

“WE HEAR YOU ALL...But We Don’t Understand What You Are Saying<sup>1</sup>:

*Personal Reflections On The Joseph Project of Ghana, West Africa  
Summer, 2007*

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***I left my heart -but not my mind-in Ghana.***

As I reflect upon my recent visit to Ghana, I remain ambivalent about The Joseph Project initiative promoted by the Ministry of Tourism and Diaspora Affairs. As part of the overall celebration of Ghana’s fifty years of independence, August was devoted to recognizing Africans of the Diaspora. Events were planned throughout the country that focused upon descendants of Africans during the Atlantic slave trade. According to an official statement from the Minister of Tourism:

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<sup>2</sup> A montage of photos depicting African Americans returning through the door of no return, while Africans onlookers watch and one young pilgrim captures the moment emotionally.

*The Joseph Project is the code name for a series of activities, actions and interactions being spearheaded by Ghana to re-establish the African Nation as a nation of all its peoples, capable of delivering on the promise of God to an African and the African peoples.*

References to verses from the Old Testament of the Bible are interspersed within speeches, press releases, and printed materials. The Ghana Government intentions are to use the year 2007, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the country's independence, to celebrate African excellence and to inaugurate "The Joseph Project" According to the Minister, "Ghana will use the year to bring together, more closely, people in Ghana and brothers and sisters in the Diaspora and establish herself as the true gateway to the Homeland for Africans in the Diaspora.

In addition to the Joseph Project, there were other celebrations recognizing Africans from the Diaspora in Ghana during the same timeframe. Panafest, a biennial festival of the arts was being held simultaneously with the celebration of Emancipation Day. There were several conferences including the International Conference on Slavery held in the country's capital, Accra. In the midst of all of this, the annual Homowo Festival of the Ga people of Accra was also being celebrated without any predicted conflicts or problems. Like Joseph in the Bible, the Ga people remembered their historical plight with famine and rose to "hoot at hunger" and atone for any sins of misunderstanding.

Then there was also the annual meeting of the African Union that represented nations interested in resurrecting Nkrumah's call for a United Africa. From most accounts, it was somewhat a momentous occasion and received mixed reviews from international media coverage. Ironically, the primary supporter of this fresh approach to an old vision was none other than the current President of Ghana, John Agyekum Kufuor. Throughout his presidency, he has been very visible

in promoting Ghana as a place Diaspora Africans can call “home”, again. Throughout the cities and countryside, billboards of Kufuor and Nkrumah give the impression that these relatively distinctively different statesmen would actually have something collective to say to one another about the fifty-year celebration of Ghana’s independence. I would love to have been a mosquito in their office during those conversations!

Then there were the apologies. Apologies for participation in the slave trade were being given all over the world, and by almost everyone who had anything to do with the human cargo industry. Multiple apologies were being given by participating countries; however no “official” apology came from the United States. International governments, churches, professional organizations, village chiefs, industrial tycoons, media celebrities, elementary, secondary, and colleges, even families impacted by gaining or losing family members were apologizing for their historical role in the slave trade. But no American official dared to publicly admit, or repent, for the role the United States played in harboring Africans in this heinous act of involuntary migration. A country that was built from the prowess of captives continues to avoid ownership for its crimes and credits. Even after visits by two presidents to the forts, there still is no apology on record.

However, there were plenty apologies from around the world. Yet, very little focus has been placed upon how Africans living outside of the Continent responded to the apologies. Just what did we think of all this ceremonial repentance? Did anyone want to know how African Americans responded to the apologies? Were the apologies for real or simply a photo or economic opportunity? Lights, cameras, and plenty of action flooded the airwaves, newspapers and magazines. But, what would be the next step? I propose that the next steps involve a series of forgiveness enactments. Perhaps a series of events are in order that would reveal the true nature

of the descendants of those who were captured, and how they accepted their plight of never returning to their homeland. Like Joseph in the Bible, they learned to “make do” with circumstances, and many have done quite well. For many, the ability to purchase a ticket on a plane might appear to be evidence of some modicum of success in their new homeland. However, like Joseph, there is more to this story of returning that goes beyond apologies. There is a real opportunity for returnees to tell their story if there are those who are willing to listen and attempt to understand from a perspective of mutual empathy. Equally important, there are insights that could benefit the Continent that are uniquely a part of the Diaspora experience. These benefits might prevent a re-scramble for Africa by those who see a continuation of the old pre-independence regimes as quite profitable.

