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**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Afrabia: Africa and the Arabs in the New World Order

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9896d35t>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 20(3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Mazrui, Ali

**Publication Date**

1992

**DOI**

10.5070/F7203016755

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AFRABIA: AFRICA AND THE ARABS  
IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

Ali A. Mazrui

Let me begin this essay on African-Arab relations with two models of historic reconciliation involving other societies. The Anglo-American model traces the transition from hostility to fraternity in the relations between the people of Britain and those of the United States from the late eighteenth century to the First World War. Are there lessons to be learnt which are relevant for relations between Arabs and Africans historically?

The second model of reconciliation traces the transition from enmity to friendship between the United States and Japan from 1941 into the 1990s. Are there other lessons to be learnt in this Americo-Japanese model which are also pertinent for African-Arab relations in historical perspective? Let us look at these two models of reconciliation more closely.

It was, of course, in 1776 that the Americans started their rebellion against the British. It became the American war of independence. For at least a century the British were a people the Americans loved most to hate. This included one additional war between the Americans and the British in 1812.

Today, Great Britain is perhaps the United States' closest ally—perhaps closer than even Israel and Canada are to Washington. The wounds of 1776 and 1812 between the Americans and the British have more than just healed. A new and deeper sense of shared identity has been forged.

In 1964 a revolution occurred in Zanzibar against a government which was perceived as Arab-led and a monarchy which was perceived as Omani. Bitter bloodletting and venomous hatred occurred between Swahilized Arabs on one side and Arabized Waswahili on the other. Arabophobia in parts of East Africa reached new depths. Afrophobia in parts of the Arab world was also unmistakable.

In reality it took about a century for the Americans and the British to stop hating each other—and longer still for them to become close friends.

In relations between Africans and Arabs, will we also have to wait for a century for the wounds of the past to heal? Is the relevant model that between the United States and Britain—in which forgiveness was very slow, but when it came it was very deep? Or is the relevant model that between *Japan* and the United States? In 1941 Japan committed treachery and bombed Pearl Harbor without declaring war on the United States of America. President Roosevelt described it as "a day

which will live in infamy." Americans had good reason to hate the Japanese.

In August 1945 the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese became the first physical casualties of the nuclear age—massacred and, in many cases, maimed for generations. The Japanese had good reason to hate the Americans.

And yet within less than a *single* generation the United States and Japan became great political allies and monumental trading partners. Forgiveness between Americans and Japanese had been quick—but was it shallow? Forgiveness between Britain and the U. S. A. had been slow—but was it deep?

Forgiveness between Arabs and Africans may be somewhere between the U. S.-British model (slow but deep) and the U. S.-Japanese model (quick but shallow). African-Arab reconciliation may be less slow than the Anglo-American fraternity and significantly deeper than the Americo-Japanese reconciliation. Afro-Arab reconciliation involves not only memories of the Zanzibar revolution but, even more fundamentally, memories of Arab involvement in the slave trade in Africa. Can the pain of the past be forgotten?

Global trends in the New World Order are dictating *speed* in African-Arab reconciliation and integration. Historical continuities and geographical contiguities may lend *great depth* to the future relationship between Africa and the Arab world. But conscious steps need to be taken in pursuit of any new forms of solidarity. Forgiving the past is one thing; forging a new future is a bigger imperative.

The ideological walls separating Indo-China from the rest of South-East Asia are beginning to fall. The ideological walls separating eastern Europe from western Europe have been coming down. The economic walls separating the United States, Mexico and Canada are also coming down. Will the walls separating Africa and the Arab world also come down as part of the new world order?

It is arguable that some of the walls separating Africans from Arabs are as artificial as the divisions which separated Slavs from Germans in Europe. There has been much discussion about the artificiality of the Sahara Desert as a divide between Arab Africa and Black Africa. Even more artificial is the Red Sea as a divide. Now that we are examining the New World Order, should we not re-evaluate these old frontiers and re-define our identities?

### The Concept of "AFRABIA"

The French once examined their special relationship with Africa and came up with the concept of *EURAFRICA* as a basis of special



cooperation. We in turn should examine the even older special relationship between Africa and the Arab world and call it *AFRABIA*.

