

BOOK REVIEW

Another addition to the call for reparative justice

Desmond Davies *reviews a book which argues that there is more to reparations than just money, as the debate on the deleterious effects of the enslavement of Africans and colonisation of their continent continues apace*

Reparations: History, Struggle, Politics and Law,
by Kwesi Pratt Jnr; Pan-African Progressive Front, Accra (2025)

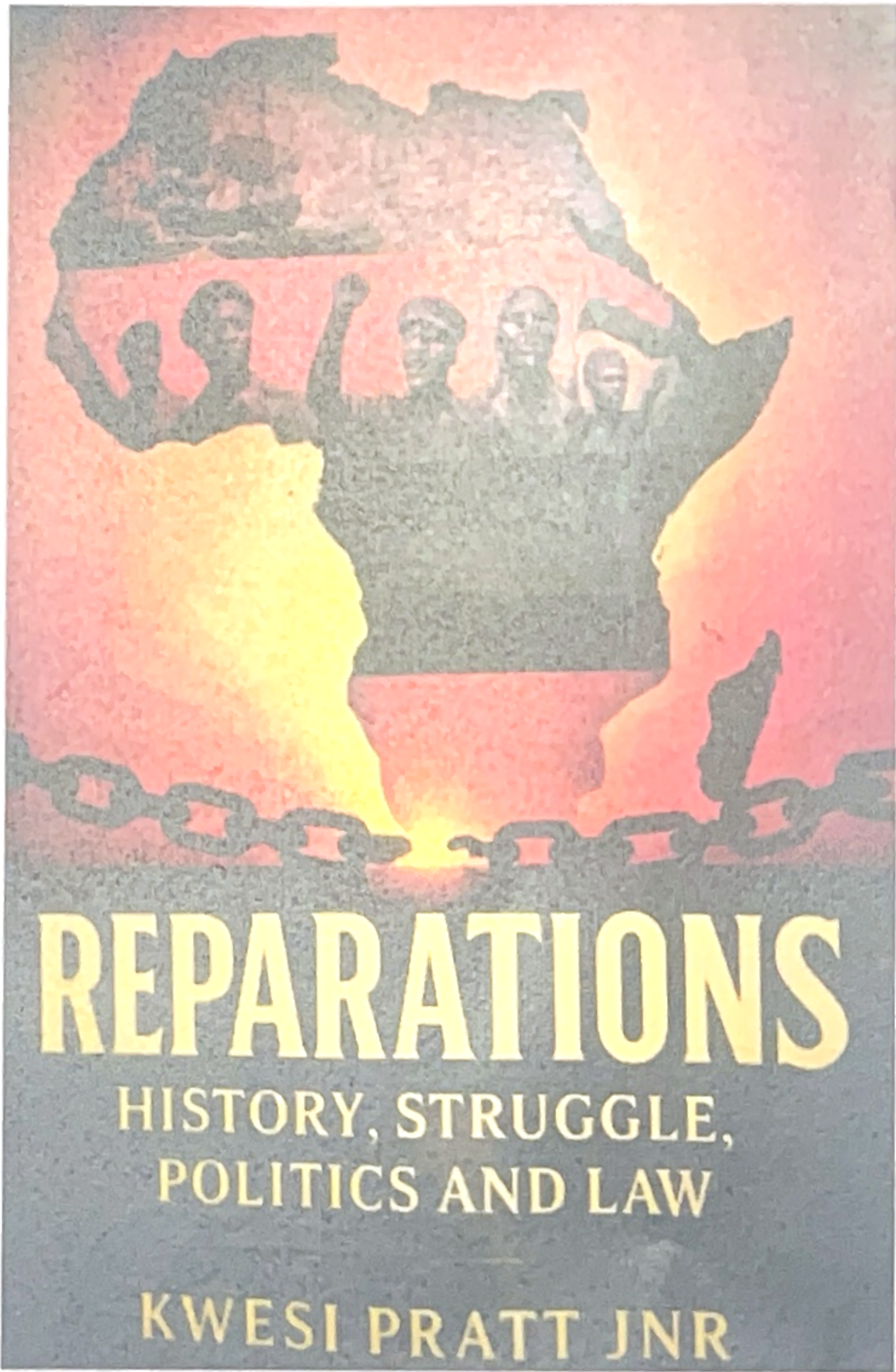
As an avowed pan-Africanist with Marxist theory leanings, Ghanaian author and journalist Kwesi Pratt has added his own take to the robust argument for those who enslaved Africans and colonised their continent to make amends for the centuries of hurt that they caused. He notes that this “legacy... continues to shape [Africa’s] economic systems, political institutions and social hierarchies”.

