

West Africa Review (2000)

ISSN: 1525-4488

A PRELIMINARY CRITIQUE OF THE TV SERIES
BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

Ali A. Mazrui

Since I have myself done a television series about Africa, perhaps I should keep quiet about Skip Gates' WONDERS OF THE AFRICAN WORLD especially since I agreed to write a blurb for his companion book. I saw the book as a special "African- American view of Africa." But I had not seen the TV series when I wrote the blurb for the book. In any case Skip is a friend with whom I have profound disagreements.

I believe the TV series is more divisive than the book. The first TV episode sings the glories of ancient Nubia (understandably) but at the expense of dis-Africanizing ancient Egypt. On the evidence of a European guide, Gates allows ancient Egyptians to become racist whites trampling underfoot Blacks from Upper Nile. Are ancient Egyptians no longer Africans?

The second episode of the TV series on the Swahili supremely ignores the scholarly Swahili experts on the Swahili people. He interviews none on camera. Instead Gates decides to confront either carefully chosen or randomly selected members of the Swahili community with racial- questions which were abstracted from survey-forms of North American opinion polls.

The program is obsessed with RACE in American terms. Did the people Gates was interviewing have the remotest idea what he was really talking about? What is more, his translator seems determined to give the worst possible interpretation of what was being said by interviewees in a place like Lamu.

Who is the best authority on Muslim atrocities in Zanzibar? Well, of course a Christian missionary priest in Zanzibar! Gates does not find it necessary to balance the testimony of such a biased witness with anything else. Any journalist worth his salt would have done better than Gates!

I thought that in episode three, which concerned the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Gates would at last regard the West and the white man as relevant actors in the African tragedy. Before seeing the episode I said to a colleague in Ohio that surely Gates could not deal with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade without regarding the West and the white man as crucial! Boy! Was I wrong? Gates manages to make an African to say that without the participation of Africans there would have been no slave trade! How naive about power can we get? Without the involvement of Africans, there would have been no colonialism either. Without the involvement of Africans, there would have been no apartheid. Without the involvement of African Americans, there would have been no segregationist order in the Old South. Without Jewish capital, there would have been less trans-Atlantic slave trade. Why did Gates pick on the Asante (Ashanti) as collaborators in the trans- Atlantic slave-trade and never mention European Jews at all as collaborators in the slave-trade? (Leonard Jeffreys paid a price for involving the Jews in the trade, but will Gates pay a price for involving the Asante?)

I was so afraid that Gates' fourth program would be insulting to Ethiopia that

I was relieved that it was merely disrespectful. I wished he was more politely dressed when he was granted an audience to a major religious leader. I wished he kept his sarcasm about the authenticity of the Covenant in check. I wished he did not make as many snide remarks which trivialized other people's values. And I wished viewers were not kept informed on camera as to how many car breakdowns he had had. Surely he had better footage of African scenes!

His fifth programme on Timbuktu returned to the issue of Africans enslaving each other. Gates seemed incapable of glorifying Africa without demonizing it in the second breath. Mali and Benin, countries of great "ancient" kings, were also countries of "contemporary" slavery. Gates refused to listen when he was told that the new "slave" could disobey his master, and was free to take autonomous employment. Gates was given this information and chose not to pursue it. Was it really a case of slavery? In this fifth episode Gates chose to denounce "the barbarity of female circumcision." And yet the institution had just been mentioned in passing. There was no attempt to introduce the viewer as to why millions of Africans belonged to this culture of female circumcision in the first place. Africans were not, after all, innate barbarians. So why had this tradition survived for so long? The institution was mentioned as a throw-away "play to the Western feminist gallery" (I am myself opposed to female circumcision, but I do not call its practitioners barbarians).

His sixth episode on Southern Africa was to be the least upsetting. Gates did try to capture the glories of pre-colonial Southern Africa and did pose some of the challenges of the post-colonial and post-apartheid eras. But even this sixth program was more of a tourist travelogue than a serious portrayal of a people. It is hard to believe that such a TV series was the product of such a brilliant mind!

These are my first reactions. If I can bear to view the series again, perhaps I should give it a second chance! But I fear that we have been let down badly.

Citation Format

Mazrui, Ali A. (2000) A PRELIMINARY CRITIQUE OF THE TV SERIES BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. *West Africa Review*: 1, 2. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?101.1.2.11>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details