



The Year of the Return

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Chiseled on the wall nearing the exit of Elmina Slave Castle in Ghana are these words:

In Everlasting Memory
Of the anguish of our ancestors.
May those who died rest in peace.
May those who return find their roots.
May humanity never again perpetrate
Such injustice against humanity.
We, the living vow to uphold this.

This year, 2019, marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans to Jamestown, Virginia. To mark this painful history, President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana has declared 2019 as The Year of Return and has invited the descendants of the Africans who experienced slavery to take a birthright pilgrimage home to Ghana, the location of 75% of slave dungeons along the west coast of Africa. Invitations to The Year of Return is being marketed as an opportunity for the African diaspora to celebrate and experience the diverse and rich cultures across the country.

Many celebrations and events such as investment forums, summits, concerts and festivals highlighting African arts, technology and culture are underway across the country for the expected half of million Africans in the diaspora, the majority traveling from North Africa, for this yearlong celebration. These celebrations are designed to showcase the best that Ghana and the continent have to offer and encourage the African diaspora to resettle in Ghana and contribute to the development of the African continent. This is keeping with Ghana's long history of providing leadership to pan-Africanism that dates back to winning their independence from British rule on March 6, 1957, and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first Prime Minister and President.

Most, if not all, of The Year of Return tours, will include a visit to at least one of the 40 slave dungeons, also known as slave castles, in the country. Between 1482 and 1786, clusters of castles and forts were erected along the 500 kilometer-long coastline of Ghana between Keta in the East and Beyin in the West. Most

of them were built as military forts or government administrative buildings. These dungeons tours will include the painful history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade that includes the details about how people were captured, brought to the dungeons and packed like cargo on ships heading to the new world. As groups travel through the dungeons, they will hear stories of the inhumane treatment of those captured as they tried to survive on little food and inadequate sanitation. These stories include the rape of women and girls, torture inflicted on those who tried to rebel and escape and the last place their feet treaded on African soil before being forced through “the door of no return.” At the end of the tour, each participant will be invited to remember those who died while being held captive in the dungeon, those who could not make the journey to the new land, those who did and their descendants. The most important part of this closing ritual at the dungeon is the vow to “never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity.”

The Ghanaian government has made a conscious decision to include this part of their painful part in their history in The Year of Return activities. This part of their history, our history, could have easily been a footnote to their all the wonderfully festive activities they have planned. By acknowledging and providing space for people to experience these dungeons, they are strengthening they’re resolved to never again allow such suffering to be inflicted on sisters and brothers under their watch.

As the African diaspora travel to Ghana this year, we are painfully reminded that 40 million people are enslaved worldwide. This is a powerful reminder that we still have a lot of work to do. May we commit and strengthen our resolve “never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity” and work to end this inhumane treatment around the world.

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