



California State University, Sacramento

Center for African Peace and Conflict Resolution

SUBJECT:

A Report: African Documentaries

May 2000

Led by Professor G. N. Uzoigwe, Head of the Department of History, Mississippi State University, who also chaired the session, a panel of discussants comprising Professors Ernest Uwazie, Lila Jacobs, Cecil Canton (CSUS), Apollos Nwauwa (Rhode Island College), and Gloria Chuku (University of Memphis), the conference in plenary session revisited passionately but professionally the documentaries on Africa by Professors Ali Mazrui (*The Africans: A Triple Heritage*); Basil Davidson (*Africa: History of a Continent*); and Henry Gates, Jr.'s more recent controversial *Wonders of the African World*. The plenary panel discussion took place as part of the Center for African Peace & Conflict Resolution's conference on "Africans in the Americas: past, present, & future" held on May 4-6 at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). Professor Mazrui (who was the conference keynote speaker) was also in the audience during the session, more as a listener. Although the panelists assessed the three documentaries at different levels of critique, it was quite settled that good efforts at educating particularly Americans about Africa should be commended and supported. Further, the panelists urged all to desist from personalizing the issues raised by the documentaries, especially in the *Wonders of the African World*. In particular, concerned scholars (pro & con) should be able to disagree honorably, without resort to rancor and bitter discourse, especially among Africa's intellectual giants.

The participants, without prejudice, consequently resolved that future documentaries should attempt the following:

1. Select a presenter who is well known and respected as a specialist in African Studies.
2. Ensure that the contents of a documentary are not only up-to-date but are also representative of the entire continent. This can be done through a review process by other experts, with such review included as part of the documentary.
3. Ensure also that the accuracy of the interpretations of African history, culture, politics, etc. are verified by a balanced committee of experts. This is intended to avoid or minimize the acrimony and controversy which the *Wonders of the African World* documentary in particular has generated, while respecting academic freedom and sound scholarship.
4. Ensure that the image of Africa should be also authenticated by the same committee. A documentary that is racist (even if covertly) and treats Africa and Africans with

paternalism and irreverence obviously negates whatever positive value that may have been intended. A so-called African documentary should show sensitivity toward the feelings of Africans by ensuring that certain offensive usages and words, as well as mannerisms, are avoided.

5. Ensure that an African documentary should not attempt to see Africa through a purely Euro-American filter or prism.
6. Beware of presenters with undisclosed political and ideological agenda.
7. Beware of presenters who are mere academic entrepreneurs.
8. Consider a documentary on African women done by African women.
9. Consider a documentary on African youth in which their views are represented by themselves.
10. Be sensitive to media image as well as the content of Africa portrayed in such documentary.