So much has happened during these yearlong observances that recognize and commemorate the return of descendants from Africa who left four hundred years ago, more or less. This highly complex issue regarding the return of Diaspora Africans is a difficult one. But it is a necessary task for all of us who reside on either side of the Atlantic Ocean to deal with it because without facing the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation, we cannot build a future together anywhere! As Europe and China both scramble for new territory inside the land and minds of Africa, the return of Joseph is probably better timed than tourism could have ever have realized when it began this initiative. Perhaps, the timing is divine!

As I reflect, I wonder if African Americans are really conscious of their part in the process of forgiveness on both sides of the Atlantic. Are we willing to forgive those we live alongside each day even when they continue to express semblances of aged-old positions of privilege? Are our lens so distorted from imbedded desires for class separation in the guise of gentrification,

computerization, and wealth? Are we so oblivious to the mimicking of white supremacy that when we return to the Continent and come face-to-face with African's own interpretation of post-colonial mentality, we suffer an even greater rigor mortis than that which prompted us to go back in the first place?

Forgiveness is serious business which requires first recognizing the act that requires us to forgive. We must forgive those who continue to capitalize from the free labor of our ancestors. We must forgive those who come to this country today and judge why we will not accept the same jobs that our great-grands and grandparents endured in order for us to have a better opportunity in the future. A return to the same position as our ancestors would indicate a complete submission to a permanent position of servitude. After four hundred years of citizenship in America, that position is unacceptable. Once newcomers have been here for at least three generations and see no progress in the mobility of their descendants, then we can have an equitable conversation. Until then, we invite those who do not know to learn from our history as Africans in America and choose empathy rather than apathy towards us.

For many of us, forgiveness is not something we dwell upon here or abroad. Yet, the Joseph Project suggests that the next step is ours. We must participate in the process of forgiving those who capitalize upon our leaving the Continent. Is that really possible?

This issue of "forgiveness" is equally complex because "who" is forgiving "who"? It could be my on limitations but I have not seen many acts of conscious forgiveness on the part of African Americans. I am talking about that old-fashioned "forgiveness" that we all hear about in Sunday School or during those hour-long worship services at today's mega-churches (or is anyone teaching the art of forgiveness today?). Critically, I am basing my claim of cultural inflexibility

upon observations of some of us who demonstrate behavior to Africa that shows a shortage of tolerance for differences and familiar conveniences.

While I applaud the courage of the Ghana government to take on such a visible effort towards reconciliation, I am also critical of The Joseph Project for many reasons. Twenty million cedis were controversially spent on Ghana's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and a relatively significant portion of that sum was allocated for The Joseph Project. Where did the money go...and who benefited from all the pomp? Did Diaspora Africans gain anything from the millions of dollars that flooded Ghana's tourist market besides a good "feeling of healing"? Did they really "come home" or were they merely a line item within Ghana's tourist revenue of the economy? How were we "marketed" to the diverse members of Ghana's class-conscious society? What were school children learning about any of this? What were the actual experiences of those who traveled so far to find what they could not find at home in America? And was it worth it or could it possibly do additional harm to what is already a very sensitive relationship between us?<sup>3</sup>

Please do not misinterpret my intentions for saying these things. I know all too well the gentle and genuine sweetness of Ghanaians who are probably the kindest, courteous and most gracious people in the world! I don't mean to be harsh about this sensitive issue, but something needs to be said about genuine and sincere repentance for the heinous treatment of Africans towards each other in the past, and even now! When I hear and read some of the scathing ridicule Africans have towards one another today, it sickens me to know that there remains a deep-seated loathing towards ourselves, which is often cloaked whenever we get an opportunity to exploit or capitalize upon one another. Is The Joseph Project a genuine opportunity for healing, or just a

newer vehicle for transporting the same human cargo who happen to return in the belly of a plane instead of a ship?

I was particularly shaken by comments I heard from African Americans as we boarded the plane to return to America. One man was so disgusted by how he felt his African “brothers” had tried to “trick” him by demanding outrageous prices for trinkets, but bent over backwards grinning to accommodate and negotiate whenever a white tourist came near. Another comment I heard was this issue of calling grown men “boys” and that their living dwellings were called “boy’s quarters”. The custom of referring to young men and women as “boys” brought back memories of slavery, Jim Crow, and years of civil suits in America. For many first-time visitors, there appeared to be many relics of by-gone days of slavery and colonialism still deeply imbedded within contemporary Ghanaian customs and lifestyles. For many returning this was difficult to adjust to, even as visitors, let alone as prospective residents.

