

Wondering about “Wonders of the African World

**Karen J. Cudjoe M.Ed.
Northern Kentucky University
University of Cincinnati
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The “victim-blaming” approach frequently used by Mr. Gates in his “Wonders of the African World” series to explain the decay of various African civilizations was very disturbing. Though it is not clear rather he resorted to this kind of investigation deliberately or because he neglected to read books that provide a sound African perspective is unknown. It was particularly distressing to hear the female professor (Dr. Aku Sue Aperbi) respond to his ludicrous question “If Africans had not sold other Africans to the Europeans there wouldn’t have been a slave trade?” with “I think so.” It is not necessary to “think so” when it is clear that had there not been a demand for slaves there would’ve been no slave trade. However, many scholars have warned us about the preponderance of misinformation that clouds the study of African events past and present (Clarke, 1970; Davidson, 1980; Karenga, 1982; Rodney, 1982; and Williams, 1976). John Henrik Clarke stated “Most people, especially Europeans who created most of the documents on slave trade, write about the subject with the intent to make the victim of slavery feel guilty and to vindicate the perpetrators of the slave trade (Clarke, 1970).

In his book entitled “Slavery and Slave trade Dr. Clarke wrote:

“There is probably more dishonesty related to the interpretation of the subject than any other subject known to man. The African slave trade, like African history, is often written about but rarely understood. This misunderstanding probably grows out of the fact that we nearly always start the study of the African slave trade in the wrong place. The germ, the motive, the rationale for the African slave trade started in the minds of the Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The slave trade could

not have started at all had there been no market for it. The slave trade started when the Europeans began to expand out into the broader world; the market was created by Europeans for Europeans reasons” (Clarke, 1970).

Dr. Clarke gives a strikingly different account compared to that supplied by Professor Aperbi, of the history of the Elmina Castle by stating the following: “In 1482, a small fleet of Portuguese ships sailed down the coast of Africa and established some trading posts. By 1482, they were taking some of the tropical riches out of Africa and also a few slaves they bought who had been prisoners of war captured in some local skirmishes among Africans. By 1482, they had built the fortress of Elmina Castle, the beginning of forts built by Europeans along the coast of West Africa to protect themselves from the Africans when the slave trade was established. In fact, the slave trade did not really get under way until the Europeans had these fortresses built. And while building the forts, with the help of Africans, they were telling the Africans that they had come to deal in honorable trade; and the naïve Africans believed this story. These fortresses actually served as holding stations for the slaves that they were shipping to the New World (Clarke, 1970).

More disturbing than the questions Gates asked were some of the questions that he neglected to ask and events that he neglected to explain such as, “Who were some of the great leaders that fought against slavery and colonization?” What divisive, murderous techniques, tricks, forms of torture and deprivation were used to get African people to participate in African slave trade?” Hundreds of chiefs were often murdered so that Europeans could more easily manipulate and control a leaderless people (Williams, 1976). He certainly could’ve given equal time and attention to the Africans resistance to slavery, and mentioned such notables as Queen Nzinga who is credited with putting up the fiercest resistance to slavery in history (Williams, 1976). All Black Americans are not drug dealers though a portion of our incomes can be attributed to drug

sales as well. Many are inclined to sell and abused drugs due to the oppressive conditions that we confront here in this society. These types of analogies were sorely missing from his report. Moreover, the notable scholar A. Adu Boahen points out there are a number of reasons why some Africans may have been amenable to participating in the trade. First of all, the African system of servitude was very mild and different from that of the European. The dehumanizing form of slavery that included extreme brutality and mutilation, breeding of women, stripping and forbidding one of their cultural practices and total denial of rights was not a part of the African system of servitude (Boahen, 1987; Bingham and Gross, 1982; Clarke, 1970; Rodney, 1982). This included the policy that the slaves and all of their offspring were to be slaves for life. Under the African system of servitude one often wore similar clothes, did similar work, could own other slaves lived in similar housing could possibly marry into the master's family and rise to become the head of the leader of the society (Clarke, 1970, Bingham & Gross, 1982; Rodney, 1982). Further, justification was needed to subject people to slavery under African slavery or indentured servitude. In some instances a person owed a debt and would be released once that debt was paid. Various scholars also point out that African servitude preceded by wars often had the redeeming quality of leading to stronger, united, larger and more affluent nations (Rodney 1982 Sweetman, 1984). The military career of Queen Amina is a good example. She is credited with uniting the Hausaland and Nigeria has since emerged as one of the wealthiest nations in Africa. Many African leaders did not know that these privileges and attributes were unheard of in the European system and how dehumanizing their institutions actually were. As John Henrik Clarke describes the European transition from guests to slave kidnappers was often a gradual process. The following excerpt helps to clarify this point:

“...The first Europeans to visit the west coast of Africa did not have to fight their way in—they came as guests and were treated as guests. Later, they decided to stay as conquerors and slave traders. In order to gain a position strong enough to attain these ambitions, they began to take sides

in African family disputes, very often supplying the family or tribe they favored with arms and using their favorites as slave catchers. A number of African nations went into the slave trade in order to buy guns and other European manufactured items. Others were forced to capture slaves or become slaves” (Clarke, 1970).

