

Jana Bennett
British Broadcasting Corporation
White City
201 Wood Lane
London W 12 7TQ

03 May 2006

Dear Jana,

2007 Bicentenary of the abolishment of African enslavement

We are writing to express our concerns about the BBC's planned output to commemorate the 2007 Bicentenary of the abolishment of African enslavement. We seek to ensure that the BBC approach to themed programming on this topic is sensitive, accurate and unmarred by a narrow stereotypical view of African history, culture and people both in Britain, the Diaspora and of course the Continent. Most importantly, for any intellectual discourse on the subject to claim accuracy and true impartiality then it is imperative that diverse African voices are included to provide editorial and moral authenticity. These voices must be sourced from African people in Britain, the Caribbean, America, Brazil and the Continent; they must also include a strong balance favouring those without pro-European religious, political or national bias.

It may be helpful if we outline our interest in this matter. Ligali is the African British¹ media monitoring authority. The remit of our Media Affairs Division is, amongst other things, to challenge the misrepresentation of African people and culture and eradicate the disproportionate level of ethnicity bias leading to the propagation of cultural stereotypes of African people in all forms of media.

The BBC has an unrepentant history of offensively portraying Diasporic African people predominantly through the mono-cultural prism of sports, entertainment and criminality. Likewise, its portrayal of African people on the Continent is stigmatised by romantic exoticism, chronic poverty, incessant warfare or dismal corruption.

A recent example exposing this anti-African bias is the priority the BBC has given to the recent passing of two famous African American personalities. The BBC has chosen to reject calls asking for the broadcasting or commissioning of a documentary on the life long devoted human rights activist Rosa Parks in favour of a tribute for the controversial entertainer Richard Pryor. In a response made to community organisation the 100BMOL BBC Two programme controller Roly Keating writes;

"As with many great international figures from 20th century history, I have no doubt that the BBC will receive proposals for programmes that explore different aspects of Rosa Parks life and legacy, and these will of course be considered on their merits..."

¹ **African British** is the name now used to describe the community previously mislabelled as Afro-Caribbean, Black British, UK Black, Negro, Coloured and Black. It embraces all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean and South America.

And for the record.... we are actively developing a tribute to the late, great Richard Pryor."

It is difficult to understand how anti-African empowerment and a commercial-like focus on ratings did not underpin the decision to give precedence of BBC resources to developing a tribute based on a controversial comedian who for many years until he recant his decision following a trip to Africa propagated the offensive n word for commercial gain.

Likewise, during 2005 the BBC broadcast an offensive docu-drama series insultingly named 'The Slavery Business: How to Make A Million Out Of Slavery'. The series which was focused on the theme of abolition denigrated African identity and portrayed the emancipation of enslaved Africans solely as an act of European charity. Our 18 July 2005, correspondence with BBC Controller Jana Bennet and the corresponding responses comprehensively address these issues.

In a BBC response sent 29 July 2005, Glenwyn Benson, Controller Factual TV concluded;

"The BBC feels that this series will challenge preconceptions, not "reaffirm myths", and that it will provide a new and deeper understanding of the role slavery played in our society."

However we now know that the BBC was wrong, and that the series as we suggested only achieved the reaffirmation of odious myths and lead to an obfuscation of world history which fuelled much debate and derision targeting African people and culture.

This is not the only time this specific issue has been handled with crass insensitivity and a cavalier attitude to historical detail. In September 2005 we made a complaint to the BBC Chairman Michael Grade expressing the unsatisfactory manner in which the BBC News Website had published an article containing anti-African terminology and several inaccurate references. We did not receive a response from Mr Grade but in related correspondence from BBC Head of Editorial Complaints, Fraser Steel he responded;

"I'm grateful to you for drawing attention to these, but I don't think they're mistakes of such gravity that I'm required to step in and uphold your complaint about them."

The offensive comments and errors remain uncorrected.

This and other examples highlights the BBC's lack of ability to comprehend the sensitivity surrounding the issue of the Maafa. It cements our fears that the BBC will almost definitely be the leading catalyst that fuels incendiary racist anti-African hostility towards the African British community.

The overall development and strategy of this programming must be African led. This leadership must also have an essential prerequisite understanding of the historical, cultural and social sensibilities of African Britons with and without Caribbean heritage if animosity is not to be cultivated by the promotion of a Eurocentric distortion of world history.

The BBC's Africa Lives output during 2005 is one such example of this reality with the initiative dominated by European media personalities such as Geldof proclaimed as the saviour of Africa. We believe it is essential that the BBC recognises that African people are capable of speaking for themselves without the need to have European platitudes mouthed through cultural disinterested African sports or entertainment personalities without academic qualifications.

It is disappointing to note that the BBC does not seem to have a visible African lead on this project which implies that the corporation seeks to deny opportunity and substantive involvement to conscious African producers, directors and presenters. We hope that you reconsider your position and welcome the opportunity to discuss our organisation's concerns whilst devising a method to ensure we can work in partnership to achieve a positive outcome.

Acting on behalf of the African community we ask;

- What are the BBC's plans for the 2007, is there a flagship 'event'?
- What programmes, debates, dramas are being commissioned and which African organisations are producing, directing and presenting them?
- What level of community involvement has been being sought as to avoid the denigration and marginalisation of one of the UK's most socio-economically disadvantaged minority communities?
- How many non African people are being sent to the Continent and Caribbean for 'research'?
- At what level are African people being involved in the senior decision making process?

Finally, we would like to add that we find all instances of the colour label 'black' offensive when synonymously used in place of African in an ethnicity context. It would be appreciated if when replying to our complaints you respectfully referred to all British nationals with antecedents originating directly from Africa or indirectly via African diasporic communities, such as those in the Caribbean and South America as African or African British.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely



Toyin Agbetu
The Ligali Organisation