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THE TRAVELOGUE: WONDERS OF THE AFRICAN
WORLD

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My colleague, Garth Myers puts his finger on it. "Wonders of the African World (WAW) is best viewed as a Travelogue." How PBS advertised it, is a different matter. I know I was very upset when I missed the first two episodes, but after seeing the first 30 minutes of the next two, I accepted it for what it was: An African- American in Africa. Perhaps not for the first time. Unlike many self-sponsored pilgrimages and excursions individual African Americans have made to the continent, this was clearly a unique trip back to Africa with a lot of issues to explore and to deal with. Some will maintain that for any African American, a trip to any African country, no matter how often, is an emotional, soul-searching experience.

Moreover, the WAW was a trip with high visibility from its American sponsors and African hosts. Easy and almost limitless access to kings, peasants, professors and illiterates alike was guaranteed. Going places, no matter how remote, how sacred, ancient and fragile, in any part of the continent was no obstacle; pathways were created and doors were generously thrown open, entering was virtually guaranteed (except in a couple of places). Topping it all, this journey was carefully and professionally documented and obviously, the traveler/narrator had a free run of the script. So I sat down to enjoy what I got and learn what I could. Yes, I did learn about several things I did not know before, I was least concerned about what Gates was wearing and glanced over some of the disrespectful or casual attitude of Professor Gates.

Having lived in this country for almost twelve years, I am beginning to understand the contentious, complex and painfully ambiguous relationship Africa and Africans have with many African Americans. I have come to understand some of the contradictory

roles that Africa plays in the identity of African Americans. I have learnt that for most African Americans in Africa, the personal is political is American-centered, and a powerful lens through which the whole continent is viewed. So I was ready to allow some personal indulgences in the series.

However, even as a travelogue, one would expect Professor Gates' commentaries to be better informed as a scholar, even if not as an Africanist. Definitely, given the title, and the reputation of Gates as a scholar, I was expecting some factual presentation, focused research, straightforward analysis even if spiced with some retrospective nostalgia.

I would have loved to hear some concerned comments about the sorry state of the library in Mali. Those ancient books must not be allowed to deteriorate any further (and I hope the community of scholars and sponsors become proactive on the case if nothing is being done already). There were some other instances where I expected the scholar in Prof. Gates to rise to the occasion and balance the personal quest with a critical approach.

Obviously, he had done a lot of research preparing for this trip, and access to the

myriad of texts - literary, critical and historical on Africa by Africans and Westerners could not have been a problem. Moreover, this was not his first journey to the continent. So I was really astounded when Skip Gates came with what I call the Alice Walker line, that Africa is in such a mess today because Africans sold their people off to slavery. Well, if Africa is being punished today for selling its people into slavery, it seems the West is being amply rewarded today for its equally culpable role in the same despicable human traffic. Moreover, who sold who into slavery? Many slave-raiders were later captured and sold into slavery. West Africa is replete with descendants of Africans turned back at sea on slave ships, and freed by Abolitionists. There are records said to exist showing that a number of Africans came to America as indentured servants, but free.

However, the most seriously indicting, actually tragically revealing, aspect of the series for me was not what Professor Gates did, say, or not. It is what we Africans, as educators, politicians, government policy-makers etc have failed to do over these years, in particular since independence. We do not discuss slavery. We do not examine it, we do not educate ourselves. A few of our writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Sembene Ousmane have examined the complicity of African slave-raiders and the implications on family lives even at the peak of the tragic trade. But the ignorance and denial persist. How else can one explain the de Souza descendants pronouncement that he was proud of what his slave-trading ancestor did, to none else but the descendant of one of his victims? To me that was a slap in the face; I did not envy Prof. Gates at that moment. I am yet to be convinced that Mn. de Souza did not realize the significance of his statement.

There is an incredible mountain of ignorance, miseducation, distortion and prejudices that Africans and African Americans need to overcome. We need to be better educated about each other, beyond cliches, slogans and platitudes. For better or for worse, the initiatives have come mostly from African-Americans. "Wonders of the African World" is an instance. African governments and institutions need to wake up fast and revamp the colonial system of education that served only too well the colonial agenda. There have been a few scattered efforts towards this in the last couple of years, more and concerted directions are needed. Interactions between African Americans and Africans take place at diverse levels and are ever increasing; they can only become meaningful when this bogey hurdle of slavery and slave trade is removed. Until then, neither side can get over it.

When we get over the disappointment that "Wonders of the African World" is different from our expectations, I hope we can use it INSTRUCTIVELY as a teaching tool balanced with other relevant tools. After all, that is how we teach, using different textbooks to give a composite picture from our own perspectives.

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