This pattern of Europeans arriving in Africa and evolving from guests to traders, to slave traders, to slave kidnappers, to conquering and overthrowing their hosts is reiterated in the writings of some of our best scholars (Boahen, 1987; Clarke, 1970; Davidson, 19--; Williams, 1976). Many scholars concur that the Europeans initially came to Africa because of the enormous wealth and abundance of resources that was reportedly there. They initiated trade in other goods, such as gold, cocoa, minerals, metals and spices before launching the slave trade (Rodney, 1982; Clarke, 1970). It is also disturbing to hear Gates imply that the wealth obtained from slavery was critical to the progression and prominence of their societies. He of how erroneous these myths are as conveyed in the following passage. portrayed Ghanaian’s and Ashanti’s specifically as if their rise to affluence largely depended upon slavery. Walter Rodney gives an illuminating explanation “...it is suggested that certain African kingdoms grew strong economically and politically as a consequence of the trade with Europeans. The greatest of the West African kingdoms, such as Oyo, Benin, Dahomey, and Asante are cited as examples. Oyo and Benin were great long before making contact with Europeans, and while both Dahomey and Asante grew stronger during the period of the European slave trade, the roots of their achievements went back to much earlier years. Furthermore—and this is a major fallacy in the argument of the slave-trade apologists –the fact that a given African state grew politically more powerful at the same time as it engaged in selling captives to Europeans is not automatically to be attributed to the credit of the trade in slaves. A cholera epidemic may kill thousands in a country and yet the population increases. The increase obviously came about in spite of and not because of the cholera. This simple logic escapes those who speak about the European slave

trade benefiting Africa. This is the picture that emerges from a detailed study of Dahomey, for instance, and in the final analysis although Dahomey did its best to expand politically and militarily while still tied to slave trade, that form of economic activity seriously undermined its economic base and left it much worse off (Rodney, 1982).

Fortunately, there are brilliant individuals and resources available. In another excerpt from Rodney's book he further dispels the myth of African affluence based on slavery in general by stating:

“To achieve economic development, one essential condition is to make the maximum use of the country's labor and natural resources. Usually, that demands peaceful conditions, but there have been times in history when social groups have grown stronger by raiding their neighbors for women, cattle and goods, because they then used the “booty” from the raids for the benefit of their own community. Slaving in Africa did not even have that redeeming value. Captives were shipped outside instead of being utilized within any given African community for creating wealth from nature. It was only as an accidental by-product that in some areas Africans who recruited captives for themselves. In any case, slaving prevented the remaining population from effectively engaging in agriculture and industry, and it employed professional slave-hunters and warriors to destroy rather than build. Quite apart from the moral aspect and the immense suffering that is caused, the Europeans slave trade was economically totally irrational from the viewpoint of African development” (Rodney, 1982).

It is not clear why the accounts provided on the television program were so distorted. However, there are superb African and African American scholars available to supply more accurate and logical accounts of historical events. In case of Dr. Aperbi, she may have been subjected, as many of are in white

dominated and funded learning institutions, to some of the misleading documents Dr. Clarke warns about. The language barrier may have prevented the Dahomey chief from fully understanding the magnitude of the questions and he in turn gave such a brief response.

Felix Okoye also made a similar observation. In his book entitled “The American Image of Africa: Myth or Reality” Okoye provides a historical overview of how some of Americas’ leading scholars, at our most prominent institutions, have rejected some of the best, and most well documented accomplishments of African people. In one segment Okoye laments the following:

“What is even more depressing is the fact that one too often discovers that many Americans, who ordinarily would be classified as right-thinking, reasonable and well-informed, tend to lose all sense of reality whenever Africa is the topic of discussion. Nathaniel Weyl, an ethnopsychologist and a self proclaimed authority on the Negro, dismissed the West Sudanic civilizations of Ghana, Mali, Songhay and Kanem- Bornu as “fables palmed off as history.

In another segment he informs us of peculiar opinions held by Dr. Henry Garrett headed the Columbia University’s Psychology Department for sixteen years. Dr. Garrett argued the following:

“Over the past 5,000 years, the history of Black Africa is blank.... The Black African had no written language; no numerals; no calendar or system of measurement. He did not devise a plough or wheel, nor did he domesticate an animal; he built nothing more than a mud hut or thatched stockade. The African had no external trade except in slaves of his own race, in ivory (on the West Coast) in palm oil and mahogany. His system of cartage was the human head. Instead of the legend of the happy savage basking in the shade of a friendly tree, what we find is a miserable

creature wracked by disease, beset by animal and human enemies. The extreme cruelty of the African to his own kind has often been commented upon by travellers” (Okoye, 1971).

What can we expect next from our “leading scholars” Jews blamed for their holocaust and Native Americans blamed for their near genocide? Certainly alternative explanations of African history are in abundance. It is unfortunate that Mr. Gates, the head of the African American Studies Department at Harvard University, either did not reference or chose to ignore some of these sources while attempting to explain significant historical events in Africa.

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