

**THE AFRICAN SCHOLAR AS A HERO IN HISTORY:
DOES ALI MAZRUI QUALIFY?**

by

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Who are the one hundred greatest Africans of all time? A London-based magazine invited nominations from its readers. A flood of nominations poured into the editorial offices of *The New African*, a magazine which has been published in London since the early years of Africa's independence in the 1960s. The editors and their advisors then analyzed the nominations. The result is a unique list of some of the most significant Africans in history.

Three biases manifest themselves on the list. One is the *gender* bias. There are very few women in this list of African luminaries. Second is the *political* bias. The people nominated are disproportionately *political* heroes and giants of statecraft. The third bias is *temporal* in the sense that the Africans nominated are disproportionately Titans of the twentieth century. Not enough heroes of earlier centuries were nominated.

What is most striking about the East Africans who made it into the list is that Professor Ali A. Mazrui is the only scholar from the region to have earned that recognition. Literary gaps in the list include the absence of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenya novelist, Shaaban Roberts, the Tanzanian Swahili poet, and Okot p'Bitek, author of *Song of Lawino*, from Uganda. Ali A. Mazrui is in splendid isolation among East African academics. Mazrui shares fiftieth place [50th] with F. W. de Klerk, the white President of South Africa who helped to end political apartheid in his country and shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela.

East Africa's first presidents of the post-colonial era do feature in the *New African* list (Jomo Kenyatta, Julius K. Nyerere and A. Milton Obote). Also recognized are some of Africa's martyrs—such as Tom Mboya of Kenya, who was assassinated in 1969, and Dedan Kimathi, who was executed by the British during the Mau Mau war in Kenya.

Some of the nominations for historic greatness are obvious, such as Shaka Zulu. Some omissions are inexcusable, such as Menelik II of Ethiopia.

But the London magazine is to be congratulated for recognizing the African Diaspora as part of Africa. The 100 greatest Africans, therefore, includes such African American giants as W.E.B. DuBois and the boxer Muhammad Ali.

By coincidence, the idea of selecting one hundred greatest Africans of all time follows in the wake of an earlier proposal by Ali Mazrui for nominations of 100 greatest African books of the last 100 years. Mazrui made the proposal at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in 1988, and the proposal was acted upon by international publishers and others. Nominations of great books were invited internationally, and a distinguished panel of judges was appointed. Because the concept had originally come from Ali Mazrui, his own books were disqualified from the competition, but he was officially appointed as “the Founding Father” of the whole process. When the awards of the final list of Africa’s greatest 100 books of the last 100 years were at last ready to be ceremonially given to the authors in Cape Town in 2002, Founding Father Ali Mazrui was given a special role. His special role included presenting an award to Nelson Mandela personally for his book written in prison, *Long March to Freedom*.

Just as Mazrui had helped to honor Nelson Mandela among the authors of Africa’s 100 greatest books of the century, the London magazine, *The New African*, ranked Mandela as the top greatest African in history [see September issue 2004]. This was in the same year (2004) when both Mandela and Mazrui were honored with honorary doctorates by the University of Transkei in South Africa. [The region of the Transkei is Mandela’s home county in South Africa.] Ironically, the three honorary doctorates given

by the University of Transkei in 2004 were to Nelson Mandela, Ali A. Mazrui and Ngugi wa Thiong'o [one South African and two Kenyans].

From the point of view of Honorary Doctorates, the year 2004 was exceptional for Ali Mazrui. He received *four* Honorary Doctorates in four different countries. Lafayette College in Pennsylvania awarded Mazrui a *Doctorate in Divinity*. Mazrui's acceptance speech was entitled "God and Globalization: Religion in the Global Village." His speech was an interfaith sermon at a primarily Christian institution.

Ali Mazrui's Honorary Doctorate from the University of Transkei was in *Political Economy*. Mazrui's acceptance speech at Transkei was on "The Seven Pillars of the African Renaissance."

From Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia in 2004 Mazrui received an Honorary Doctorate in *Humane Letters*. His acceptance speech has been translated into Amharic in writing. The topic was "Africa Has Two Parents and One Guardian: Africanity, Islam and the West."

From Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Ali Mazrui received in 2004 an Honorary Doctorate in *Science and Human Resource Development*. His acceptance speech was on "The Ethics of Professionalism: Seven Pillars of Integrity." At the same ceremony he was officially installed as the first of the Chancellors of the University who was not Head of State. The two previous Chancellors were President Daniel arap Moi and President Mwai Kibaki, both Heads of State.

What is more, Mazrui is so Pan-African that not all Africans know which African country produced him. Because of his ten years at Makerere University in Kampala, many Africans believe Mazrui is a Ugandan. Because of his Swahili cultural background,

some Africans believe Mazrui is a Tanzanian. Because of his association with the University of Jos in Nigeria, and because he is married to a Nigerian, some Africans see Ali Mazrui as a Nigerian. And because of his residence in the United States for more than a quarter of a century, many Africans believe that Mazrui has become an African American.

New African magazine falls prey to this Pan-African ambiguity of Mazrui. The magazine describes Mazrui as “a Tanzanian intellectual and writer [who] presents a positive image of Africa and its people.” Mazrui regards the mistake about his nationality as a tribute to his Pan-Africanism. The struggle continues.

Poets have argued that when we unreservedly accept true greatness in others, there must be something in ourselves which is obstinately great. In his play about Abraham Lincoln, the American playwright John Drinkwater captured this thought in the following lines:

When the high heart we magnify,
And the sure vision celebrate,
And worship greatness passing by,
Ourselves are great!