Then there was the African American leader of a youth group who created such a stir on the departing plane, I wondered if returning to the Motherland had made any impression at all on her. She was not pleased with her seat assignment, so she had the stewardess move everyone around until she got her choice. It was not the circumstances that were so bothersome; it was the tone and inflexibility that caused everyone on board to get drawn into this uncomfortable situation. My response was to just insert my earplugs to my iPod and deal with my own personal emotions regarding this inevitable departure.

It was not until I encountered the same young woman waiting for an open lavatory that it became clear that everyone invited to international travel had different interpretations of etiquette and manners. Trying to be cordial, I asked her about the youth group she was leading. Instead of

providing information about them, her response was all about her and her business. So, I simply let go of the idea of having a conversation with her, and just stood there waiting for the vacant sign to light up on the lavatory door. But, in the midst of our brief conversation, another young lady passed by looking for something. Mistakenly, “miss businesswoman” thought the other woman was trying to get ahead of the line and expressed her disapproval, loudly.

The other woman was puzzled and assured her that she was not interested in going to the bathroom. In the meantime, since I was actually the next in line, I quickly entered and closed the door for some comic relief! I heard “miss businesswoman”, still declaring that the stewardess had no right to touch her during their earlier dilemma...and I simply shook my head in dismay as I thought, “and she is leading a group of our youth?” Was this trip going to become a real-live version of “Soul Plane”??? I shuddered at the thought!

Since my return home, I have continued to reflect upon issues that could be worthy of discussion and further inquiry. For example:

(1) What is really happening to relationships between Africans on both sides of the Atlantic?<sup>4</sup>

(2) What needs to happen to incubate genuine apologies, forgiveness, and reconciliation?<sup>5</sup>

And (3) what continues to provoke mis-communication and mis-education among those with good intentions, good hearts, and a genuine desire to invest in Africa?

**And finally what, if anything, does any of this have to do with the Scriptural story of Joseph?**

As a student of theology, I am concerned with the use, or mis-use, of this very complex story about the life of Joseph from the Bible. As a theme for a highly commercial enterprise, my

concerns also include how an inaccurate interpretation of the story from Genesis might cause even more mis-education about Diaspora Africans as well as the Holy Scriptures. For example, without effort to clarify the nuances within the biblical depiction, one might think that the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers was swift and without challenges and consequences. Therefore, a simplistic reconnection through verbal expressions of apologies and rituals as demonstrated throughout the current Joseph Project sites could ceremoniously overlook the necessity for difficult inquiries that lead to a genuine act of forgiveness.

Premature calls for declarations that all could and should be forgiven without further deliberation, might limit opportunities for real healing between us. Perhaps this was simply naiveté among the planners of The Joseph Project. However, that was not the immediate case on either side within the biblical story. Joseph questioned, tested, and challenged his brothers before he accepted their apology...or repentance. Also, his brothers had suffered years of guilt and loss of familial esteem because of their youthful exploits. All of them suffered from a lack of genuine relationships with their father, Jacob. And, as always, the loss of spiritual peace and relationship with God was felt by all of them. Does any of this sound familiar? Is this relevant to where we descendants today on both sides of the Atlantic stand with one another, with our ancestors, and with God?

In a song performed by Ghana's popular musician Ambolley, he challenges us to return to Africa, "not your White self...but your Black self". He further reprimands those who practice "mental slavery" and are conditioned to be afraid to return to Africa as Africans. However, upon the arrival of many Africans from the Caribbean, America, and Europe there is a shocking revelation that Africans on the Continent appear more like Joseph's brothers during that in-

between time when he was sold, and prior to their family's reunion. There is a gap of time when all of the brothers (and what about the sisters?) were catching hell one way or another! From prison to poverty; from fiascos to famine; the entire family was catching hell...vulnerable and exploitable! Who can overlook Potiphar's wife, or the forgetfulness of the baker? During this in-between time, there was little evidence that reconciliation was even possible within the family. Today, is there a genuine "welcome home" extended to Diaspora Africans beyond the carefully-constructed containments and benefits that tourism allows in order for those who make a living at "hawking" those who return to African shores with money to spend? And what about that money? Are we still in the "between" time?

What is really happening between Africans on both sides of the Atlantic?

Our current dilemma is like making applesauce out of oranges! Those who are fortunate to return are usually coming with complex emotions, and expectations. Many arrive as the "artist" within rather than the "scientist". Diaspora Africans who travel to the Continent are often coming as informed creative people with somewhat romantic notions about what to expect once they reach the Motherland. Diaspora Africans return to Africa as artists, ministers, intellectuals...often searching for answers as well as an escape from the belly of the beast of Babylon...America.