After all, the majority of the Arab people are now in the African continent. The bulk of Arab lands are located in Africa. There are more Muslims in Nigeria than there are Muslims in any Arab country, including Egypt. In other words, the Muslim population of Nigeria is larger than the Muslim population of Egypt. The African continent as a whole is in the process of becoming the first continent in the world with an absolute Muslim majority.

But *AFRABIA* is not just a case of the spread of languages and the solidarity of religion. Whole new ethnic communities were created by this dynamic. The emergence of Cushitic groups like the Somali in the Horn of Africa is one case in point. Oman, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia were also instrumental in helping give birth to whole new ethnic groups on the eastern seaboard of Africa. Swahili culture and the Swahili city states captured a whole epoch in African history and legacy. Oman is central to the modern history of the Swahili heritage.

The brave peoples of Eritrea are also part of the bridge of *AFRABIA*. Even the Berbers are a special case of *AFRABIA*. The very name "*Africa*" probably originated in a Berber language, and was initially used to refer to what is now Tunisia. The continent got its name from what is now "Arab Africa." Is there a stronger argument for *AFRABIA*?

Then there have been the migrations and movements of populations between Africa and Arabia across the centuries. There is evidence of Arab settlements on the East African coast and in the Horn of Africa well before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad S. A. W. And the fact that the first great muezzin of Islam was Seyyidna Bilal is evidence that there was an African presence in Mecca and Medina which was *pre-Islamic*. Bilal was there before he was converted—a symbol of older Arabian link with Africa. *AFRABIA* is a *pre-Hijriyya* phenomenon.

Islam itself is almost as old in Africa as it is in Arabia. In Ethiopia Muslims sought religious asylum during the Prophet Muhammad's early days when he and his followers were persecuted in Mecca. Archaeological excavations in Eastern Africa have discovered remains of mosques which go back to the earliest decades of Islam. Islam as a factor in *AFRABIA* does indeed go back some fourteen centuries!

There is the impact of language on *AFRABIA*. The language with the largest number of individual speakers in the African continent is still Arabic. The most influential indigenous African languages are Swahili (Kiswahili) in East Africa and Hausa in West Africa—both of them profoundly influenced by both Arabic and Islam, a manifestation of *AFRABIA*.

Linguistic links between Africa and Arabia are, in fact, much older than Islam. Everybody is aware that Arabic is a Semitic language, but not as many people realize that so is Amharic, the dominant indigenous language of Ethiopia. Indeed, historians are divided as to whether Semitic languages started in Africa before they crossed the Red Sea, or originated in the Arabian peninsula and later crossed over to Africa. The very uncertainties themselves are part of the reality of *AFRABIA*.

In the New World Order, two processes are under way, each one seeking to redefine the nation-state. The *centrifugal* forces create fragmentation and separatism. The most dramatic examples have been the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The *centripetal* forces create bigger economic and political communities. The year 1992 was intended to witness the deeper economic integration of the European Community, probably followed by the admission of more member states before the end of the century.

In the Arab world the most serious cases of internal centrifugal fragmentation within countries are in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Sudan. Iraq faces central oppression and ethnic separatism. The Kurds and the Shiites are up in arms, sometimes literally. Lebanon has not yet healed its sectarian divisions. And the Sudan is torn not only by the civil war in the South but also by new religious and political tensions in the North.

Centrifugal fragmentation in Africa includes not only the Sudan but also ethnic separatism in Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, Senegal, and—with lesser intensity—even Nigeria.

In addition to national centrifugal tendencies, there are wider *regional* forces of fragmentation in both Africa and the Arab world. *The Gulf crisis of 1990-91* was one of the most divisive events in recent Arab history. One unthinkable scenario occurred in August 1990 when one Arab country completely swallowed up another—the brief conquest of Kuwait by Iraq. The other unthinkable occurred in 1991—when Arab bombs and Arab missiles bombed fellow Arab cities. The wounds of division have yet to heal in the Arab world.

