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THE GATES-MAZRUI CLASH: WHY MAZRUI MAY
HAVE A CASE

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The exchange between the two great scholars has been hugely absorbing. While the US PBS TV series was called "Wonders of the African World," here in the UK the BBC version was entitled "Into Africa" and shown around August 1999. Most people of colour are aware that today's dominant discourse is largely western, the content and form being defined by their scholars and media pundits. We are no more than passive spectators or at most bit players. It was therefore exhilarating to view a series both scripted and narrated by a reputed black scholar, providing fresh insights into African history whereas in most disciplines we have to make do with western representations.

Unfortunately, Professor Mazrui disagreed with Gates' perspective and issued a critique to which Gates responded at length. Gates' friend Soyinka also joined in and flatly rebuked Mazrui for crossing the bounds of academic decorum. This may have provoked Mazrui into launching a second critique (more a scathing attack) in which he accused Gates of black orientalism. At first reading, the attack may seem churlish - as if Mazrui is resenting the success of Gates' series and its positive reception by the western media and academia. But, in my view, Mazrui's crucial point is that Gates has had to pay a heavy price for this acceptance, being constrained from presenting a radical view or seriously challenging western interpretations and prejudices.

In order to engage favourably with and be accepted by the western establishment, Gates had to play by the rules current today: demonize the Muslims and other "extremists" (or at least play down their positive side), don't knock the Jews, go easy on past western misdemeanours. In his critiques, Mazrui (a Muslim) proceeded to show that Gates (Christian) had abided by the rules.

- The series contain little about the Islamic cultural contribution to Africa. Gates had ignored virtually the whole of Arab North Africa. He had misrepresented the Swahili people and preferred to hear the views of a Christian missionary on Muslim atrocities in Zanzibar.

- Earlier Gates had denounced the black American Africanists and Afrocentrists in the columns of the New York Times (an establishment paper),

- Gates did not hide his pro-Jewish bias.

- Worse still, there was an emphasis on the Arab (rather than the white) role in the slave trade. (Interestingly the European missionaries and teachers had done the same in Africa in the colonial days.) Mazrui charges that Gates had "got the white man off the hook for the Atlantic slave trade", thereby jeopardizing the OAU sponsored campaign for reparations in which Mazrui is involved.

Now consider the reaction to Mazrui's own TV documentary *The Africans: a Triple Heritage* (1986) commissioned and largely funded by the BBC. According to Edward Said, here was "an African representing himself and Africa before a western audience whose societies had pillaged and enslaved Africa for several

hundred years.” Mazrui depicted Africa’s history as made up of three strands: the indigenous experience, the Islamic experience and western imperialism.

The western establishment was not pleased. The National Endowment for the Humanities withdrew its financial support. The New York Times attacked the series on three consecutive occasions. Mazrui was accused of exaggerating the evils of western colonialism [for example, talking of numbers killed in the Algerian war of liberation] and was branded an unscrupulous propagandist. Here was an African, says Said, on prime-time TV ”daring to accuse the West... and showing a command of the ‘western’ historical method and political rhetoric.” Mazrui came out as a ”real human being” - contrary to the constructions of imperial ideology. Mazrui erred by being true to the facts as he knew them but he discovered that attempts by non-whites to put forward their own versions of white colonial history will not be favourably received in the institutions of power, indeed will be resisted.

Gates played it safe by not rolling out grisly statistics of colonial atrocities or running down the West. But by the same token, Mazrui felt Gates had thereby compromised his integrity as an independent black scholar and failed to tell the whole story about Africa.

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