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**PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS AND
THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE:
COMPARATIVE INTELLECTUAL RECOGNITION**

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Ali A. Mazrui has been nominated as one of the top one hundred public intellectuals in the world. The nomination has been made by a leading American journal, FOREIGN POLICY, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in New York in September 2005. The British magazine, THE PROSPECT, in London, has associated itself with the same choice of the top one hundred public intellectuals – a choice which does include Ali Mazrui.

But what is a “public intellectual”? He or she has been defined as *“a person who has shown distinction in their own field along with the ability to communicate ideas and influence debate outside it.”*

Ironically, Ali Mazrui publicly defined the term “intellectual” for the first time in East Africa as long ago as the 1960s. He was, at the time, a professor in Uganda. In the Town Hall of the City of Kampala, Uganda, Mazrui debated a leading member of the Uganda Government on “The Role of the African Intellectual in the African Revolution”. Mazrui’s debating adversary was Uganda’s Head of Security and Intelligence, Mr. Akena Adoko, who was at the time the second most powerful civilian in Uganda, after President Milton Obote. The moderator of the debate was the Mayor of the City of Kampala. The Town Hall was packed to overflowing. Ali Mazrui offered his definition of an intellectual, which was destined to capture the imagination of East Africans for decades:

An intellectual is a person who has the capacity to be fascinated by ideas, and has acquired the skill to handle some of those ideas effectively.

This was, of course, more than a quarter of a century before Ali Mazrui was himself designated as one of the world’s top “public intellectuals” by a journal published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

But is Ali Mazrui a “scholar” or a “public intellectual”? In the 1960s President Milton Obote of Uganda asked Mazrui a related question: “Professor Mazrui, are you sure you know the difference between being a political scientist and being a politician?” The Head of State of Uganda was getting irritated by Mazrui’s political activism. Obote was often angry with Mazrui’s readiness to criticize major public policies openly, in contradiction of Presidential pronouncements. This was long before the term, “public intellectual”, was coined! With or without such a term, was Ali Mazrui evolving into “someone who had demonstrated distinction in one’s own field, combined with a capacity to communicate ideas and influence debate beyond his or her professional field”?

The new list of one hundred great public intellectuals offered by FOREIGN POLICY and THE PROSPECT magazine suffers from some of the recurrent flaws of such lists. There are not enough women among the top stars. There is also disproportionate representation of not only the Western world, but also the English-speaking world.

Among Black Africans on the list, there is one novelist (Chinua Achebe), one playwright (Wole Soyinka), one social scientist (Ali Mazrui) and one plant pathologist (Florence Wambugu). Only three African countries are represented in this list of the top public intellectuals – Nigeria (Achebe and Soyinka), Kenya (Mazrui and Wambugu) and South Africa (J.M. Coetzee).

A woman of African and Muslim ancestry is also included in the list, although she is now a Dutch citizen and a strong critic of her ancestry. This Euro-critic of Islam is

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, of Somali origins. She is a heroine among Westerners, but sometimes regarded as an “Islamophobe” by fellow Somali and fellow Muslims.

An Egyptian associated with militant Islam has been given due recognition in the list. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qadarawi, whom Ali Mazrui has known at Oxford University, has since fallen foul of Tony Blair’s government. Yusuf al-Qadarawi has refused to condemn Palestinian suicide bombers. But al-Qadarawi is still a public intellectual of immense international influence.

In the previous year Ali Mazrui was voted by another Western magazine in London among the one hundred greatest Africans of all time. The London magazine, THE NEW AFRICAN, had invited its readers to nominate the towering one hundred Africans in all history. Ali Mazrui was astonished to learn in September 2004 that he was among those nominated by readers for distinction in the entire span of African history. Although Mazrui was flattered by the tribute, he dismissed the selection as “exuberance”!

Needless to say, Mazrui has found it easier to believe cautiously that he is among the top public intellectuals alive in the world today than to believe that he is among the top one hundred Africans (dead or alive) of all time!!

But, at the minimum, Ali Mazrui is grateful for this new wave of international recognition.

By coincidence, Africa World Press, a publisher in Trenton, New Jersey, may be publishing before the end of 2005 a book entitled THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN THOUGHT AND ACTION. The book is about the work and career of Ali Mazrui, as

evaluated by a dozen other professors, and edited by Professor Parviz Morewedge, an Iranian-American scholar.

As for non-African public intellectuals in the top list selected by FOREIGN POLICY, these include Noam Chomsky of MIT, Samuel Huntington of Harvard, Vaclav Havel, former Czech President, Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore, Paul Wolfowitz, the new President of the World Bank, Salman Rushdie of the SATANIC VERSES controversy, and Pope Benedict XVI, the new leader of the Catholic Church.