Debunking the Truth Through a Video Documentary: A Case Study of Henry Louis Gates' "Wonders of the African World"

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By Kehbuma Langmia*

INTRODUCTION

The fact that Black people have in the past and continue to endure untold pain and suffering in the mother continent of Africa and in the Diaspora demonstrates that something is wrong and needs to be righted. Henry Louis Gates’ 1999 three-part video documentary series, Wonders of the African World (WAW), funded by BBC and PBS and filmed on the continent of Africa, examined this issue from different perspectives. Professor Gates, a Harvard-based African American scholar, is a renowned intellectual and a cultural critic. Wonders of the African World (WAW) begins with tracing the roots of the ancient Nubians (Blacks in Egypt). He meets with some African Americans in Egypt attempting to trace their own roots as they view the pyramids. They admit that they’ve been misled all along in the United States about their origin, Egypt, not belonging to Africa and the pyramids not having been constructed by Blacks. Pharaohs—they believed—were only Whites, according to the pictures they saw in America.

Through a combination of music, natural sounds, mood, pace, points of view and a variety of camera angle shots, Gates takes the audience through the North, West, East and South of Africa to show how the Black race is perceived by those he interviews. One of the captivating scenarios (his visit to the abandoned Museum in Sudan, University of Timbuktu and the role of Blacks in South Africa) vindicate the misconception by many that the Black people of sub-Saharan Africa have continuously played inferior roles vis-à-vis those of the more superior Arabs and the European colonizers.

In response, this article attempts to answer three questions: 1) How is the relationship between the Black and Arab people portrayed in Wonders of the African World? In other words, what are the salient signs, symbols, and

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nuances used by the author to depict the nature of relationship between Blacks and Arabs. 2) How is the relationship between Africans and African American people portrayed in WAW? That is, what are the techniques used to show the relationship between Africans in the continent and African Americans living within the United States? and 3) How is the relationship between the Western (White) race and people of African descent portrayed in WAW? In other words, what are some of the salient techniques used by the author to show how the White European race interacts with the other races in the movie? To answer these questions, this article uses visual semiotic analysis as a methodological framework and applies Molefi Asante’s Afrocentricity theoretical postulations to explore the various relationships in the documentary. Afrocentricity, according to Asante is:

...a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person...It centers on placing people of African origin in control of their lives and attitudes about the world. This means that we examine every aspect of the dislocation of African people; culture, economics, psychology, health and religion.

... As an intellectual theory, Afrocentricity is the study of the ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than victims. This theory becomes, by virtue of an authentic relationship to the centrality of our own reality, a fundamentally empirical project...it is Africa asserting itself intellectually and psychologically, breaking the bonds of Western domination in the mind as an analogue for breaking those bonds in every other field.1

Lessening the bond of Western domination is the focus of Louis Gates’ documentary. A close reading of this documentary reinvigorates the debate of race and culture dominance in our socio-anthropological discourse. The attempt at combining Afrocentricity with visual semiotics is to ascertain the hidden meanings of Arabs/Blacks; Blacks/Whites and Blacks/Blacks co-relationships in the documentary. How are these relationships viewed? Whose lens should dominate the role played by each race? Who is more believable? Afrocentricity puts Africans in the center as “key players rather than victims”. Understanding this is essential in examining the gamut of interrelated issues unearthed by Louis Gates in his documentary. By combining these two approaches, the ensuing analysis seeks to provide a clue to where we stand in this tri-racial debate.
METHOD