On the other side, Continental Africans often dream of America and Europe as the place to live, mimic, and seek their fortune. Often with myopic focus on what they believe will gain them access to the western ideals of ownership, higher education, and social status, first-generation Africans are highly motivated to succeed in school and professions. Therefore, many young Africans are programmed very early by parental influence to concentrate their energies into the sciences, economics, computer technology, and politics. This is especially apparent among first-

generation Africans in America whose parents are from the Continent. While seeking American citizenship, there is little effort to know more about the America that owes its prosperity to early captives who could possibly be descendants from their very kin. For too many Africans, it is the belief that such disciplines are straight paths to the American Dream, and that the dream of America will eventually lead to a Nirvana lifestyle when they return to Africa.

So what happens when events such as Panafest and other creative outreach events take place in Ghana that celebrate the arts and draw creative people? Who are the attendants?

For many who return, the experience of finally setting foot on African ground rivals any spiritual pilgrimage. However, our soberness was not always shared or revered by others, including the citizens of Ghana. I have watched on-looking locals as they have attempted to gauge just how to approach these visiting “prospects” who, with just one purchase, could make a day in the sun a worthwhile investment for a carver, a toy maker, or bead dealer. In days gone by, local vendors surrounded cars and buses the minute they stopped with hopes of gaining the attention of the passengers. Persistently, they followed all the way to the entrance of the forts (I cannot call them castles...), and waited until you returned with hopes of getting you to buy.

But this time, things were different. In an effort to maintain order and an appearance of respect for the visitors, there were now police around the entrance, and barricades kept the locals at a distance from the parking area. While I found it less stressful to return to my car and driver without the deluge, I also felt a sense of remorse because I knew that someone had been limited in making a profit from their handmade carvings, beads, and paintings. Gone were the days when I might impulsively barter with someone, and even exchange addresses to start a pen-pal chain. Definitely, crowd control had its consequences for everyone.

However, I believe the well-meaning intentions of the Joseph Project's return to these shores were much more complex than tourism could have possibly handled or even imagined. For example, where were the elite or the ruling class beyond designated government officials who appeared for photo opportunities? We saw the masses, but where were the investors and benefactors of this orchestrated tourist trade? Were they in Africa? **Were they even Africans?**

In 1995, I had the honor of interviewing Nana Okofi, co-founder of **One Africa**, a guest house and restaurant complex, located between Cape Coast and Elmina. During that prophetic interview, he expressed a growing concern for the tourist trade that was about to explode along the western coast of Africa. In his interview, he discussed the concentrated effort of non-Africans upon tourism to capitalize on the burgeoning interest of African Americans to return to the places of ancestral tribute. Somewhat as a cottage industry, there were visionaries who were bringing groups to places like Ghana in order to supplement the mis-education that was so prevalent in the United States about African Americans and Africa in general.

Visionaries like Yosef ben-Jocahannan, Asa Hilliard, Anthony Browder, Leonard and Rosalind Jeffries and many others were bringing plane-loads of us across the Atlantic Ocean with the deliberation of reinforcing what the ancestors had been preserving and our DNA was now revealing!

However, there were some who watched this then unregulated industry with a newly-found zeal for capitalism in the name of "tourism". Through the guise of "entrepreneurship", it would appear that an aged-old enterprise was returning with a new coat or "commodity" of many-colors - due to manumission - and the benefactors were not necessarily any different from those days gone by! Tourism was now a new acceptable form of human trafficking, and this new

commodity was better dressed and with pockets of money to spend! But, one still has to ask: **Is this a genuine path towards forgiveness and reconciliation among us?**

**2. What needs to happen to incubate genuine apologies, forgiveness, and reconciliation among Africans, globally?**

A friend born on the continent asked me quite candidly “why was an apology necessary”? My first reaction to this inquiry was one of disbelief that he would ask such a question. Especially since he was married to an African American why didn’t he already know the answer to his own question. Then I recalled meeting his wife; she was definitely not brimming with knowledge about African American history. Her focus was on being as “American” as possible...straightened hair...green-colored contact lens...conversations about the latest diet...and everything about Tupac! But still, the brother had been in the States for over thirty years. For certain, he had come into contact with “someone” with a little knowledge about why the apology was necessary. Or had he been oblivious to it as an issue for all these years because he was also pursuing the “American Dream”?

I have found that quite often we do not get together as peers on either side of the Atlantic. Tourists rarely interact with local folks on mutual terms. Instead, tourists are steered to well-orchestrated sites where everyone has been “programmed” to respond, appropriately. Getting off the pre-determined path is challenging yet can be done with caution. Like Joseph, perhaps healthy suspicion is the only way to pierce through the performance of an apology in order to get to the issue of genuine repentance and forgiveness.

