

EDITOR'S NOTE

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The African Studies Association and *Issue* are fortunate to have the "Focus" section of this number guest edited by Omari H. Kokole, a young Ugandan scholar, and Ali A. Mazrui, the distinguished Kenyan scholar. Our good fortune stems from the timeliness of the topic, "Afro-Arab Relations," and from the provocativeness and high quality of the pieces which serve as the focus of analysis. There are two main reasons we feel the theme of Afro-Arab Relations is timely. First, in recent years, new patterns of contact and interaction between the African and Arab worlds have emerged, and there is a need for critical scholarly analyses of these new phenomena. African and Arab states share membership and form voting blocks not only in international organizations like the United Nations and its various agencies, but they also share membership in the Organization of African Unity. Bilateral and multilateral ties between countries in the two worlds have expanded substantially, and it is clear that we have entered into a new era of African-Arab relations. Second, a consideration of the current status of Afro-Arab relations is timely because of the fact that the 1985 annual meeting of the ASA will be held in New Orleans in conjunction with the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). This number of *Issue* seems the appropriate vehicle to stimulate interest among our membership in preparing papers and organizing panels around this or related themes.

The historical relations between Arabs and Africans have not always been good, particularly from the African point of view. In the lead article in the "Focus" section, Mazrui, however, tries to accentuate the positive and to demonstrate what Africa owes not only to Arab culture, but also to "Semitic" and "Western European" cultures broadly conceived. He writes:

Africa is a cultural bazaar. A wide variety of ideas and values, drawn from different civilizations, compete for the attention of potential African buyers. This marketing of cultures in Africa has been going on for centuries—but a particularly important impact has come from the "Semites" (especially Arabs and Jews) and the "Caucasians" (especially Western Europeans). . . . In sub-Saharan Africa it goes back to the *Triple Heritage* of indigenous traditions, Semitic influences, and links with the Greco-Roman world.

Mazrui's assumptions and arguments in this piece are, as usual, very provocative; but, they are also controversial. One of the reviewers of the essay was Hailu Habtu, a Tigre scholar, who wished to engage Mazrui in a public forum and to offer a counter-perspective. The Editor of *Issue* obliged, and Habtu's rebuttal appears as the lead article in the

"Insight" section of this number. Hailu Habtu vigorously argues that Mazrui's "hidden premise is the existence of an African cultural vacuum . . . destined to be filled by 'universalistic civilizations' . . . On top of being incorrect, the unstated premise is, to say the least, offensive [to Africans]." Mazrui chose not to submit a rejoinder but to leave the matter to be debated by others who might want to join the lively discussion begun here.

The theme of the cultural impact of the Arab World on Africa is continued in the article by Dr. Sulayman S. Nyang, who describes three phases in the development of Islam in West Africa. First, it was an immigrant religion, practiced by seasonal traders. Second, orthodox Islam was adopted by African Muslims. The third stage was the transformation of African Islam by the forces of Western-based modernization in the Twentieth Century.

The other two articles in "Focus", by Dunstan Wai and Omari Kokole, center on international relations. Wai concludes in a similar vein to Mazrui that Africa-Arab relations have been "asymmetrical". That is, much more of Arab culture has penetrated and been absorbed into African culture than the opposite. However, rather than sympathetically treat this subject as does Mazrui, Wai is critical, sensitively explaining that "Arab affluence, generosity, as well as condescending tendency toward Africans, continually reinforce Africa's negative perceptions."

Kokole's article critically evaluates the performance and potential of OPEC aid to African country, and concludes that because OPEC countries are LDCs like African states, they cannot provide needed technology. All they have to offer is money (and highly priced oil). As a result they are limited in what they have done or have the potential to do to help Africa develop. At the same time, he suggests, "They have tried their best and deserve commendation for that."

The articles in "Insight" range from penetrating critiques of scholarship to critical analyses of public policies to a consideration of the pedagogical concerns of Africanists who study African women's history. Each of the pieces in this section should provide considerable food for thought and action.