

REVIEWS

Wonders of the African World with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 1999. Written & narrated by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Distributed by PBS Home Video and PBS Adult Learning Service. Approximately 6 hours on three videos. \$59.98. Order from PBS at <www.pbs.org>. Click on "Programs A-Z; Wonders of the African World; Shop PBS."

When Kenneth Clark did his monumental *Civilisation* series for the BBC some thirty years ago he subtitled it "A Personal View," which really amounts to an oxymoron, as if a survey of some two thousand years of western culture could be anything else. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., scholar-celebrity, chair of Harvard University's Afro-American studies program, director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research, MacArthur Foundation fellow, frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine, and author of the award winning *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, recalls the influence that series had on a young and impressionable "Skip" Gates growing up in Piedmont, West Virginia. Gates told *Newsweek* magazine, "I loved the Kenneth Clark series *Civilisation* when I was a teenager, so I always fantasized about doing the same thing in Africa." So trading in the tweed blazer and fedora of Kenneth Clark for an assortment of T-shirts and sunglasses, Gates embarks on a very personal, even emotional, encounter with Africa and the complex indigenous civilizations found there throughout history, but especially in ancient times. Yet few subjects are as fraught with so many pitfalls, pejorative myths, stereotypes, ideological minefields, hidden agendas, tourist kitsch, and sentimentality as the history of African cultures and societies. Gates not only wants to present African history to a western audience, he also wants to relate the experiences of African-Americans, particularly that of slavery, to the historical experiences of the continent. He and his producers have created a bold, personal, sweeping, and controversial documentary that if nothing else shows Africa as a land of life rather than as a world of death, war, famine, and disease.

The series is divided into six parts. The "Black Kingdoms of the Nile" deals with Gates's search for the Kingdom of Nubia in Egypt and the Sudan. Telling the audience that he had always heard about "Nubians" as a child, he was now determined to discover the ruins of the ancient capital of this Black kingdom and learn about the lives of "real Nubians." Gates quite correctly avoids the controversy surrounding Martin Bernal's thesis in *Black Athena* that the Greeks in essence stole their culture from the Egyptians, a truly African culture. In "The Swahili Coast" Gates travels the coast of Kenya and Tanzania where he encounters people who see themselves as being Arab and not African in culture and descent. In Zanzibar he confronts the reality that the island had become one of the main suppliers of slaves to the Muslim world. The segment "The Slave Kingdom" has caused a good deal of criticism because Gates states that he "had always been haunted by stories of Africans selling other Africans," and emotionally confronts the descendants of the old warrior kingdoms of Asante and

Dahomey in modern Ghana and Benin with their own complicity—a complicity, by the way, that they don't express intense regret about, since it was really seen as one ethnic group selling another, not Africans selling Africans. While the slave trade could not have existed without African cooperation, there is plenty of room for blame since most purchasers were, of course, Europeans. "The Holy Land" takes Gates to Ethiopia, a Christian kingdom for over 1600 years, whose rulers trace their lineage back to Solomon and Sheba. Here he runs into the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan, with whom he has a rather strained interview. But mostly, the episode focuses on his dogged, but unfulfilled and skeptical, search for the Lost Ark of the Covenant, which Ethiopian Christians believe rests in the city of Aksum. Beginning with the quote from Thackeray about the mythical city of Timbuktu, Gates sets out on "The Road to Timbuktu," famous for its university that educated Africans at the time the European universities were just getting started. Gates is shown books that indicate evidence of a "grand civilization, untranslated and unknown." Unknown, apparently, because they have not been translated from Arabic. The "Lost Cities of the South" tells the story of how ancient civilizations in South Africa have been kept under wraps because of apartheid. Gates then heads off for the great stone city of Great Zimbabwe that Europeans for centuries refused to believe could have been constructed by Africans. Along the way he sings "Country Roads Take Me Home" karaoke-style with Afrikaner merrymakers, visits a Disneylandesque, fantasy African theme park outside of Johannesburg, with the segment finally concluding at the grave of Cecil Rhodes in Zimbabwe.

Similar to Michael Wood in the PBS series *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*, Gates is the center of attention: riding on buses, waiting for broken down cars to be fixed, reading accounts of European explorers, taking a sand bath, calling everyone "brother," going to markets (where he always seems to ask, "Do you come here everyday?"), stressing the importance of "Imodium and Wipes" in the Third World, threatening to scale a fence to see the Ark of the Covenant (being then warned by a companion that that would not be such a good idea), climbing a rope to get into a monastery in Ethiopia, and after being told that he could not enter a mosque until he converted to Islam, responding with, "I want four wives." Both as narrator and actor, Gates comes across without affectation as a blend of the sophisticated, cynical, humorous Harvard professor and the wide-eyed, naive, African-American tourist.

Gates has been criticized for everything—wearing inappropriate clothing, orientalism, cultural insensitivity, ignoring the importance of Islam in Africa, being Euro- and Christian-centric in his approach, ignoring the recent history of Africa, making Africans the objects not the subjects of history, using the prism of the North American conception of race, and using a very American and highly personal style in viewing his subject. Gates has always rejected the Afro-centrist idea that Afro-American studies is a discipline rooted in a special African or Black-centered

perspective and possessing its own unique criteria of truth, seeing it rather as just a field of study subject to strict academic standards. As for the series itself, this reviewer does not think Gates was being disingenuous using some European accounts as entry vehicles for African culture, bearing in mind that it was meant to appeal to a mass, largely white, American audience, who really do not know much about Africa.

Projects of this kind will always engender criticism from academia, some of it deserved, some no doubt based upon jealousy and partisanship. And controversy is hardly new in African and African-American studies, and can in fact be beneficial. Gates's engaging style and presentation will surely create interest in African history and will find a home in World Civilization, Comparative Civilization, and African Civilization classes, as long as it is supplemented with films and videos from African directors and producers such as Djibril Diop Mambety or Mickey Madota Dube, part of a new generation of young black filmmakers who have emerged since the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa. The works of such artists are now becoming increasingly available from sources such as the *Library of African Cinema 2000* from California Newsreel. For there will always be a myriad number of African worlds that no single source can pretend to cover.

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Clarice Swisher, ed. *The Spread of Islam*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1999. Pp. 240. Paper, \$12.96; ISBN 1-56510-966-X.

Ruth Roded, ed. *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999. Pp. xv, 271. Cloth, \$59.50; ISBN 1-86064-308-6. Paper, \$25.00; ISBN 1-86064-309-4.

These two anthologies have in common an examination of a particular theme, contained in the title, over the entire course of Islamic history from the time of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia to the present. The similarities end there.

The Spread of Islam is one of six volumes in Greenhaven Press's "Turning Points in World History" series that seeks to examine pivotal events, evolutionary developments, or revolutionary new inventions that changed the course of history. This volume falls into the evolutionary development category as the spread referred to covers the entire period from the founding of Islam to bring a contemporary major world religion. The book comprises a series of secondary source essays selected on the basis of their "accessibility," although the term is not defined, each preceded by a summary of the author's main points. Greenhaven's in-house editor, Clarice Swisher, added an introductory essay, a collection of primary source documents, a glossary, chronology, reading list, and index. The book contains five chapters: "The Origin and