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A PRELIMINARY RESPONSE TO ALI MAZRUI'S PRE-
LIMINARY CRITIQUE OF WONDERS OF THE AFRICAN
WORLD

Henry Louis Gates

Only rarely as a scholar does one have the opportunity to discuss one's passion for a subject, the reasons for one's choice of it as one's life's work, and the *raison d'être* for the production of a specific work about it. The extraordinarily energetic reactions to my film series, "Wonders of the African World," provide such an occasion for me to address these issues generally and, more specifically, to respond to questions raised by the distinguished African scholar, Professor Ali Mazrui.

Before I do so, however, let me state frankly that I relish the fact that so very many people academics and non-academics alike have felt moved to write to me and to each other about the series. I am first and last a teacher, and anytime so many people are moved to discuss and debate African history must be seen as a good time, indeed, for our field. We are, after all, scholars, not devotees of a religion or an ideology, and the free exchange of ideas without vilification or name-calling is one of the fundamental aspects of the scholar's calling.

Like so many of my contemporaries in African and African American Studies, I came of age in the early sixties, just as many African countries were gaining their independence. I was ten years old in 1960, that great year of African independence, and for reasons even I do not understand, I busied myself memorizing the names of each African country, its capital, and its leader, pronouncing their names as closely as I could to the way our evening news commentator did on the nightly news.

Enamoured of Africa and keenly curious about socialism, I spent the 1970-1971 academic year living in an Ujamaa village in central Tanzania, where I was trained to deliver general anesthesia at an Anglican Mission Hospital. After an extended time there at Kilimatinde, I moved to Dar es Salaam, where I lived for two months, then hitch-hiked across the Equator, managing to travel from Tanzania through Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and the Congo, by land and by river, from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean without leaving the ground. By the age of 20, I had travelled through nine African countries, saddened only that illness a severe case of dysentery prevented me from fulfilling another dream, which was to cross the Sahara by land.

After graduation from College, where I majored in History, I went to the University of Cambridge where I enrolled in the Faculty of English, under the direction of Wole Soyinka. Much of my passion for African Studies was generated by Soyinka's sublime example, and it is clear to me today that had it not been for our chance encounter, and my deep friendship with a fellow African student, Kwame Anthony Appiah, I would have ended up neither as a professor, nor as a scholar of African or African American Studies.

Soyinka taught me many things, far too many to detail here. But what most struck me about him was his dictum that a fundamental aspect of commitment to a field indeed, to one's people, however broadly that may be defined was the willingness both to praise and to criticize, whenever the occasion called for

one to do so. "Criticism, like charity," Wole would repeat, again and again like a mantra, "starts at home." And so, in the pages of his journal, *Transition*, on whose editorial board I have sat since 1973, Soyinka attacked the excesses of brutal dictators such as Idi Amin, Mobutu, or Sani Abacha, as well as the reluctance of other African and African American intellectuals to do so in public for fear, somehow, of giving comfort to colonialists, racists, or neo-colonialists. Since graduate school, I have taken Soyinka's notion of "tough love" as the ultimate sign of passion and true commitment that a scholar can demonstrate in his devotion to her or his field.

Like many of my contemporaries, I have long been appalled by the penchant of white racists to demean, deny, or denigrate the civilizations that black people have produced on the African continent. The sustained, systematic attempt of European scholars to lift Egypt out of Africa, to whiten its people, and to deny its hybrid culture any influence from sub-Saharan African civilization is one of the great scandals of Europe's attempt to dominate the African continent and to justify the enslavement of tens of millions of its people. I vowed to fight that early on in my career, and as a student produced a 500-page Ph.D. thesis about the racist discourse of Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Jefferson, and Hegel, and their denigration of Africans as a people without reason, and Africa as a "continent without History." "Wonders of the African World" is my attempt to bring into the homes of average Africans, African Americans, Europeans, and Americans, some of the monuments of civilization created by people living in twelve countries on the African continent, delivered in an accessible form.