Visual semiotics, a term used by Lev Manovich\(^7\) has different objectives in analyzing visual texts. Manovich, a professor of visual arts in the University of California, San Diego, in 1989 outlined the salient features of this methodology. Visual language, like film, pictures, videos and television, acts like verbal texts. Their similarities lie in the context and culture for which interpretation can be rooted. Unlike the traditional notion of semiotics, expounded by Roland Barthes,\(^3\) that deals chiefly with describing and analyzing the semantics of linguistic elements of a language structure, Manovich believes visual semiotics should begin from what he calls the “units of visual language.” These units can be ascertained from the “pictorial organization” of the images whether static or in motion. Another important element associated with analyzing the visual image, as Manovich points out, is taking into account the symbiotic relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal. Louis Gates in his film *Wonders of the African World* (WAW) links verbal languages in the movie with carefully selected pictorial shots that fortify his argumentation. The only way that the audience can capture this symbiotic relationship is through a profound decoding process that is intricately linked with history, culture and customs of the people of sub-Saharan Africa. Sometimes, his verbal commentaries, judgment and conclusions precede the immediate image projected to the audience. For instance, the crowded ceremony during the baptism scenes in Ethiopia and the wedding scenes in Ghana buttress his earlier assertion of the communal and deep spiritual lives of the people of sub-Saharan Africa seen on the streets, buses and trains that transport him through the continent. Having spent a good part of my adult life in Africa, I can identify with the poverty depicted in his portrayal of dusts, hunger, malnutrition, overcrowding, noise and the indolent eyes of unemployed youths at bus stations. But the emphasis, I think, is not on the physical representation of these negative realities, but rather what forces—past and present—are pushing this on a race that has suffered years of deprivations. The units of visual analysis are the three part series. Part I in the Nubian land of Egypt and Sudan constitutes unit 1, Part II deals with Gates’ experience with Arabs and Africans in Kenya and Ghana respectively while Part III constitutes his views and portrayal of life during and after the Apartheid regime in South Africa. In each of these units, my analysis takes into consideration the nuances of verbal and non-verbal communicative elements with particular emphasis on mood, pace and shot selections in relation to the visual semiotic framework of Manovich. Since the theoretical framework is Afrocentricity, at every analytical plane, Africa will constitute the main ontological departure. By Afrocentric ontology, I am presenting the perspective
of J.M Blaut\textsuperscript{4} that “Eurocentric diffusionism,” a view that clouded our judgement of what is intrinsically indigenous to certain regions of Africa, did not put Africa on the map of history.

A number of scholarly writings show the marginalization of Africa by outsiders as well as insiders. Ukadike\textsuperscript{5} denounced the content of some films made about Africa that sought to consciously present a non-objective picture of the continent. His anger was directed towards Westerners who, more often than not, failed to take other variables into considerations when making films about Africa. On the other hand, a Western filmmaker, Pineau Carol\textsuperscript{6} ("The Africa you never see") called attention to her fellow western film makers who intended to document Africa objectively. According to her, if you don’t love the continent, you will not portray it adequately. Similarly, in an interview with Pedro Pimente on the film he made about Mozambique, Taylor ("interview with Pedro…") stressed the need for those making films about Mozambique to portray the citizens not as illiterates but people who have had a long history of evolution. This actually ties in with the theme of hypocrisy when African talents and artifacts are not given world recognition—like the paintings in the abandoned museum in Sudan—in Gates WAW part I. Illiteracy in Western art and writing does not in any way imply illiteracy in African art and writing. Jeyifo cites some of the comments on Gates’ WAW which he disagrees with:

Books and films on Africa by Africans and African-Americans should serve the interests of Africa, not those of its historic enemies; “Wonders of the African World” does not do that, it grossly distorts African history and traditions, and does so in the service of the enemies of Africa, specifically the Western world, and still more specifically “the White man”\textsuperscript{7}.