Africa did not enter the 1990s as deeply divided at the regional level as the Arab world did. But Africa's economic situation in the 1990s has been particularly severe, and the political will to pursue African unity has been weakened even further. Moreover, *two happy developments in Africa of 1990-91* have had the unintended consequence of diluting Pan-African commitment. The beginning of the end of apartheid is, from almost every point of view, good news for Africa and the human race. But the struggle *against* apartheid had for so long been a great unifying force in Africa—at least as compelling as the struggle against Zionism has been in the Arab world. While Zionism is still powerful and defiant, apartheid is beginning to crumble. Pan-



Africanism may have to pay a price for its own success. The end of apartheid could deprive Pan-Africanism of a major unifying force.

The other happy trend in Africa in 1990-91 has been the struggle for greater democracy—from Dar-es-Salaam to Dakar, from Lusaka to Lagos, from Algiers to Kinshasa. African rulers are being called upon to become more accountable. While the pro-democracy movement in Africa has been an exciting development, it has focussed the minds of citizens on domestic issues in each country rather than continental issues of unification. The *regional* effect of democratic activism has, on the whole, been centrifugal—at least in the short run.

But while Africa and the Arab world are for the time being each internally divided within itself in terms of contemporary politics, the two overlapping regions are cross-culturally linked by the forces of history and geography. Indeed there was a time when what we now call the Arabian Peninsula was part and parcel of Africa physically. It is to these geo-physical lessons of *AFRABIA* that we must now turn.

#### Black Continent, Red Sea?

A central thesis of ours in this part of the paper is that the Red Sea has no right to divide Africa from Arabia.

*Where*, then, is Africa? *What* is Africa? How sensible are its boundaries? Islands can be very far from Africa and still be regarded part of Africa—provided they are not too near another major land mass. But a peninsula can be arbitrarily dis-Africanized.

Madagascar is separated from the African continent by the 500-mile wide Mozambique Channel. Greater Yemen, on the other hand, is separated from Djibouti by only a stone throw. Yet Madagascar is politically part of Africa, while Greater Yemen is not.

Much of the post-colonial African scholarship addressed itself to the artificiality of the boundaries of contemporary African states. But little attention has been paid to the artificiality of the boundaries of the African continent itself. Why should North Africa end on the Red Sea when Eastern Africa does not end on the Mozambique Channel? Why should Tananarive be an African capital when Aden is not?

There has been discussion in Africa as to whether the Sahara desert is a chasm or a link. Continental Pan-Africanism asserts that the Sahara is a sea of communication rather than a chasm of separation. Yet there are some who would argue that North Africa is not "really Africa." Why? Because it is more like Arabia?

But in that case, why not push the boundary of North Africa further east to *include* Arabia? Why not refuse to recognize the Red Sea as a chasm, just as the Pan-Africanist has refused to concede such a role to the Sahara Desert? Why not assert that the African continent ends

neither on the southern extremity of the Sahara nor on the western shore of the Red Sea? Should not Africa move northwards to the Mediterranean and north-eastwards to the Persian Gulf? Alternatively, should this new concept be called *AFRABIA*?

The most redundant sea in African history may well be the Red Sea. This thin line of ocean has been deemed to be more relevant for defining where Africa ends than all the evidence of geology, geography, history, and culture. The north-eastern boundary of Africa has been defined by a strip of water in the teeth of massive ecological and cultural evidence to the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

The problem goes back three to five million years ago when three cracks emerged on the east side of Africa. As Colin McEvedy puts it:

One crack broke Arabia away, creating the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, and reducing the area of contact between Africa and Asia to the Isthmus of Suez.<sup>2</sup>

Before the parting of the Red Sea, there was the parting of Africa to create the Red Sea as a divide. Three cracks had occurred on the African crust—yet only the one which has resulted in a sea was permitted to "dis-Africanize" what lay beyond the sea. The other two cracks resulted in "rift valleys," straight sided trenches averaging thirty miles across. The eastern and western rifts left the African continent intact—but the emergence of a strip of water called the Red Sea has resulted in the *geological secession* of Arabia.