To do so, I wrote to two dozen scholars in Africa, Europe, and America, inviting them to send me suggestions for the "seven wonders" of the African world. I compiled their suggestions into a list of twenty-four, then grouped these by region. For example, five on my original list the Sahara, the River Niger, the Grand Mosque at Djenne, the Sankore Mosque at Timbuktu, and the Dogon people all reside in Mali. Hence, Mali became a site for one of my programs.

Let me state the obvious: I am a professor of literature, not an historian, an archeologist, or an anthropologist. Accordingly, the Wall-to-Wall Production Company and I consulted with a wide range of scholars to shape my approach to this vast and complex subject, on both the film series and the book that accompanies it. I have attached, at the end of this piece, a list of some of the scholars whom I consulted.

Each draft of the chapters of my book was critiqued several times by other scholars, none more thoroughly than the chapter on the Swahili coast, which was reviewed by Ali Mazrui himself, whose opinion of it, printed on the dust-jacket, reads as follows:

"This is more than a book about Africa. It is a study in black

America's profound ambivalence about our shared ancestral continent. Caught between a distaste for Africa within his own family and his abiding love for and fascination with Africa, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., traverses the continent with a keen eye, a brilliant mind, and an ambivalent heart."

Now, having seen the film series, Professor Mazrui has shared his reactions and concerns, to which I should now like to respond. Let me repeat that I cherish the sort of debates and discussions that his critique has generated, especially given the fact that it has occurred on the Internet. Perhaps this debate will be recalled by our descendants as the first such use of the Internet by scholars in African and African American Studies to air their views. If so, this will have been a signal moment for our field.

Since Professor Mazrui's critique has been so widely disseminated, let me refer to the questions he raises by implication, episode by episode. Perhaps because of his haste to share his initial responses, his critique contains a number of factual errors.

1. I did not attempt to "dis-Africanize ancient Egypt." Rather, I sought to accord ancient Nubia its due recognition. The difference is critical. I hope to deal with the question of the colour of ancient Egyptians in a special one-hour documentary that will feature a wide array of experts. I would hope to invite Maulana Karenga, Molefi Asante, Dr. Ben and Martin Bernal among those to appear on camera. What do I think about this issue? Though not an expert, I suspect that if the average ancient Egyptian had shown up in Mississippi in 1950, they would have been flung into the back of the bus. And that is black enough for me. But the fundamental fact, on which there is no reasonable disagreement, is that Egypt is first and last, an African civilization. (Mazrui mistakenly claims that I am speaking to a European guide at Abu Simbel. I am not. I am speaking to an Egyptian. That's a pretty good example of "dis-Africanizing modern Egypt!")

2. Ali erroneously argues that I failed to consult with Swahili experts, or to put them on camera, or to include Muslims. This is just not true. Ummi Ali Hammid, the descendent of Tippu tip, is a Swahili and a Muslim, and it was she that said: "it was the trend of the time, that was business, purely. You either be a slave or a slaver. You choose the lesser of the two evils. And if you are in a position to be a slaver why should you be a slave?" (I assume that Mazrui is not questioning the fact that thousands of slaves were sold in Zanzibar.) As for the experts we consulted, look at the list below.

3. Asante and Benin. The source of the statement about the slave trade that there would have been no slave trade in these countries without the complicity and collaboration of the kings (and their representatives) in Asante and Dahomey was not me, but Dr. Akosua Perbi, a *Ghanaian historian*. This is indeed

a vexed and painful issue. I know that it was, and remains, a painful issue for me. How I envy my African friends's easy accessibility to their people's languages and cultures! How much I lament all that our ancestors suffered to survive the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow racism and segregation. But don't ask me, a descendant of slaves, to avoid addressing this complex issue, which disturbs so many of us so deeply simply because it is so confusing, so troubling, so anguishing. No one I interviewed thought my questions inappropriate or felt that I wanted to make them feel guilty. I don't believe guilt to be heritable. I merely wanted to bring a dialogue into the open between Africans and African Americans that has long been simmering beneath the surface. We all feel discomfort in discussing the contributory role of African hierarchies in the slave trade. If "Wonders" succeeds in opening this deeply buried matter to sober reflection, then the series will have made an important contribution. Need it be said that to acknowledge that Africans participated in the slave trade along with Europeans is not to exclude the horrible crimes of the latter?