Biodun Jeyifo’s comments triggered a barrage of criticisms because what should constitute African interests or African American interest is relative and subjective at best. Rather books and films should represent Africa as is, with extraneous variables that have contributed positively or negatively to the rise and fall of that continent. No one should advocate a ‘rosy’ picture for the continent because it is tantamount to putting dusts into one’s eyes. But no one should irrationally denigrate it either. My analysis of the video examines the cultural significance of some salient themes in the documentary that have placed Africa under the laughing gaze of Western scholars. Some selected scenes, especially in part I, like the displacement of the Nubians to a new land, stripped them of their cultural abode that has defined their character and identity. The pain of displacement as symbolized on the faces of the interviewees of Gates cannot be overlooked. Another author, Ansell, in the
article “Using films in teaching about Africa” urges us to make connections in the film depiction of events and situations in Africa. Any film that is made about Africa should seek to redefine Africa by making the students “construct new images of Africa”. Jude Akudinobi makes similar assertions about African documentary films. It should not be incumbent of the producer/director of African film documentary to conceptualize a theme that must necessarily satisfy the thirst of the Western donor countries. The film maker is in a position to play the middle-of-the-road player so as not to reconstruct history. Akudinobi posits that “more than in the case of fiction, the African filmmaker thus finds himself conditioned to offer images on documentary subjects which, according to European television (the real providers of capital for documentaries) satisfy their audiences’ tastes and expectations”. He goes as far as to cite some African film makers who try to reconstruct the past slave experience. This reconstruction, they believe, will help young Africans to understand the psychological trauma their forbears went through in the hands of the invaders. The purpose should be for them to understand the complex relationship between the mother continent of Africa and its Western counterparts. When Pissarra discusses the impact of the African film documentary “The luggage is still labeled: Blackness in South African art”, he takes the audience to a different dimension: The complex bilateral affinity between White and Black South African post apartheid. The documentary can be summed up as a depiction of the struggle between “Blackness against whiteness”. But Mario Pissarra articulates another vision for the bi-racial relationship to yield more fruit. He thinks that we should “deconstruct blackness instead of seeking to essentialize racial identities”. The South African White elite according to Pissarra is still struggling to maintain the gap. The message of the documentary is that the gap should not only be narrowed, it should cease to exist. By reducing the black person to the level of black piece of art to be sold or displayed does no good to the people of Africa. Africanization of the Black symbol in the form of masks is not a satire, “it means making a greater effort to learn about the arts of this continent, from the earliest times to the present. It means prioritizing learning about African histories and learning African languages”.

The attempt at depicting life in Africa before and during the 50s constituted the subject of some of the films discussed by Rebecca Hodes. According to her, documentary films about Africa prior to 1950 mainly depicted a diminutive African seen as an appendage to the West. The continent of Africa was shown as home for wild life, in fact, a virgin land to be exploited by the technologically advanced Western nations. The people were savages and hunters in urgent need for clean civilization and rescue. In her study, she cited John Marshall’s film, “The hunters” as a prime example. She affirmed that the
film was heavily criticized as an “ethnographic Othering” by Western scholars to denigrate Africa.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

RQ1: How is the relationship between the Black and Arab peoples portrayed in the documentary Wonders of the African World? what in fact are the salient signs, symbols, and nuances used by the author to depict the nature of relationship between Blacks and Arabs in the film?

The Nubian displacement constituted the first discourse fragment or unit in this documentary. The social problem in this segment of WAW is the displacement of the Nubian (Black) people of ancient Africa. Louis Gates started his trip by traveling to discover the land of African ancient civilization in Egypt. He witnessed this himself as he interviewed some surviving Nubians in Gaberswan, South of Egypt. These were the first black Pharaoh’s generation who were chased out of their original abode by the Egyptian government that wanted to construct a dam in their village. As a result of flooding they became displaced. When he met with some of the surviving Nubians, they were afraid to chastise the Egyptian government for building the dams that took away their land. The intention was to obliterate the Nubian (Black) civilization and beauty that had reigned thousands of years ago. They were chased from their original site. They lost their land and culture. “They lost their close relationship with the Nile” (noted Gates interpreter and guide). Survivors, we are told in the film, were barred from speaking negatively about their displacement. They spoke favorably of the Egyptian government for fear of persecution. Through an interpreter and the presence of an armed force, Louis Gates found it difficult to get to the bottom of the problem as stated by ‘Fosea’, one of the survivors. She provided two contradictory responses when asked how she felt about the construction of the dam: “It doesn’t make me angry. The benefits of constructing the dam outweighed the disadvantages,” she said. But those listening around her whispered that she was supposed to speak unfavorably. But she was cautious because there was a policeman with the camera crew sent from Egypt. Now when the policeman disappeared, she changed her story: “Most of the old Nubian folks were crying as they were leaving their original village,” she said, and added that she missed everything they left behind in her original village. The camera panned on a group of Muslim women sitting and listening as Fosea was being interviewed as innocent kids were playing on the dusty ground.