*But what a geological crack had once put asunder, the forces of geography, history, and culture have been trying to bind together again ever since.* Who are the Amhara of Ethiopia if not a people probably descended from South Arabians? What is Amharic but a Semitic language? What is a Semitic language if not a branch of the Afro-Asian family of languages? Was the Semitic parental language born in Africa and then crossed the Red Sea? Or was it from the Arabian peninsula originally and then descended upon such people as the Amhara, Tigre and Hausa in Africa? How much of a bridge between Arabia and Africa are the Somali? All these are lingo-cultural questions which raise the issue of whether the geological secession of Arabia three to five million years ago has been in the process of being neutralized by *AFRABIA*, the intimate cultural integration between Arabia, the Horn, and the rest of Africa.

In the linguistic field it is certainly no longer easy to determine where African indigenous languages end and "Semitic" trends begin. There was a time when both Hamites and Semites were regarded as basically alien to Africa. In due course Hamites were regarded as a fictitious category—and the people represented by the term (like the



Tutsi) accepted as indisputably African. What about the Semites? They have undoubtedly existed in world history. But are they "Africans" who crossed the Red Sea—like Moses on the run from the Pharaoh? Or are the Semites originally "Arabians" who penetrated Africa? These agonizing problems of identity would be partially solved overnight if the Arabian peninsula was part and parcel of Africa, or if a new solidarity of *AFRABIA* took roots.

### On Culture and Continent

The cultural effort to re-integrate Arabia and Africa after the geological divide five million years previously reached a new phase with the birth and expansion of Islam. The Arab conquest of North Africa was a process of overcoming the divisiveness of the Red Sea.

Twin processes were set in motion in North Africa—Islamization (a religious conversion to the creed of Muhammad) and Arabization (a linguistic assimilation into the language of the Arabs). In time the great majority of North Africans saw themselves as *Arabs*—no less than the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. In short, the Islamization and Arabization of North Africa were once again cultural countervailing forces trying to outweigh the geological separatism perpetrated by the birth of the Red Sea millennia earlier. North Africans have been cast in a dilemma. Are they as African as the people to the south of them? What has yet to be raised is whether the Arabs east of the Red Sea are as African as the Arabs north of the Sahara.

But if the Red Sea could be ignored in determining the north-eastern limits of Africa, why cannot the Mediterranean also be ignored as an outer northern limit? There was indeed a time when North Africa was in fact regarded as an extension of Europe. This goes back to the days of Carthage, of Hellenistic colonization, and later of the Roman Empire. The concept of "*Europe*" was at best in the making at that time. In the words of historians R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton:

There was really no Europe in ancient times. In the Roman Empire we may see a Mediterranean world, or even a West and an East in the Latin and Greek portions. But the West included parts of Africa as well as Europe. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Even as late as the seventeenth century the idea that the land mass south of the Mediterranean was something distinct from the landmass north of it was a proposition still difficult to comprehend. The great American Africanist, Melville Herskovits, has pointed out how the Geographer Royal of France, writing in 1656, described Africa as "a



peninsula so large that it comprises the third part, and this the most southerly, of our continent."<sup>4</sup>

The old proposition that North Africa was the southern part of Europe had its last desperate fling in the modern world in France's attempt to keep Algeria as part of France. The desperate myth that Algeria was the southern portion of France tore the French nation apart in the 1950s, created the crisis which brought Charles de Gaulle to power in 1958 and maintained tensions between the Right and the Left in France until Algeria's independence in 1962, with an additional aftermath of bitterness in the trail of Charles de Gaulle's career.

This effort to maintain Algeria as a southern extension of a European power took place at a time when in other respects North Africa had become a western extension of Arabia. From the seventh century onwards Arabization and Islamization had been transforming North Africa's identity. Because Africa's border was deemed to be the Red Sea, the Arabs became a "bicontinental" people—impossible to label as either "African" or "Asian." Indeed, the majority of the Arab people by the twentieth century were located west of the Red Sea (i. e., in Africa "proper") although the majority of the Arab states were east of the Red Sea (deemed as Western Asia).

The Arabic language has, as we indicated, many more speakers in the present African continent than in the Arabian Peninsula. And Arabic has indeed become the most important single language in the present African continent in terms of speakers.