4. Mazrui chides me for interviewing the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church wearing a T-shirt. The shirt bears an image from one of the holiest sites in Ethiopian Christendom. Nevertheless, I myself apologized to the Patriarch on camera for my inability to return to my hotel to change after shooting another scene earlier that morning. He accepted my apology and we moved on.

As for my supposed "sarcasm" "about the authenticity of the Ark," I happen to believe that there is an ancient Ark housed in St. Mary's Church at Axum, and that it most probably is the best candidate for the ark that some claimed housed Moses' Tablets. (Whether or not you believe that Moses went up to the mountain, and God inscribed on two tablets the Ten Commandments is entirely a matter of personal belief.)

Let me put it this way: along the way to Ethiopia I interviewed the Patriarch, Minister Farrakhan, and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Given the belief system that each represents and claims to believe more or less literally, why is it so hard to believe that the Ethiopians possess a holy relic of such antiquity? Why make such a bold claim in the first place unless someone has solid reason to believe it to be true? The Ethiopian government, by the way, has hailed the series "for unveiling so many wonders of Africa and Ethiopia" and for "combating flat, superficial images." "Wonders" is, it concluded, "a wonderful piece of work." (Letter from the Embassy of Ethiopia, Washington, D.C., November 5, 1999).

5. As Mazrui knows, I have never called anyone on the African continent or on any other continent a barbarian: I called the practice of female genital mutilation barbaric, and it is. And until it is eradicated from the African continent, I shall not disguise my opposition to it. No apologies there.

Second, I did not describe the relation between the Bella and the Tuareg as slavery; Mr. Baba, my informant, did. What I said was that the relation between the Bella and the Tuareg was "as close to slavery as I ever want to

get.” And I mean that. I will not do Ali the discourtesy of suggesting that he aimed to defend a relationship of domination based on heredity and skin colour.

6. Ali’s only objection to this episode is that it is a ”tourist travelogue” ”Wonders” is an autobiographical essay, narrated and written by an African American, one who has travelled extensively by land and water from Johannesburg to Cairo, from Zanzibar to Dakar, on over 50 trips to the Continent; The whole series was framed as a travelogue which allowed me to show both the diversity of the vast African continent and the African peoples themselves.

I am proud of ”Wonders of the African World,” and I stand by the mode of film making that it embodies. As I said at the outset, I relish debate and the free exchange of ideas. Ali Mazrui is an admired friend; but in his haste to share his disagreements with me on the Internet, he has accused me of saying several things that I simply did not say.

Yet I think there is a deep difference in attitude between us that underlies Ali’s response to my series. The role of African collaboration in the slave trade (though hardly a major part of my film series) is anguishing to me. He displays no such anguish. While intellectually I know that kingdoms engaged in war and sold their enemy captives to Europeans, and that they did not think of these captives as ”fellow Africans” still I wonder why the King of Dahomey forced the slaves to march around the ”Tree of Forgetfulness” six times, counter-clockwise, so that they would forget those who had enslaved them into the horrors they would face on the Middle Passage and in the New World, so that their souls would not return to Dahomey to haunt the guilty. (Go to the Route des Esclaves in Benin and see the tree yourself.) Does this sound as though those in Africa were unaware of the depth of suffering that New World slavery held? Does it not suggest they felt guilty about it? You decide. But don’t ask me not to wonder what in the world was on these brothers’ minds when they sold other black people to these strange Europeans!

Let me end with a piece of good news. So many people have asked me about the fate of the books at Timbuktu. When I returned from filming in Mali, I secured a grant from the Mellon Foundation to catalogue the manuscripts that we filmed, to construct a building to house them, and ultimately to digitize and translate them. The film series would have been justified, in my opinion, if this accomplishment had been the sole benefit that generated. The Malian government and the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute at Harvard are collaborating jointly on this crucially important project.

I invite all who would care to discuss these ideas further to participate in an online chat that we shall conduct soon on our website, Africana.com. Please check the site for further details.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

For the film series, we consulted, among others, the following scholars:

Our series consultant was Dr David A Anderson, from the African History Department at SOAS.