Semiotically, this first visual frame is fraught with painful signs and symbols in the various scenarios of poverty, suffering and pain in Africa. I don’t think it was intentional to emphasize the decrepit nature of their homes but rather an attempt to achieve cinematic realism. Fosea is wearing a black
gown all along and her body is totally covered. This contrasts sharply with the rather Western-style dress with uncovered hair of the female interpreter of Gates who lived in Cairo. Cinematically it shows the contrast of living standards between these two. The later is a liberated modern woman who lives and works in the urban city, Cairo, while the former is non-modern stereotypical Arab woman living in rural Egypt. The twists and turns in the narrative of Fosea are demonstrated through the wry grin and laughter in the eyes and lips of Gates’ interpreter. Fosea, the kids and some of the onlookers are steeped in poverty through the symbolic view of their crowded abode. A similar visual strand is visible in Kush, another ancient Nubian city. This time it is not the Egyptians that are planning to build an electronic dam; it is the Sudanese government. Once more, the Nubians are going to lose their valuable land, they will once again take to the road in search of another sanctuary. In the words of Gates “history is repeating itself”. The question is why? What has the Sudanese government and the Egyptian government to gain in destroying Nubian culture and history? Like Fosea in Gaberswan, Gates interviewed one of the residents who ironically praised the dam construction but hesitates to provide candid answers to questions related to the decimation of a people’s history and treasures. From his nonverbal lip gesture, seen clearly through a close-up shot of the camera, he is disillusioned and, when subconsciously pushed to say something, he admits “What can we do?” The ironic situations of these visual frames indicate that these surviving Nubians are making the best of a bad situation. Their strengths lie in their communal lifestyle as evidenced in the joy and occasional grin on the face of Louis Gates as he mingles with them. The next visual fragments when he travels to Sudan take another new turn. This time, it is the conscious neglect of valuable African monuments and artifacts.

THE TEARS OF MEROE

Henry Louis Gates visited one of the destroyed ancient Nubian city in Sudan, and discovered the land of the Meroe. They were the most influential in the world “controlling vast regions and negotiating treatise,” Gates’ new informant admits. With imposing structures like mud-built Museum having beautiful engravings on the walls, there was every reason to see the past in this video. The pictures, drawings, carving that are portrayed in this segment have meanings that can be stretched to thousands of years back as Gates admits through voice over narration. “For over a thousand years, from ancient Greeks to Rome, Meroe flourished. But we still know very little about it.” In fact, the tone, rhythm and pitch of his voice were all indicative of the sadness he felt. He and his informant go further to note that Meroe was the greatest center for
learning and is the oldest university in Africa dating back to the 6th century B.C. With the pictures of beautiful grafts, design, pyramids etc, the symbol of the ancient city in the heart of the Sahara desert is breathtaking. “Yet we know little about it”. We are constantly being told that Sudan has been torn by civil war, with a government that sponsors terrorism. A 2000 year old college, according to Gates “should have been the great monuments of the world”. But now it is perishing in the middle of the desert with no one to tell its tale. The same can be said about the encounter Gates had with the Italian archeologist who introduced him to another abandoned and dilapidated Kingdom ruled by a certain ‘Pianky’ who was one of the first black Pharaohs. He and many other black Pharaohs were never recognized and respected by the Egyptians. In fact, Gates is informed that “black Pharaoh’s were always under the feet of the Pharaohs,” the archeologist said and, when asked why scholars have declined to give Nubia’s history the place it deserves. she replied, unhesitatingly, “racism”. When Gates finally sees what he set out to uncover i.e. “the black Pharaohs of the Nile,” his hand-held touch light in the film flashes on the black and white pictures of the Pharaohs on the wall, he notes that “For over a hundred years black men and black women were the most powerful rulers in the entire world”. This people were the black Pharaohs of the river Nile.