The case for regarding Arabia as part of Africa is now much stronger than for regarding North Africa as part of Europe. Islamization and Arabization have redefined the identity of North Africans more fundamentally than either Gallicization or Anglicization have done.

In spite of the proximity of the Rock of Gibraltar to Africa, the Mediterranean is a more convincing line of demarcation between Africa and Europe than the Red Sea can claim to be a divide between Africa and Asia.

All boundaries are artificial but some boundaries are more artificial than others. *AFRABIA* has at least two millennia of linguistic and religious history to give it geo-cultural reality.

### *AFRABIA* and Global Apartheid

One wider trend worth watching is the emergence of *GLOBAL APARTHEID*. The White world is closing ranks, in spite of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Pan-Europeanism is reaching new levels of solidarity from the Urals to the Pyrenees Mountains.

In North America a new mega-economy is emerging, encompassing the United States, Canada, and possibly Mexico.

But when you look closely at this new world order, two disturbing tendencies emerge. Arabs and Muslims are disproportionately the frontline *military* victims of the new order. Blacks are disproportionately the frontline *economic* victims of the emerging global apartheid.

The military victimization of Muslims includes:

- (a) Permitting nuclearization of Israel but attempting to veto nuclear-power in the Muslim world
- (b) Subsidizing Israel's military capability
- (c) U.S. bombing of Beirut under Reagan
- (d) U.S. bombing of Tripoli and Bengazi in Libya under Reagan
- (e) Shooting down of Iranian civilian aircraft in the Gulf and killing all on board under Reagan
- (f) Bush's decision to save time rather than lives in the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis—leading to the death of hundreds of thousands of lives
- (g) Potential second strike against *Libya*

*Two-thirds of the casualties of U. S. military activity since the Vietnam war have been Muslims*—amounting upwards to half a million lives. The Muslim victims have been primarily Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Libyans, Iranians and others.

If Muslims have been frontline *military victims*, Blacks have been frontline *economic victims* of the new world order:

- (a) Continuing support for incompetent and corrupt African regimes
- (b) The terrors of economic structural adjustment under the IMF and World Bank in the Black World
- (c) The injustices of the wider world of commodity prices against fragile African economies
- (d) The huge Black underclass in the United States—adding *AIDS* and *DRUGS* to poverty, crime and social adjustment

- (e) The rise of racism in Europe (France, Germany, Belgium)
- (f) The U. S. Supreme Court's *move to the Right*—hurting gains in civil rights and minority advances

The new world order runs the risk of creating a disproportionate number of more *dead Muslims*—while it also runs the risk of perpetuating a disproportionate number of more *poor Blacks*.

AFRABIA is potentially part of the answer. Reconciliation between Arabs and Africans will continue to be needed—hopefully not as slow as the reconciliation between Britain and the U. S. A. after their 1776 and 1812 confrontations. The Afro-Arab entente will also hopefully not be as shallow as the cordiality between Japan and the United States. Africans and Arabs need to learn the lessons of speed from Japan and the U. S. A., and the lessons of fraternity from the older experience of Britain and the United States.

We have had Arab institutions designed to help Africa—like the Arab Band for African Development. We have not had African institutions designed to help Arabs outside Africa. The innovations needed would break the mould of Arabs always as donors and Africans always as recipients of foreign help. *AFRABIAN* institutions would pool the resources of both relatively wealthy Arabs and relatively wealthy Africans—and address those resources to the needs of the poor in both Africa and the Arab world. *AFRABIAN* institutions would be under the joint control of both Arabs and Africans. At last it would be conceivable for African money to help poor Arab countries like Yemen or even Jordan—just as Arab money has sometimes helped even relatively well-endowed African countries like Zaire.

Will such experimentation have to await the moment when majority rule in South Africa is achieved? Will the first foreign aid from Blacks to Arabs have to come from post-apartheid South Africa? That is at least one scenario. Not long after South Africa is both *liberated* and *stabilized*, there will be a need for a new summit meeting of Arab and African Heads of State and Governments, to take genuine stock of "the New World Order." It is to be hoped that high on that agenda for an Afro-Arab summit will be the creation of new and innovative *AFRABIAN* mechanisms of cooperation. As the Afro-Arab past is forgotten, a new Afro-Arab future can thus be forged. It can only be a minimum defence against the dangers of global apartheid.

