

West Africa Review (2000)

ISSN: 1525-4488

WONDERS OF THE AFRICAN CRISIS

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"Wonders of the African World" was a captivating program to watch. I saw it when the BBC spread the broadcast over six weeks in the UK but it was refreshing to watch it again packed into three days on the PBS here the US. I am disappointed that such a program was shown in the UK without a public debate whereas it has not gone unchallenged here in the US. This is probably a reflection of the fact that people of African descent are better organized in the US where they have successfully struggled for so many programs in Black Studies and Pan African Studies compared to the UK where such programs are almost completely non-existent. However, the lack of debate in the UK may be as a result of the disinterested way the BBC spread the broadcast over six weeks, making it more difficult to follow.

Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. used humor to communicate the most delicate issues while providing a critical appraisal of African historical achievements and disasters. It is good to know that such a landmark program is going to be used as an educational resource on Africa. No educational text is ever perfect without room for corrections and improvement or updating, hence the need for new editions every so often. In that connection, the curriculum should address a number of issues that the medium of television could not adequately capture in six hours especially when the people behind the camera and those in charge of scripting and editing do not share the passion of the people watching the program with understandable trepidation.

As a descendant of Africans who survived the slave raids, I feel a close affinity with Professor Gates and all the African Americans who still suffer the psychological pain of the slow healing wounds of slavery. As a young boy, I remember going to live with my mother in her home village for a while. I was surprised to be informed that I should not accept food in the compound of one of my maternal cousins because a person from that branch of the family committed the abomination of selling a person from my mother's branch. The elders explained that such an abomination was not pardonable and that the only way to avoid disaster was by avoiding the ritual of breaking bread with the offender's branch of the family. The fact that this ritual breaking of the tie of blood is very rare in Africa is a direct evidence that it was very rare for Africans to sell their own kind into slavery.

Now that I am in the US, I subconsciously hope that I will meet a descendant of my sold ancestor and I regard African Americans as my brothers, sisters, distant cousins, uncles and aunts in order to console myself. This story should also be told because Professor Gates had a preference for visiting slave trading chiefs and their descendants without emphasizing that Africans are not just descendants of slaves and descendants of slave traders: the majority of Africans are descendants of survivors of the African holocaust, as Bob Marley and the Wailers stated when they sang, 'We are survivors, yes, the black survivors!' In other words, it is misleading to give the impression that it was a case of a choice between selling slaves or being sold as a slave. The majority of our ancestors fought against the

evil and even European historians have paid homage to the heroic bravery of the African resistance in the face of genocidal terrorist technology.

This lesson is important for African American children who should not risk seeing every African as a descendant of slave traders instead of recognizing our common kinship as survivors. Professor Gates should have explored this aspect with the ordinary Africans he met. Instead of using every opportunity to remind everyone that his ancestors were slaves, he should have asked what it felt like for one survivor to meet another. Alternatively, when he met Europeans in Africa, he should have asked them if they felt guilty as the descendants of the European slave traders and whether they understood his psychological pain as one of the descendants of the survivors.

Walter Rodney understood this link in his book, *Groundings with my Brothers*, where he reasoned with poor people in Jamaica that it is wrong to read African history from the perspectives of a few kings and chiefs. He was explaining the fact that he, a black man who was popular among the poor working people, was banned from returning to Jamaica, a predominantly black country, by a government that was run largely by black men but under the influence of what Rodney called "White Power." This was a popularization of the fuller analysis in his doctoral dissertation, . *History of Upper Guinea Coast*, where he theorized the class character of the chiefs who stole and sold poor Africans under the control of European slave traders.

Furthermore, a groundbreaking program such as this should have been a little less touristy and more programmatic than it was. It is difficult to understand the reason behind the joke that wipes and Imodium are essential requirements for travelers in the Third World. Was that product-placement advertisement or simple prejudice? If those products are so essential in Africa, how come they are not staple commodities in Africa. Here, Professor Gates should have asked Africans how they manage to survive without popping those pills and wiping with baby wipes.

I am saying this because my father happens to have been an herbal expert on dysentery and every patient who took his drink of squeezed leaves recovered fully and often faster than those who relied on western medicine. The achievements of Africans are not only in the past but also in the present but we miss them because we are busy searching for the ruins of slave-trading palaces. Gates should have been a little less skeptical about the healing practices that he found in Africa especially since he later said that his first adventure in Africa 20 years earlier was cut short by dysentery.