If the discovery in Meroe wasn’t enough to portray the bleak image of Black Africa that of Kerma, once known as the capital of Nubia, was enough to bring back long forgotten memories. Gates discovered the 4000 years old city had been buried in the sands. He met with a Swiss archeologist who had been working in this region of Sudan for the past thirty years to uncover the buried Nubian city. With the help of local Sudanese people, they dug the sands that were used to bury a vibrant city. Gates meets them and is shown an old bridge that had just emerged from a digging. The archeologist admitted that more and more cities were still to be discovered underneath the mud. His intention was to find out about the past so as to better understand the present. In fact, Gates even confesses in the video:

I began this journey in search of the lost kingdoms of the Nile. To be perfectly honest, I was afraid that the tales of the lost cities and black Pharaohs were only a figment in someone’s imagination. I never dreamed that I’ll actually find pyramids, painted tombs and entire cities. But what makes me sad is that a lot of these could truly disappear before someone really has a chance to understand it.

What will make it disappear is if it is not admitted, whether you are black or white, that black men and black women ruled the world thousands of years ago. The Pharaohs in the Bible are never referred to as Nubians or blacks; no
one will dare say that on the religious pulpit. You risk excommunication.

**INFERIORITY OF BLACKS VIS-À-VIS ARABS**

While visiting the island of Lamu off the coast of Kenya, Louis Gates discovered that the Arabs who settled along the coast of Kenya were descendants of Middle Eastern merchants. They took African black women not as wives but as concubines because being black was considered inferior. A new visual pattern developed. For instance, Gates discovered from an interview with one of the elders of the Arab tribe that it was acceptable for Arabs to keep African women as concubines and bare children with them but never the opposite. In fact, it was considered shameful to identify oneself as African in the Swahili land of Kenya, in the heart of Africa. But the shots that were selected to echo this theme in the documentary were limited to a male’s viewpoint. The men that were interviewed disclosed what it felt like to have an African woman as concubine but there is no African lady to give the women’s viewpoint on the same issue. Africans were willing to identify themselves more as Arabs and not Africans. What also makes this segment intriguing is the fact that Gates learned from another interviewee that while Arabs were able to keep records of their family tree Africans could not. Africans were largely illiterates. The question then arises as to why Africans were illiterates. Was it a conscious decision to remain illiterate or suppression by the Arabs? Another issue that further aggravated the situation of Africans was colonialism. The British who visited the Swahili land after the Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula in the early 19th century gave more privileges to those who claimed to be of Arab descent. This, according to Gates, “deepened racial divisions” between the two cultures. How come two foreign visitors to a strange land made the occupants subservient to them and ashamed of their origin and their skin. This is one of the perplexing discoveries in WAW. As Gates met more and more Arabs and Africans he was comfortable, given warm welcome as he is allowed to take part in African games, jokes, songs and dances.

The inferiority and the continued backwardness of the Sub-Saharan people is similarly echoed through the visual signs and symbols of Mali’s gold and Salt as Gates prepared to visit the historic city of Timbuktu. The extreme close-up camera shot on the earrings of one of the Fulani people of Mali informed the root of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. A big gold ring worth $4000 is worn by a Malian looking rather poverty-stricken. If this gold were to be sold in the West that money can take care of a city’s health, education and shelter. Still on his way to Timbuktu, Gates arrived at another city, Janae, also called ‘the city of knowledge’. The Mosque, which is built out of mud is nothing short of a classic structure that can parallel any western cathedral.
While Gates was having a dialogue with the Imam of the mosque, the camera panned on little kids of about 5-11 years old actively studying Arabic from a wooden scroll made of clay. Gates was told that generations of sub-Saharan Africans from the 14th century have read and studied from that same clay which, in fact, is the modern day Koran. The kids, he was told, could drink from that clay but the words on them would never disappear. By drinking from the clay, they were actually immersing themselves in the knowledge and wisdom pool of the Koran. There is every indication, when Gates faced the camera and addressed the audience of his video, that he had definitely come face-to-face with history especially as he admitted that all along they have been deceived in the West that Africa is peopled with illiterates. For him to discover that there was and still is not a single illiterate person in the city of Janae was a great shock that the entire world needed to know.