§The Slave Kingdoms:

We interviewed Dr Akosua Perbi, from the History Department at the University of Ghana, Legon. Her research area is the history of West African indigenous slavery and West African involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

At the research stage, we also consulted Professor John Fynn (a Ghanaian), also from the History Department at University of Ghana.

§Asante

On Asante history we spoke to:

Dr Tom McCaskie, Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham
Professor John Aquandah, authority on early Akan history in Ghana
Prof. Adu Boahen, authority on Asante history. Formerly of University of Ghana at Legon and at Kumasi, now retired.
Professor Mawere Opoku, also at Legon.

Of course, as those who saw the program know, we also interviewed the Oheneba Adusei Poku, son of the late Asantehene, who was quite open about the role of the Asante rulers in the slave trade.

§Benin

We consulted with and interviewed

Dr Joseph Adande, art historian from the Facult des Arts et des Lettres at the University of Benin, Cotonou, who specializes in the history of the kingdom of Dahomey, and the chief consultant to the Royal Palaces of Abomey Museum.

§Swahili:

David Anderson was our principal consultant for the Swahili programme.

Other scholars whom we consulted in person and through their work in the course of our research were:

Dr Farouk Topan, lecturer in Swahili and cultural forms, SOAS (Zanzibari)
Dr Mark Horton, Dept. of Archaeology, University of Bristol (principally Shanga and the archaeology and history of the Lamu area).

§Zanzibar:

We spoke to: Prof. Abdul Sherrif, U. of Dar es Salaam Also principal curator of Dept. Antiquities in Zanzibar, campaigning for the preservation of Old Town

§Nubia:

Dr Ali Osman Saleh, Department of Archaeology, University of Khartoum
Dr Hassan Hussein, Director, Dept of Antiquities, Museum of Khartoum
Dr Salah ad Din, Dept of Antiquities, Museum of Khartoum
Dr Zahi Hawass, Director of Antiquities, Pyramid District, Cairo

␣Holy Land (Ethiopia):

Roderick Grierson and Stuart Munro-Hay
Dr David Phillipson, Dept of Archaeology and Anthropology, Univ. of Cambridge (an archeologist working at Axum)
Dr Richard Pankhurst
Dr Merid Woldearegay Chairman, History Dept., Addis Ababa University
Tsegaye Gabre Nadhin, Poet/playwright/translator
Professor Teddesse Tamrat, Addis Ababa University Press
Dr Abdussamad Ahmad, Director of Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University
Ato Jarra Hailemariam, Head, Centre for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage
CRCCH
Nubre'id of Aksum, (Chief Priest)

␣Timbuktu:

Dr Kevin MacDonald, Institute of Archaeology, UCL
Dr Samuel Sidibe Director, Musee National, Bamako, Mali
Dr Tereba Togola Directeur, Institut des Sciences Humaines, Bamako, Mali
Dr Boubakar Diaby, Chef de la mission culturelle de Djenné (UNESCO)
Dr Timothy Insole (archaeologist), St John's College, Cambridge
Mohammed Dicko, director of Centre Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu
Ali Ould Sidi, Chef de la Mission Culturelle, Timbuktu

␣South Africa/Zimbabwe:

UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE History dept
Dr Gilbert Pwiti
Proof Peter Garlake

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Professor Martin Hall

For the book, I also consulted with the following scholars:

Professor David Anderson (All Segments), School of Oriental Studies University of London
Professor Emmanuel Akyeampong (Ghana and Dahomey), Department of History, Harvard University

Professor Anthony Appiah (Ghana and Dahomey), Department of History, Harvard University

Professor John Hunwick (Mali), Department of History, Northwestern University

Professor Kevin McDonald (Mali), Department of Archeology, University of London

Professor Martin Hall (South African and Zimbabwe), Department of Archeology, University of Capetown

Professor John Middleton (Swahili), Department of History, Yale University

Dr. Roderick Grierson (Ethiopia), Independent Scholar, Author of *The Ark of the Covenant*

Professor Harold Marcus (Ethiopia), Department of History, University of Michigan

Professor Ali Mazrui (Swahili), Department of African Studies, SUNY at Binghamton

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