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”WONDERS OF AFRICA”: A EUROCENTRIC EN-
TERPRISE

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I have tried to delay further commentary on the Gates' project until several articles I am writing come out in other venues. However, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's comment greatly disturbed me because of its personal nature toward Ali Mazrui. Like all of us, both have flaws, but it is not Mazrui's project that is under scrutiny here, but Henry Gates.' We all confronted Ali during his time on the video stage. Now let us look carefully at the nature of the negativity that is included in the Gates project. The beautiful African coastline in Ghana is studded with the haunted vestiges of slave fortresses built by European nations over a period of four hundred years. It is not unlike the history of the European Slave Trade in other parts of West Africa, from Mauritania to Angola, where more than six hundred slave ports were constructed by Europeans to support the rape of Africa. If one listens closely to Henry Louis Gates, the entire project of slavery would not have occurred if it had not been for African involvement. Blaming the victim for the predicament of enslavement is neither historically correct nor morally valid.

"The Wonders of Africa" television series sponsored by the BBC and the PBS and hosted by Professor Gates is one more attempt to rewrite the history of slavery. Despite the magnificence of the African landscape and the vitality of its modern cities, Gates finds opportunity almost at every turn to reduce the history of Africa to petty warfare and the history of the enslavement of millions of Africans to African culpability. If Gates were a white traveler in Africa commenting as he did on African society, making jokes about dignitaries, and sowing seeds of divisions between African people, the NAACP and a host of human rights leaders (Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, Soyinka) would have considered his production an insult and an assault on African people. However, because he is black we must call it a travesty. This travesty will set back the intellectual discourse on the African enslavement for fifty years if the narrative is not corrected to show that you cannot reduce the centuries of the Asante Empire, the Dahomey and Yoruba kingdoms to slave raiding in the interest of Europe.

Nowhere in "The Wonders of Africa" do we get the theme of African resistance to the enslavement, when in fact Africans fought, if you take European accounts, more than three hundred battles with European slave raiders and occupiers both in the interior and along the coast of Africa.

There are several disturbing themes that flow from Gates' core argument about slavery that must be confronted head-on. To allow these themes to go unchallenged would set an unacceptable scholarly precedent where misinformation, because it is distributed by the media, passes for truth. I will discuss each theme separately.

First, Gates argues that continental Africans are responsible for enslavement of Africans in the Americas and Caribbean. He marshals opinions from ordinary Africans about African involvement. What is true is that some Africans were collaborators with the Europeans much like some Africans were collaborators

with whites in South Africa. However, we do not blame apartheid on South African blacks and Gates would not claim that because some Jews assisted the Germans that Jews were responsible for the holocaust. Slavery was initiated and maintained by Europeans; Africans were always on the fringes of this monumental catastrophe. No African society depended upon slave labor as a mode of production. Indeed, in any situation where people are seeking to liberate themselves you will have those who side with the oppressor. It is not just a historical reality, it is a current fact.

Secondly, Gates seeks to trivialize the traditional rituals and practices of Africa. He makes snide remarks about African practices of state, medicine, and ornamentation. He would not dare remark on English royal traditions in the same vein. The disrespect shown to the traditional leaders of Africa left an indelible impression of arrogance and haughtiness, perhaps the results of a post-modern disparagement of culture and customs.

Thirdly, "Wonders of Africa" reinforces the stereotypes first created by the European travelers going down the Niger River in their pith helmets that Africa is backward, inadequate, scary, and not a place any African American would want to be. His vehicle breaks down and it is a major production. I have lived in Africa, travelled to the continent more than fifty times and this is not a common experience of African Americans traveling in Africa. Why was this event not edited out of the video since it is not a remarkable fact except if you want to leave an impression of African inefficiency?

How was this project sold to the white producers? Were they told that the video would show how Africans were responsible for our own predicament? The themes covered in the series rest on some disturbing sub-texts such as the undermining of a pan-African sentiment, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, the separation of ancient Egypt from the rest of Africa, the attack on the Swahili language, and the undermining of the movement for African reparations. I see this series as a clear assault on the African and African American narrative of liberation. Much like Keith Richburg's *Out of America*, Gates' "Wonders of Africa" is more about his own story than about Africa. This is seen in an almost obscene assertion of American superiority and the beauty of being Harvard while not once speaking to an African scholar at one of the elite universities on the continent. This is not a benign travelogue despite Gates' flippant commentaries; it is a documentary which mocks African culture, distorts African history, reinforces stereotypes, and imports American racist interpretations to African situations. This is a truly Eurocentric enterprise. How Wole Soyinka could support this series on Africa really escapes me except perhaps he really did not see the series and wrote his intervention as a wish.

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