Another important theme that emerged as Gates made his way to Timbuktu was that of destitution. The boat that transported him and his crew for a two days non-stop journey to Timbuktu was filled with filth. But within that filth, there was a feeling of resilience, hope and happiness as transmitted through the close-up shots on the faces of sprawling passengers who were crammed in the old boat. Since Gates looked different, he was given the best cabin on the top floor. While there, Gates was comfortable with a large space for him alone. It is here that a sharp contrast between poverty and riches was exposed. As shown through wide angle shots as Gates moved around the boat to meet and greet the passengers, another reality hit him hard: some of the people were transporting an entire home full of relatives and property. This reinforced the theme of destitution in the continent. When he met with the captain who was steering the boat he was told through the French language translation that the boat “must respect the spirits of the river”. What this meant is that they had to move slowly especially as they approached the Sahara. This opened another depiction of the belief system of the Black race in the documentary.

Africans believe in the super natural god as the guidance of the living and protector of the weak in spirit. This seems to be one of the integral parts of the religion, culture and customs of the people of this region. Poverty, misery and helplessness were also shown when Gates finally arrived at Timbuktu and bought a pack of grilled sweet potatoes. As he moved and ate the potatoes, the crowded inhabitants who were curious to meet him were eagerly begging to have a piece of the grilled potatoes. As shocked as Gates was to see this kind of scenario being played before his very eyes, his voice-over narration made it very clear that he saw it differently. These were people not only fighting destitution, but they had been abandoned, neglected and chastised and so the journey to self-empowerment seemed to be miles away.
This is the same situation when he finally visited University of Timbuktu. The pace and mood of the shots indicated sorrow and sadness. The color and dirt shown on this scene was a metaphor of the lives of the African people. The building was constructed with sand and the craft and skill of the builders as seen on the screen is another metaphor of the talents of the African people that has not been properly credited. When Gates and his informants visited some of the neglected buildings of the university they discovered books that were abandoned thousands of years ago. There are other several places in the city where books are archived. These books are shown to Gates as they revealed some of the hidden truths about the black people. He is told that the University of Timbuktu had about 25,000 students around the 16th century and students came from all over West Africa. These students studied Arabic, Mathematics, Astrology etc. He even named one famous black scholar who had written volumes and volumes. What irked Gates was not that these students had the luxury to study under great minds but the fact that while in the United States of America they were told that black people couldn’t read and write. So America was the Treasure Island for them.

The purposeful deceit and prejudice against Black intellectual power was equally dramatized in this documentary as the camera panned slowly on collections of books as old as the 16th century stacked in the libraries in sub-Saharan Africa and in his words “untranslated and unknown.” This situation showed the mental strength of the erstwhile students. This incredible POV shot of an upbeat Louis Gates wearing a white T-shirt with the inscription “Timboctou” using the low camera angle shot of him directly talking to the audience captured the theme of his journey to Timbuktu. The use of the low angle shot symbolized authority. He is elevating the status of the black person who had suffered pains of mischaracterization and subjugation. He said:

I have dreamed about coming to Timbuktu since that day when I heard about it. I see this courtyard surrounded by black men with long gowns and turbans which they received as sign of their degrees when they graduated and each of them carrying books. And the whole place surrounded by books, precisely when the Europeans said that black Africans lacked the intellectual abilities to ever to learn to read and write. This place founded just at the same time like the University of Paris, University of Bologna and Charleston in Prague and 311 years just before my own beloved Harvard. This place was beaming with 25,000 students and scholars gathered from all over West Africa and North Africa and they will come here because this was
the African great center of learning. (Takes a deep breath)
It is enough to make you cry. (Emphasis added)

This sincere submission by Gates especially as he concluded his monologue in the film captured the entire mood of the film.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS II

RQ2: How is the relationship between Africans and African American people portrayed in WAW? That is, what are the techniques used by the author to show the relationship between Africans in the continent and African Americans living outside the continent within the United States?

Africans selling other Africans to slavery is the subject of the next unit in WAW. Louis Gates visited the Elmina beach slave castle and discovered that Africans were the main conspirators in selling other Africans to the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. The brutality he experienced in the rooms and door of no return where captured slaves were housed was a painful heart wrenching experience especially for visiting African Americans who are seen in the video. The tears on their faces and their candid assessment of what took place during the slave trade with Africans selling their children to the white man for the sake of money has been a bitter pill to swallow. If Africans were dispossessed in Egypt and the Swahili land by Arabs, in West Africa it was no longer the question of inferiority of the black man, it was downright spinelessness and wickedness by the kings who preferred money to the life of their own people. This experience of about 500 years ago may still affect the relationship between Africans and African Americans today. His verbal interviews with people still living in Dahomey who remembered what took place was complemented with the visual display of heart wrenching images of war-like brutality in the kingdom of the chiefs who sold their people to slavery and the artful paintings on the walls of the King. Dreadful images of deadly weapons like knives, swords, metals and chains all go to illustrate his point about the brutality and savagery of slave trade in Africa. What also makes this segment of the film gory is the fact that he is shown scattered bones of the dead along the shores of the Atlantic Ocean where slaves were being transported. He is told that some decided to kill themselves rather than submit to the humiliations at sea. Gates does not leave here without making his intentions known that he still found it hard to forgive and forget the horrors of slavery being perpetuated by Africans on fellow Africans. His consolation only came from the new generations of Africans who told him to let bygones be bygones because what the forefathers did to slaves who were transported to the new world was deplorable but they were influenced by miserliness. They were vulnerable to the intricacies of the European invaders who were clever at persuading the
chiefs to give-up their strongest men and women to work for them. He was also consoled in the video during a one-and-one interview with one of his informants who advised him to forgive the forbears so that together there will be peace among all Africans and the returning African Americans.

**THEMATIC ANALYSIS III**

**RQ3:** How is the relationship between the Western (White) race and people of African descent portrayed in WAW? What are some of the salient techniques used by Gates to show how the White European race interacts with the other races in the movie?

Another portrayal of Africa is also seen when Gates moved further south to the city of Mombassa. Mombassa is one of the most visited tourist centers for western visitors. In the hotel where he is living Gates made a candid assessment as he walked down to the beach with white European tourists tanning themselves under the sun. Through a cross angle shot that shows disgust and detachment, he makes this observation:

> You know I have to admit one thing. I never ever get used to coming to resorts in Africa and seeing nothing but “Nsungus” or white people. It just takes me out seeing all these African servants basically kissing the behind of a bunch of European tourists. Basically you never see black tourists from the country or from the upper classes in these kinds of Resorts. I find it deeply disturbing.

While he is making this observation, the detached camera showed the White visitors in a long shot tanning themselves under the sun. His voice narration did not trigger any curiosity from them. They seem disinterested, stressing the theme of loneliness as if he is in a wrong place in Africa.

This painful situation that Gates found himself can be explained from two perspectives. Firstly, as an African American who has suffered the pangs of white racism and other racial bigotry, segregation, lynching, death and other forms of brutality from the majority white community, it is understandable. But from the perspective of a poor African living in the continent and looking for a job to sustain his family, White tourists are the only way out. When they kiss their behind they are handsomely paid unlike their black African brothers who have little to offer. For a continent and a group of people that have suffered centuries of deprivation, subjugation and neglect, this is a way to make ends meet.
The last leg of Gates journey into heart of sub-Saharan Africa is in Southern Africa. All the tour guides that accompanied him whether white or black all echoed the same message: The history of South Africa needs to be rewritten. There are lots and lots of lost ancient cities and the valiant courage of the black people who built them have not been acknowledged. The people of South Africa and Zimbabwe have lived under false historical lessons for centuries. In this video, you could read the facial expressions of sorrow and disgust just on the mere thought that the imperialists deceived the people into believing that their history started in 1652 with the arrival of the Boers in their fatherland. Gates unearths ancient historical data that showed that Africans toiled and moiled thousands and thousands of years to build their cities.

Another portrayal is that even after colonization, especially with the arrival of the British, The South Africans were told, especially during the era of apartheid, to sing “God save the Queen of England” as their national anthem instead of “Sikelela” to honor their own fatherland. As Gates wrapped up his presentation, especially with the visit to Cecil Rhodes grave in Zimbabwe, there was a silent voice that echoed as the guide recalled the song by the people in 1902 while burying him. The song was seeking to appease the spirit of their ancestors to pardon them because they are burying a white man in their land. The racism of Cecil Rhodes and all his heinous crimes especially with the dream of making the British empire stretch from Cape Coast to Cairo in Egypt only goes to demonstrate how mean and animalistic he treated the black people. As the movie ends with the credit rolling, we are transfixed with the silent hope that the entire history of sub-Saharan Africa needs to be rewritten to reflect the truth of what actually took place.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to answer three stated questions. With regards to question one, the findings discussed showed that the Arab race has been privileged over the black race especially as seen in the Nubian lands. The fact that they could not muster enough social, cultural and political might to withstand the overwhelming government forces from Egypt and Sudan that sought to seize their lands or disregard their cultural achievements goes to show that their relationship in the movie is unequal. Similarly, the fact that black women were being used as concubines by Arab men and African men not allowed to marry Arab women also demonstrated marginalization and inequality between the two races. The ancient tombs, crafts, embroidery of Nubian culture have been neglected and ignored. Even if their construction may have been originated from coerced labor, they still merited recognition by the outside world. The discovery by Gates depicted some of the underlying racial problems between whites and blacks in Egypt. An Afrocentric scholar,
conscious of the implications of privileging Eurocentrism from the view point of what J.M Blaut calls “the diffusion of modernization” will certainly gnash his/her teeth with such blatant marginalization. Any work must be judged according to its own cultural and geographical merits.

The second visual segments show how ancient arts in Sudan failed to highlight the achievements of black Pharaohs of the Nile. It also showed neglect and disrespect for the black race. Their educational achievements were disregarded and ignored. Playing the role of the second class citizen characterized the relationship between blacks and Arabs. They are trampled upon, discounted, abused, snubbed and treated with scorn and disdain. They were subjected to ridicule by Arabs and Westerners. The black race has been subjected to scorn because of what the Arabs termed the illiteracy factor fueling the powerlessness of the black person in the movie. What Gates failed to articulate in the movie is the raison d’être of black illiteracy that would provoke such sub-standard treatment from the Arabs. Was it the fault of inadequate traditional education or the lack thereof? Was the University of Timbuktu that used to beam with thousand of African students in the 16th century not effective enough to disseminate the culture of reading, writing and record keeping for the black race? What about the passing of the flame of academic touch to future generations? What went wrong so terribly? Who is at fault for black illiteracy? This did not come across in the film given the fact, too, that some of the informants were not experts in their various fields to tackle this complex problem.

For research question two, another dynamic with regards to the fate of the African race has developed. How can one justify the selling of Africans as slaves to the Europeans on grounds of miserliness as seen in Ghana and Dahomey? Whatever the case, this documentary empowered the black race by condemning what their forefathers did, yet at the same time, recognized the dubiousness of the Westerners in achieving their objectives of subjugating the black power. All along Gates has been out to achieve an objective of debunking the myth of black inferiority and intellectual backwardness that has been the subject in most European literature about Africans and Africa. The relationship between Africans and African Americans in the movie was intriguing. Slave trade complicated their interactions as African Americans saw themselves as victims to the miserly quests of Africans. But at the same time the Africans strongly believed they were deceived by the Western invaders.

When we look critically at research question three the rift between the black race and the westerners revealed another dissatisfactory discourse. Their relationship has been the subject of not only documentary films but also books. There are a couple of these books but most especially Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad that made Africans look like apes. That book provoked Chinua
Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart* to set the records straight. Or the situation of European authors who will say that Africa has no history and that the only history that Africa has is the history of Western colonization. Or trying to unearth the truth in *Kings Solomon’s Mine* by Rider Haggard that sought to portray how lost cities have been buried in Africa. When watching Gates WAW, some of these thoughts certainly create dismal feelings with the overwhelming evidence as shown in the movie. The courage, bravery and the scientific intellect of the black person as seen in their inventions, creativity and imaginations should be a wakeup call for the entire world to face reality and put the Black race at its rightful place in history even if their creativity in art work was equally tainted with servitude and oppression by fellow blacks intra-racially speaking. Oppression, slavery and maltreatment of man by man regardless of race or geography should be frowned at just as progress, growth and empowerment should be celebrated irrespective of race or geographical origins.

NOTES

8. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


13. J. M. Bluat makes the argument in his book cited in no.4 that any developmental initiative in Africa or any other non-European power was considered archaic, uncouth, raw that needs a European touch on it to be considered relevant and therefore important.