavery practised in these centres is officially sanctioned (Van Reisen et al., 2023, p. 332). Eritreans held in the Tajoura detention centre, explained

what happened when Libyans came to select the labourers they wanted. Often, they openly referred to the labourers as slaves: 'Every morning when someone comes there, he says: 'We need five "*eubayd*", which means 5 slaves. "I need five slaves". Everybody that is hearing that one, they are feeling angry' (Van Reisen, 2023, p. 644).

The African Union and the Arab League, both of which claim to represent Africa's peoples, could do far more to tackle this question – surely one of the most serious and urgent that the continent faces, rather than diverting attention to reparations for past wrongs.

Secondly, it is incumbent on Europeans and Americas to treat the claims of Africans and members of the African diaspora with greater seriousness. This is not the place to unpick the lasting harm that enslavement inflicted on Africa's peoples, a scar that is to be found wherever its people now reside. Just as others need to address the question, so too does the West. A more open exchange of ideas and imaginative solutions regarding memorialisation and education may prove to be a more productive approach than the logjam produced by escalating financial claims for reparations that are unlikely ever to be met.

Notes

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3. UK will not pay out over slavery, says Reeves, *BBC*, 24 October 2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn01ljdl07xo Accessed 2 April 2025.
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6. https://mirmartinique.com/.
7. https://www.growthinktank.org/en/paying-for-the-past-material-reparations-after-slavery-in-the-french-antilles-since-1998/.
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12. For sources see: Plaut (2025) Forthcoming), *Unbroken Chains: A 5,000 year history of African enslavement*, Hurst Publishers.
13. 'Mali: Ban slavery by law, say top rights experts', *UN News*, 8 May 2023. Accessed 15 October 2024 https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136437 Accessed 2 April 2025.
14. BaTswana slavery is controversial and some question its existence. See the discussion by Morton (1994) *Servitude, slave trading, and slavery in the Kalahari*, in Eldredge, Elizabeth and Morton, Fred (eds.) *Slavery In South Africa: Captive Labour On The Dutch Frontier*, Westview Press, pp. 215–250.
15. Attempting to reach definitive totals is fruitless but anyone wishing to consider this further can read Professor Capp's examination of the calculations. Capp, Bernard (2022) *British Slaves and Barbary Corsairs, 1580–1750*, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 17. See also Davis, Robert C., 'Counting European Slaves on the Barbary Coast', *Past & Present*, No 172, August 2001. Toledano, Ehud, (1982), *The Ottoman Slave Trade and its suppression*, Princeton University Press.
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