



Ali A. Mazrui was distinguished for his work in African and Islamic studies.
Emma Wright / Assistant Photo Editor

Mazrui credits TV show for academic success

By Michelle Cornett

News Editor

Professor Ali Mazrui can now add two distinctions to his resume: being named one of the 100 greatest Africans of all time and one of the world's top 100 public intellectuals. Mazrui, who is the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities and director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies, was recently named by Foreign Policy and Prospect magazines to their new list of the top 100 intellectuals. He was named to New African magazine's list of the 100 greatest Africans of all time last year.

"Well, it's obviously gratifying to know that enough people out there are reading and appreciating what I produce," Mazrui said. "I do write a lot and I want to believe that what I write has an impact."

According to the magazines that published the list, Mazrui's latest distinction as a top public intellectual defines him as "someone who has shown distinction in their own field along with the ability to communicate ideas and influence debate outside of it."

Agreeing completely with this definition, Mazrui stressed the importance for public intellectuals to make an impact on society, using whatever means available to them.

"Public intellectuals really ought to seek to influence thought beyond their own professional fields, and one way to do it is to engage in public media or be available to discuss big issues with newspaper, television and radio," Mazrui said. "I've done all of those in my life."

Though he holds a doctorate from Oxford and has written over 20 books dealing with African, Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, Mazrui credited the television series he

created, “The Africans: A Triple Heritage,” as a main contributor to his appearance on the lists.

“It reached millions of more people than any of my books,” he said. “It’s been shown in dozens of countries and translated into several languages, so I would imagine it’s had a lot to do with rousing the interests of those who compile a list of this kind.”

The series, created in the mid-1980s, has been a subject of controversy in the past.

According to Mazrui, Lynne Cheney, former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, threatened to pull the organization’s funding from the project, which she considered “anti-Western.”

“The series was about imperialism and slavery, how else would it sound when you’re talking about the whole span of African relations to the West?” Mazrui said. “What’s the point of getting an African to do it and then expecting them to pat the West on the back?” But Mazrui doesn’t hesitate to point out a few criticisms of his own, particularly regarding the biases of the list he was recently named to. He said in naming the top public intellectuals, the magazines concentrated disproportionately on the English-speaking world, the Western world and males.

“We should try a little harder to contain the biases and make sure the criteria which are used are sensible,” Mazrui said, adding that aside from the bias, he had no objection to the creation of the lists. “There’s a constituency that wants to read about people, who is up and who is down, and I have no objection to that.”

Far from objecting, Mazrui has even been responsible for the creation of such a list. He is considered the founding father of a project he devised to identify the 100 greatest books by Africans in the past 100 years.

Gratified by the recognitions he has received, Mazrui said he still has a few major questions to resolve.

“If you’re declared one of the top 100 public intellectuals in the world, should you include that in your resume or not?” he said with a laugh. “If you’re declared one of the top 100 Africans who ever lived, do you make it bold on your resume?”