## Conclusion

We live in an age when a people's perception of themselves can be deeply influenced by which continent or region they associate



themselves with. Until the 1950s the official policy of the government of Emperor Haile Selassie was to emphasize that Ethiopia was part of the Middle East rather than part of Africa. Yet it was the Emperor himself who initiated the policy of re-Africanizing Ethiopia as the rest of Africa approached independence. Ethiopian self-perceptions have been getting slowly Africanized ever since.

Yet cultural similarities between Ethiopia and the rest of Black Africa are not any greater than cultural similarities between North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Nevertheless, a *European* decision to make Africa end at the Red Sea has decisively dis-Africanized the Arabian Peninsula, and made the natives there see themselves as West Asians rather than North Africans.<sup>5</sup>

Before the parting of the Red Sea, there was the parting of Africa to create the Red Sea. Several million years ago the crust of Africa cracked and the Red Sea was born. As we indicated, this thin strip of water helped to seal the identity of whole generations of people living on both sides of it.

Yet cultural change has been struggling to heal the geological rift between Africa and Arabia. Did the Semites originate to the east or the west of the Red Sea? Are upper Ethiopians originally South Arabians? Has Islam rendered the Red Sea a culturally irrelevant boundary? Has the Arabic language made the boundary anachronistic? Is it time that the tyranny of the sea as a definer of identity was at least moderated if not overthrown?

In any case, the tyranny of the sea is in part a tyranny of European geographical prejudices. Just as European map-makers could decree that on the map Europe was *above* Africa instead of below (an arbitrary decision in relation to the cosmos) those map-makers could also dictate that Africa ended at the Red Sea instead of the "Persian Gulf." Is it not time that this dual tyranny of the sea and Eurocentric geography was forced to sink to the bottom?

The most difficult people to convince may well turn out to be the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula. They have grown to be proud of being "the Arabs of Asia" rather than "the Arabs of Africa." They are not eager to be members of the Organization of African Unity—however helpful such a move would be for the O. A. U.'s budgetary problems. Will they at least embrace the concept of *AFRABIA*?

And yet if Emperor Haile Selassie could initiate the re-Africanization of Ethiopia, and Gamal Abdel Nasser could inaugurate the re-Africanization of Egypt, prospects for a reconsideration of the identity of the Arabian Peninsula may not be entirely bleak. In the New World Order it is not only Europe which is experiencing the collapse of artificial walls of disunity. It is not just the United States, Mexico, and Canada which will create a mega-community. It is not just South East

Asia which will learn to re-admit Indo-China to the fold. Also momentous in its historical possibilities is the likely emergence of *AFRABIA*—linking languages, religions, and identities across both the Sahara Desert and the Red Sea in a historical fusion of Arabism and Africanity in the New World Order.

But will *AFRABIA* be a case of rich Arabs in a union with poor Africans? Actually, there are rich countries in Africa, poor countries in the Arab world—and vice versa. Africa's mineral resources are more varied than those of the Arab world—but African countries like Zaire have been more economically mismanaged than almost any country in the Arab world.

*AFRABIA* of the future will include post-apartheid South Africa—richer and more industrialized than almost any other society in either Africa or the Arab world. The *AFRABIA* of the future may economically be led by the oil-rich and the mineral-rich economies—but in a new order where equity and fairness will count as much *between* societies as they have sometimes done within enlightened individual countries. Amen.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The issue of whether the Red Sea is a legitimate boundary of Africa is also discussed in Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: BBC Publications and Boston: Little, Brown Press, 1986), Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup>C. McEvedy, *The Penguin Atlas of African History* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>See R. R. Palmer in collaboration with Joe Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 2nd edition, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>See Merville Herskovits' contribution to Wellesley College, *Symposium on Africa* (Wellesley College, Massachusetts, 1960), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>This question also features in Ali A. Mazrui's television series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Washington, D. C.: WETA, Public Broadcasting System, 1986), Programme No. 1: "The Nature of a Continent."