But even while being a tourist, Gates should have been more skeptical about the narrative of the white guide who told him that monkeys were built into the iconography of the gamblers' paradise in South Africa because, according to the guide, once upon a time, there was a famine and the Africans were saved by the philanthropic monkeys that climbed trees to gather and squeeze fruit juice

into their dying mouths. Poor Africans, they could not be resourceful enough to save themselves from starvation even when the fruits were right above their apparently lazy heads. This episode reminds me of Gates' book, *The Signifying Monkey*, where he was misled to believe that the Yoruba regard monkeys as folk heroes. On the contrary, being called a monkey was one of the most common forms of racist abuse that Africans suffered from colonialists. Anyone who dares try that in Nigeria today risks being forcefully pilloried like a monkey as an African American Professor discovered recently in one of the universities in Yorubaland. Africans had folklore in which monkeys were tricksters or con artists but the fraudsters were more despised than admired.

Gates looked for modern evidence of the continuation of slavery in Africa but he was looking in the wrong places. The fact that a Malian peasant was indentured as a laborer to a nomadic Malian was not the evidence of modern slavery. The evidence lies in the vaults of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank which preside over the on-going enslavement of African people. As in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, rich Africans and dictators are making a killing from the modern slave trade.

The reason why Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Sani Abacha of Nigeria stole the wealth of their own people and stashed away the loot in Europe was not because they were stupid as Gates implied when he asked how Africans could sell their own people. They had selfish interests to protect and as in the case of slavery proper, the majority of Africans are survivors and activists against the modern equivalent. Again, this is a point that Professor Gates could have discovered if he had asked the women selling things in the market about the debt burden instead of trying to prove how African he was by haggling over every miserly price they quoted for him or by joking that he would marry four wives if he became a Muslim.

Moreover, what is to be done about the books 'discovered' in Timbuktu by Professor Gates? Should they be carted away in the direction that our ancestors were sold in the past or should they be preserved where they are and translated so that scholars from Africa and abroad will continue to make pilgrimages to the ancient centers of learning in Africa? My wife, an applied linguist, argues convincingly that fund-raising efforts should be geared towards preserving them at home while making the contents available globally. We now know that Gates raised money to build a place for their conservation in Timbuktu and he should be congratulated on that but if that was not an afterthought, why did he not say so on camera even if only as a proposal?

Instead of agonizing over the evil of the slave trade, we the survivors should be organizing to make sure that it never happens again. As Jimmy Carter said during the launching of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, never again shall we see such atrocities and keep silent. We should raise funds for a similar museum dedicated to the memory of the African Holocaust. Gates should have said a word or two about the campaign for reparation to be paid

to the survivors of the slave trade. We must not think that the slave trade has ended when the wealth produced in Africa is still being transferred whole-sale to Europe and North America for the servicing of dubious debts.

Instead, we should remind the world that Africa is the one owed huge debts that must be paid forever as a life-sentence against Europe and North America. Frantz Fanon was right when he observed in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the fact that Africans built a university hundreds of years before the 'beloved Harvard' of Gates does not mean much to Africans who are starving today. Debt cancellation is never going to be enough, it is time to start paying back the Third Debt to the Third World.

Gates has generously invited his critics to appear for a televised debate and to contribute to an online chat all about his wonderful 'discoveries'. The response to his program is unprecedented but I doubt if he was right to see it as the first time that people of African descent utilized what Gates called the modern talking drum (in an article in *The New York Times*) to spread the forbidden message of resistance. Perhaps, the television space secured by Gates should be taken up by his critics and supporters alike but the space is probably better used for the discussion of matters more pressing to people of African descent.

Surely, the racist criminological crisis facing the African diaspora and the debt crisis strangulating Africa and the African Caribbean are more urgent topics than the comical errors of one brother. At the same time, we should be generous to Gates in our critique for he offered us the opportunity to emphasize a few things that we would have taken for granted. The brother made some errors in his documentary but no one is above mistakes and he remains a brother in spite of the errors. This explains why the tone of my response remains respectful to the brother. We must avoid the "battle royal" of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* where black people, like crabs in a bucket, are forced to entertain the world by pulling each other down.

Citation Format

Agozino, Biko (2000) WONDERS OF THE AFRICAN CRISIS *West Africa Review*: 1, 2.
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