The call for reparations is not an appeal to guilt

He writes: “The call for reparations is therefore not an appeal to guilt; it is a demand rooted in justice, history and international law.” But, unlike others in the quest for reparations, Pratt does not focus solely on financial compensation.

He argues “reparations are not just about money”, adding: “They are about land, dignity, language, memory and sovereignty. They are about transforming a global system built on theft into one that honours the stolen. And most of all, they are about affirming the agency, worth and future of Africa.”

There lies the rub. Those who feel uncomfortable, when Africans on the continent and Africans in the diaspora bring up



the issue of reparations, tend to argue that financial reparations cannot be quantified after such a long time. But British plantation owners in the Caribbean who were deprived of their slaves were



Pratt describes the Africans who sold enslaved people to Europeans as “middlemen”

compensated by the British government after the abolition of the trade in Africans by an Act of the British parliament in 1833.

So, that is what is fuelling the sentiments for financial reparations. If slave owners can get compensation, so too should the slaves who laboured without any recompense.

For many in the reparations debate, they tend to discount the role of African slave traders and the wealth that they also built. Pratt calls the Africans who sold slaves to Europeans “middlemen”. I think they were active in the ghastly business. They were not on the periphery. The Europeans stayed in the forts and castles built along the coast of West Africa while the Africans went into the interior to bring their human cargoes for the Transatlantic journey.

Elmina Castle in Ghana. Goree Island in Senegal. Bunce Island in Sierra Leone. These were the major hubs for the Transatlantic Slave Trade for over 400 years.

There is thus a need for the descendants of West Africans who sold their people into slavery to at least spiritually atone for the role of their ancestors. Looking back, all of those who were shipped out from West Africa must surely have placed a curse on those who sold them into slavery.

Is it any wonder that West Africa is in so much in disarray today? Until there is spiritual atonement for the role West Africans played in the slave trade, the region will continue to be troubled by the souls of those who died on the journey and those who went through so much anguish in the Americas.

While the financial compensation debate continues, Pratt aptly calls for reparations to become a vision for liberation. Noting that the colonial structures in Africa were all about exploiting the continent rather than developing it, he wants African governments to invest more in their citizens.

But this is nothing new. As he himself points out, since independence African countries have been trying to navigate the colonial structures that they inherited. However, these countries have been hamstrung by the global economic landscape that is skewed in favour of the developed nations.

Therefore, there must be a change of mindset among Africans. Education, as Pratt himself points out, is crucial. He argues that the colonial system has hampered learning in Africa – more so on the historical front.

But after 60 years of independence there should be history being taught in African schools from an African perspective. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s seminal tomes on African history by the acclaimed Ghanaian historian, Professor Adu Boahen, were required reading in schools in West Africa.

He played a major role in the UNESCO-funded 11-volume General History of Africa, a monumental work that took 60 years of collaboration among over 550 historians and specialists. Naturally, Western members of UNESCO were not happy with this project that was backed by Amadou Mahtar Mbow from Senegal, the first African to serve as UNESCO Director General, from 1974 to 1987. They withdrew funding from the organisation.

Pratt’s thoughtful work must now serve as a spur for a similar project on African history funded by the African Union that has belatedly jumped on the reparations bandwagon. And there is no shortage of African historians who can put the needed volumes together through rigorous research.

Ghana could start the ball rolling. Indeed, in his Forward, President John Mahama notes: “The future [the book] imagines is not built on forgetting but on truth-telling, reckoning and the radical possibility of repair.”

This “truth-telling” must now be undertaken from the African perspective.

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