Forgiveness is never an easy act for anyone except the greatest of men and women. We average folks require a great deal of coaxing in order to achieve true forgiveness, as a giver or a receiver.

Forgiveness requires several acts of preparation. One is the need for both parties to have similar information about the reason for forgiveness. What was the act that required forgiveness in the first place? Like any criminal act, there are multiple versions regarding what really happened at the scene of the crime. There are so many versions today of what and why the African Slave Trade existed in the first place. The gentleman sitting next to me on the plane stated that Americans...meaning white Americans...had really received a “bum rap(misplaced blame)” for their role in the slave trade. I asked for a further explanation and he replied that Africans had played as much a role as Americans. After internally assessing just how much I needed to impart in my response I said, “the real crux of the problem is the kind of slavery practiced in America. How heinous was the treatment, and how the truth was institutionally hidden from the descendants of early Africans in Americans.

After a rather pregnant pause, our conversation continued as he described his reason for being in Africa at this time. He had volunteered to go to a village and teach the children. In addition, he also helped build houses and worked alongside much younger men that proved to be a blessing for him by rejuvenating his body, mind and spirit. Back home, he was a professor at a university teaching business management. But since the passing on of his wife, he had time to extend himself beyond his typical life of creature comforts. Our exchanges of opinions were electric, challenging, and respectful. By concentrating on our exchanges we both had found a way to further ignore the antics of the “business woman” who continued to complain.

- 3. What continues to provoke mis-communication and mis-education among those with good intentions, good hearts, and a genuine desire to invest and favorably portray Africa?**

Too often when one thinks of Ghana, one thinks of the Ashanti as if they are the “only” culture group within the country with a history or merit. Granted the popularization of the Akan, which include the Ashanti, have popularized many symbols (e.g. Adinkra) , languages, (e.g. Twi) and heroes of the Ashanti nation within western culture – such as Nana Yaa Asantewa. But there is far more, and many diverse cultures in Ghana with their own uniqueness and contributions to Ghana. However the emphasis upon one culture over others might leave the tourist with the impression that Ghana is homogeneous and that nothing else happens in Ghana unless it comes from Kumasi, the capital of Ashanti territory. On the contrary, there is much more to Ghana and if we Diasporans are the returning “Joseph’s”, shouldn’t we know more about our homeland than one self-contained prescribed version that is crafted within tourism?

I believe a true apology comes from a transparent and contrite heart. Is Ghana ready to open its heart and history to us for a closer examination of what is indeed the motivation behind the apology? As repatriates, is there tolerance for such challenges to traditions, customs and status quo? Or are the new migrant “temps” simply to accept everything without question and find gratitude in simply being allowed to just come home? Will Diasporans ever experience Ghana without first obtaining a conditional visa? And what about “dual citizenship? Will it ever include “we”?

In 1995, I visited Ghana once as a tourist. Since then, I have entered from different segments and from a variety of points of view including kinship, education, religion, and economics. As an artist and anthropologist, I continue to collect materials and experiences that support the importance of aesthetics to the fiber of the Ghanaian society. Along the way, I “adopted” a wonderful family who accepted me with sincerity and open homes and arms. I have been blessed

with brothers, sisters, elders, youngsters, friends, and colleagues who have opened up their homes, hearts, and minds to me without insisting that I become more than I am capable of at this juncture. No demands or expectations, just unconditional acceptance, at least during my presence<sup>1</sup>. In return, I have tried to reveal my true nature, including those unique instincts which have been handed down through generations of cultural conflict and confusion in America. The process of cultural exchange and understanding takes time and patience on both sides.

Mis-communication is avoided when transparent conversations are encouraged among like-minded people. When tourists can openly engage locals with similar backgrounds and experiences into thought-provoking discussions, we will all benefit. When Christians can openly discuss their understanding of Jesus Christ as an African, and the responsibilities that go with this revelation; when men and women can openly discuss the multiple versions of marriage and family that are still practiced throughout the Continent and the Diaspora; when young generations can formulate and implement solutions that are taken seriously by the aging establishment; when all descendants of “African Eve”, no matter where currently residing or cultural identity practices, begin to invest and favorably portray Africa with honourable intentions, good hearts, and genuine desire. Then maybe we will hear each other and begin to understand what each is saying, as a global people.

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<sup>1</sup> A comment made by Amiri Baraka during an interview with Amy Goodman on “Democracy Now” radio program, WPFW-FM, August 27, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Photo of African Americans coming through the Gate of No Return, Cape Coast Fort.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid