

A journey through Africa's civilisations

Wonders of the African World by Henry Louis Gates Jr., published by Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, ISBN: 0375709487

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The paperback edition of Henry Louis Gates Jr's *Wonders of the African World*, published in January, is a welcome arrival, bringing this useful book within the reach of more readers. Originally published as the companion volume to the television series produced by American PBS, Gates's book is beautifully illustrated by Lynn Davis's photographs.

It is ambitious in scope, dealing with pre-colonial African cultures from Egypt, and the Horn of Africa, to the trading cities of the east coast, the kingdoms of the west coast and the Iron Age settlements (zimbabwes) of the Limpopo valley in the south. Inevitably Gates can offer only a brief account of each civilisation, and some areas, such as central Africa, are not touched upon at all, but he succeeds in conveying an impression of the rich diversity of pre-colonial societies in Africa.

The book is well supplied with chronological tables, allowing the reader to establish a mental framework for African history and it also has a useful bibliography, which acts as a guide to more detailed accounts for further study. It is at once scholarly, drawing on up to date material and classic sources to offer an introduction to African history, and is written in a clear accessible style. It is a popular book, in the best sense of the term.

Gates's aim is to show what the diverse cultures of Africa have contributed to the world. When so much of African history is still obscured and distorted by the legacy of colonialism, and so little of what has been discovered by recent research is widely known, this is an important and worthwhile task.

He begins his survey in Egypt, where he tackles the contentious issue of ancient Egypt's relationship to the rest of Africa. He resists the pressure to identify ancient Egypt as an entirely black civilisation ruled over by black pharaohs. In a measured account of what is still a heated debate, he demonstrates that Egypt existed alongside and interacted with other African civilisations, and was ruled for almost a century by pharaohs from the southern kingdom of Kush or Nubia.

The beginnings of urban civilisation in this region are only just beginning to be discovered, now it is realised that the Sahara was once much greener than at present and provided a home for communities of early farmers. An African origin for ancient Egyptian civilisation is becoming far more likely, which as Gates points out was what the Greeks thought all along.

Politics and war are the great barriers to research in Africa. Gates set out for Sudan just as the US government launched its missile

attack on a Khartoum pharmaceutical factory. Meanwhile the Sudan regime is doing all it can to eliminate the evidence of an ancient Nubian civilisation. The recent discovery of oil in this area has made the situation even worse, with the government forcibly moving whole communities. What Gates is able to show of Kerma, Napata and Meroë reveals a rich and literate civilisation that lasted for over a thousand years before it was eclipsed by the rise of the Axumite kingdom centred in present day Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Axum continued to dominate the Horn of Africa and parts of Arabia until the 8th century AD, when the Arab Empire emerged. Gates surveys its monolithic obelisk/stelae of the pre-Christian period and the later rock cut churches. He discusses the Ethiopian claim that the Ark of the Covenant is at Axum, but concludes that, "the odds of the Ark being housed in the Sanctuary of the Tablet at St Mary's Church at Axum are overwhelmingly against the Ethiopians."

His journey to Mali, now one of the poorest countries in the world, reveals a fertile cultural heritage in the city of Timbuctu, which was once a centre of scholarship and still houses many Arabic manuscripts. In the 14th century the Malian empire was one of the greatest in the world. Its wealth was based on salt and gold, which it traded across the Sahara desert to Europe and the Islamic world. Archaeology is revealing even older cultures in this area. At Djenne, a city dating back to the 3rd century BC has been discovered.

He does not hide unpalatable aspects of modern Africa. He notes that the Tuareg, who founded Timbuctu, still have slaves, although they are themselves reduced to the condition of refugees.

Slavery dominates the chapter on East Africa, where he examines the evidence for an indigenous African contribution to what has often been thought of as a purely Arab culture in the trading cities of the coast. Here Tippu Tip, the 19th century black African slaver, left a tangible legacy in his house, where 40 slaves were slaughtered and buried in the foundations to make the walls strong.

In West Africa he again confronts the question of the black African role in the slave trade. He admires Asante civilisation, but recognises that this kingdom succeeded in remaining independent for so long because it sold slaves in return for European guns.

The final chapter in the book deals with the early Shona states of Southern Africa, responsible for a series of stone towns along the Limpopo valley of which the most famous is Great Zimbabwe.

The apartheid regime had always claimed that the land was empty when the first Dutch settlers arrived and that Africans were incapable of developing any civilisation of their own. However, these towns reveal that a process of urbanisation and state formation comparable to that on other continents took place in Southern Africa.

The book has the character of a personal memoir, in which Gates recounts not only his journey through Africa, but also reminisces about growing up in America and how he and his contemporaries thought about Africa. A great part of the book's interest lies in the tension created by Gates's ideological commitment to Pan-Africanism—he is W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of Humanities and the chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University—and his desire to tell the truth about African history.

What becomes apparent in reading the book is that Pan-Africanism does not offer a coherent analysis of the complexities of African history. In this sense the book is itself a historical document. It is a document from the ideological crisis of the Pan-African movement. Gates wants his readers to know that there is more to Africa than war, disease, poverty and famine. But these afflictions are the result of the Pan-African movement's inability to end the domination of Africa by the imperialist countries.

While Gates clearly believes that in some sense all Africans are brothers because of the colour of their skin and their origin on the same continent, black African participation in the slave trade constantly intrudes itself on his consciousness. He cannot accept, for example, Louis Farrakhan's claim that it was the Jews rather than Arabs and Africans who ran the slave trade. The aim of Farrakhan's book *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, was, he writes, “to divert attention from the dramatic extent of black enslavement in the pre-Islamic Arab world, and in the Muslim world since the eighth century.”

He acknowledges that when, under the influence of Pan-Africanism, many African Americans “returned” to Africa they were disappointed by their reception and found “the African role in the slave trade of other Africans ... both a horrific surprise and the ultimate betrayal.”

The emphasis that he places on slavery is important at a time when serious commentators are suggesting that Africa is poor and backward because of some inherent weakness. He cites recent research, which suggests that between 1519 and the 19th century some 12 million people were shipped from Africa as slaves. When followed by half a century of colonial rule and another half century of indirect economic domination by the imperialist countries, this is more than enough to account for Africa's present condition.

Yet Gates's Pan-Africanism prevents him from really analysing the role of slavery in African society and resolving the question to which he keeps returning—why did Africans sell other Africans into slavery? In classic Pan-Africanist style, he wants to see African society as homogeneous rather than being divided into antagonistic classes. While he is proud to say that states existed and to recount their artistic and cultural achievements, he is unwilling to accept that states only come into being when society is divided into social classes.

The state is not merely the product of a more complex society; it is a specific historical response to the needs of a ruling class to

maintain its wealth, power and privilege. Great works of art, immense achievements in scholarship and fine architecture may be created by such states, but in all hitherto existing societies, on whatever continent, the emergence of a ruling class has been at the expense of the majority of society. A ruling class can only exist by appropriating a surplus for themselves. One of the commonest forms in which this has been achieved has been through slavery.

The existence of slavery in no way diminishes the achievements of African civilisations. African societies found themselves drawn into a new and more rapacious economic system, when the Atlantic slave trade opened up. It was a system that they could not control. Tippu Tip's great granddaughter says to Gates, “back then, you could be only two things: a slaver or a slave.” Gates comments, “I had never thought of my own family's participation in the slave trade as a matter of choice, but I had to concede that faced with the same possibilities, they no doubt would have elected the path of Tippu Tip.”

Gates conceives of history as being made up of a series of individual moral or economic choices. While it is true that people make their own history, they do not make it as they choose. They make choices within a very definite set of social and economic circumstances and a definite historical context. For all his knowledge, Gates lacks a sense of history. Despite his moral indignation, the tragedy of slavery is unintentionally diminished—reduced to the sum of individual decisions about personal economic advantage and morality.

Nowhere is his lack of historical sense more apparent than in his attitude to the Enlightenment. Hegel, Jefferson, Hume and Kant are all condemned because they denied that Africa had a history. This is a profoundly anti-historical approach. These great thinkers lived at time when very little was known about African history. They should not be condemned for reflecting the attitudes and level of knowledge of their age.

In his quest to find his African roots, Gates forgets that he is himself a product, both intellectually and socially, of the Enlightenment and the revolutions that flowed from it. The Enlightenment is as much the legacy of Africans and their descendants as it is of those of European descent. If its ideals went further than could be practically realised under the given social and economic conditions of the time, then that is a testimony to the foresight of its leading thinkers, rather than a failing to be criticised by subsequent generations.

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