

# **The Master Synthesizer: Africanity and Islam in Ali Mazrui's Scholarship**

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Ali Mazrui was born in 1933 in Mombasa, Kenya. Sent to England in 1955 for his secondary school education, he remained there until he earned his B.A. (1960, politics and philosophy) with distinction from the University of Manchester. He received his M.A. (1961, government and politics) and Ph.D. (1966, philosophy) from Columbia and Oxford universities, respectively. In Africa, he taught political science at Uganda's Makerere University College (1963-73), and then returned to the United States to teach at the University of Michigan (1974-91) and New York's Binghamton University (1991-2014).

An avatar of controversy, Mazrui was also legendary for the fertility of his mind. Nelson Mandela viewed him as "an outstanding educationist"<sup>1</sup> and Kofi Annan, former secretary-general of the United Nations, referred to him as "Africa's gift to the world."<sup>2</sup> Salim Ahmed Salim, former secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity and prime minister of Tanzania wrote:

Ali Mazrui provided [many of us] with the illuminating light to understand the reality we have been confronting. He armed us with the tools of engagement and inspired us with his eloquence, clarity of

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ideas while all the time maintaining the highest degree of humility, respect for fellow human beings, and an unflagging commitment to justice.<sup>3</sup>

Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature and Mazrui's erstwhile intellectual adversary, also wrote warmly, albeit after Mazrui's death, about "the intellectual industry of scholars such as Ali Mazrui." Soyinka added, "I already feel his absence, and miss him."<sup>4</sup>

Did Mazrui foresee his own fame? Did he know that one day he would be so influential that *Foreign Policy* magazine would name him in 2005 one of the top 100 public intellectuals alive or that in the same year *New African* magazine would dub him one of the top 100 great Africans who had ever lived? Did he foresee that he would be included, to his honor, in David Horowitz's *The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*?<sup>5</sup> When I posed these questions to him in 2007, he replied, rather modestly:

You are asking me if I ever realized that I was an African genius!! My answer is that I am convinced I fall short of a genius, although I have had fans who have so regarded me as a genius from my days at Makerere in Uganda ... I am flattered that there are people in the world who value me so highly, but let me pray that at least one of my children or grandchildren rises to the real ranks of which I have been so prematurely elevated.<sup>6</sup>

I have no intention here to explore systematically why Mazrui was held in such high esteem. That is definitely a worthwhile project that can be pursued on another occasion. For the time being, I wish to share a brief perspective about how his scholarship on Africanity and Islam evolved over time. As the longest-serving associate director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, which Mazrui founded in 1991, I would also like to say a few words about how I remember him.

With clarity, grace, and imagination, Mazrui wrote and published more than forty books and a large number of essays – a massive body of knowledge by any measure. In terms of the range of areas he explored with uncommon flair and in his contributions to scholarship and policy debates, he has simply no peers in Africa.

Although Mazrui stuck to a cultural framework of analysis after publishing "On the Concept of 'We Are All Africans'" in 1963,<sup>7</sup> he became

more focused on it after 1990, subsequent to the publication of his *Cultural Forces in World Politics*.<sup>8</sup> The discipline of political science in North America also opened itself up somewhat following the end of the Cold War, reviving its interest in issues relating to culture and identity. One of the places where Mazrui systematically articulated what he called “the clash of cultures” was in his 1986 9-hours TV documentary “The Africans: The Triple Heritage,”<sup>9</sup> which the American conservative intellectual Charles Krauthammer dismissed as “a historically ambitious, technically superb, visually arresting political tendentiousness.”<sup>10</sup> The Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka also described it, quite unfairly in my view, as Mazrui’s *triple tropes of trickery*.<sup>11</sup> But what upset Mazrui even more was Soyinka’s insinuation that he was not black enough to be African.<sup>12</sup> Mazrui responded:

My African identity is not for you to bestow or withhold—dear Mr. Soyinka ... If I was somebody constantly looking for approval from people who were “blacker” than me, I would have kept a low profile instead of becoming a controversial African political analyst.<sup>13</sup>

It was also at this juncture that the Palestinian scholar Edward Said decided to intervene. He lamented:

In 1999... [Soyinka] writes a tremendous attack on the African political scientist Ali Mazrui, who is a Muslim from Kenya. The essence of the attack on Ali Mazrui is that he is not a pure African. He is an Islamicized and Arabized African. So [Wole Soyinka] the integrative liberationist African ... in Nigeria has become a nativist, attacking a man for not being black enough!”<sup>14</sup>

If Soyinka disapproved of what he saw as the documentary’s Islamic bias, others, especially in the West, decried the “anti-Western underlay” of Mazrui’s script. A barrage of criticism ensued from multiple directions. This was not surprising, given the fact that he was occasionally critical of American foreign policy in the series, even though he had received partial funding for it from Washington. But, remarkably, then-Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and others came forward to defend its showing to the American audience. On the floor of the US Senate, Kerry thus summed up his view about “The Africans”:

It is a series that has sparked a great deal of discussion and controversy. While I cannot endorse all of the conclusions ... its showing

has provided the American people with an-all-too-rare look at Africa from an African perspective.<sup>15</sup>

In any case, in 1993 Samuel Huntington formulated his “clash of civilizations” thesis in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>16</sup> The journal subsequently invited Mazrui to contribute an article on a related theme; he replied by submitting his “Islamic and Western Values,” which it published in 1997.<sup>17</sup> Mazrui also debated Huntington at Princeton University in May 1995. In his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), Huntington expressed admiration for Mazrui’s “colorful phrases.”<sup>18</sup> Decades earlier, we may recall, Ghana’s first president Kwame Nkrumah had also complimented the “literary effort” in Mazrui’s sharp critique of his policies.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas both Mazrui and Huntington dealt with issues of culture and civilizations, their perspective could not have been more different. Mazrui’s culturalist framework placed change at the center of his analyses of culture and identity, and his critique of Huntington reflected the former’s longstanding sensitivity to the issue of change in the context of the postcolonial condition. Mazrui thus wrote:

The worst mistake which Huntington made was not ‘conceptual’ [such as the meaning of civilization] or ‘factual’ [whether the role of state would decline]. The central error he made was temporal, the assumption that clashes of civilizations were parts of the future, rather than inseparable from the past and the present of the human condition.<sup>20</sup>

Mazrui then proceeded to outline the different phases of the clash of civilizations: genocidal, enslaving, imperial, and hegemonic. In all of them, Mazrui believed, the West has been the major transgressor.<sup>21</sup>

If Mazrui was an articulator of the ideology of the global South during the first half of his career, with particular focus on Africa, it can be argued that he became a defender of the ideology of Islam during the second. His Islamic sensitivity reached an acute level in the last decade, after America’s invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. His public position on this issue drew sharp critiques, particularly as they were expounded more systematically in his *Islam: Between Counter-terrorism and Globalization* (2004).<sup>22</sup> Jesse Sebatini’s “Terror in the Ivory Tower: The Case against Ali Mazrui,” which ap-

peared in a student newspaper at Binghamton University in 2005, claimed that Mazrui had links with terrorist organizations.<sup>23</sup> In his response, “The Younger Face of Bigotry: The New McCarthyites,” Mazrui asserted, “I have no connection with any ‘terrorist organization’ – unless you regard the present government of the United States [led by George W. Bush] as such [an] organization. ...”<sup>24</sup>

In an open letter directly addressed to President Bush, Mazrui wrote on April 7, 2003:

Your historic administration keeps on emphasizing that it is not against Islam or the Muslim world. But we have had wars against two Muslim countries so far (Afghanistan and Iraq) and two other Muslim countries have been threatened by members of your administration (Syria and Iran).

But how did Ali Mazrui, the expositor of ideology of the global South, become a spokesperson for Islam in the West? The shift in his emphasis was neither unexpected nor sudden. On the one hand, Mazrui’s documentary had also played a part in his transformation from and Africanist to an Islamicist. As he told me:

When the BBC invited me in about 1980-1982 to do a television series with them about Africa, what they had in mind was a story about “Africa and the West.” Instead, I insisted that the TV series be about what I called “Africa’s Triple Heritage: Africanity, Islam, and the West.” In the TV series I drew attention to Islam as a major part of the African condition. This became a major turning point in my career. Instead of my being viewed exclusively as an Africanist and political scientist, I began to be viewed also as someone who had important and distinctive things to say about Islam. Before long I was receiving an avalanche of invitations to speak about Islam or to play other roles in Islamic institutions. Since then I have served on several boards of Islamic organizations, been chair of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, been elected a trustee to the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, and been elected president of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Mazrui had come to believe in recent years that in contemporary history “negro-phobia” has subsided while “Islamophobia” has increased, rendering the culture line rather than the color line more salient. Although his thought along these lines was formu-

lated earlier, he found additional affirmation of his theory more recently in the 2008 election and 2012 reelection of Barack Obama as the country's first African-American president. Incidentally, Mazrui was in Kenya when President Obama visited our campus (Binghamton University) on August 23, 2013. Obama and Mazrui thus never met in person, but we sought to ensure that he would receive Mazrui's unpublished book-length manuscript, "Barack Obama in Comparative Perspective," while visiting Binghamton. It might also be mentioned in passing that Barack Obama, Sr. and Ali Mazrui shared friends but never met each other.

The issues Mazrui addressed made him more relevant to academic and public discourse during the last twenty years. But his perspective, divergent as it was from the dominant view, continued to marginalize him to some extent in the mainstream disciplines. His "classical" or "traditional" approach, which sometimes allowed him to "embed" himself in the stories he told, also had not endeared him to many of his more "scientifically oriented" colleagues. Others, including some "postcolonial" scholars, saw Mazrui's proximity to the corridors of power as the Achilles' heel of his scholarship. Mazrui's response was that he could be a member of the status quo and its critic at the same time:

If I was looking for a stamp of approval ... I would have kept low profile instead of becoming a controversial African political analyst. If I was looking for the stamp of approval from governments ... I would not have challenged Milton Obote and Idi Amin of Uganda, Daniel arap Moi of Kenya or Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. Obote was sometimes tempted to detain me or expel me; Idi Amin eventually wished he had eliminated me; and Julius Nyerere was in recurrent debates with me. Moi does not know what to do with me.<sup>26</sup>

Although the values Mazrui embraced, the method he espoused, and even some of the audience to whom he addressed himself seemed to keep reducing the size of his fan club, we can be almost certain that his stimulating and substantial intellectual output will be put in the limelight of greater scholarly scrutiny in the future. "When a man comes to know a problem or be certain about a matter," Ibn Khaldun wrote, "he must openly state (his knowledge or his certainty)."<sup>27</sup> By synthesizing African-ism and Islam, Mazrui had sought to do just that.

## Endnotes

1. Ali Mazrui, "A Destiny in Five Dimensions," *Mazrui Newsletter*, no. 25, IGCS, Binghamton University, 2001, 16.
2. Mentioned in Ali Mazrui, "On Boundaries and Bloodline," *Mazrui Newsletter*, no. 25, IGCS, Binghamton University, no 20, 1996. Appendix 4.
3. Salim Ahmed Salim, "Foreword," *A Giant Tree Has Fallen: Tributes to Ali A. Mazrui*, ed. Seifudein Adem, Abdul Samed Bemath, Abdul Karim Bangura, and Jidefor Adibe (Johannesburg: African Perspectives Publishing, forthcoming).
4. Wole Soyinka, "Remembering Ali Mazrui," *Transition* 117 (2015): 193.
5. David Horowitz, *The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Washington, DC: Regenery Publishers, 2006).
6. Seifudein Adem, "Ali A. Mazrui: Witness to History (Interview)," Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, November 2007.
7. Ali A. Mazrui, "On the Concept of 'We Are All Africans,'" *The American Political Science Review* 57, no. 1 (1963): 88-97.
8. Ali A. Mazrui, *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990).
9. Ali A. Mazrui, "The Africans: A Triple Heritage" (PBS/BBC, 1986).
10. Charles Krauthammer, "Deserve Better," *Chicago Sun Times*, September 15, 1986.
11. Wole Soyinka, "Triple Tropes of Trickery," *Transition* 54 (1991): 179-83.
12. *Ibid.*, 180.
13. Ali A. Mazrui, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Soyinka: The Strange Case of Nobel Schizophrenia," (2000), [http://igcs.binghamton.edu/igcs\\_site/dirton3.htm](http://igcs.binghamton.edu/igcs_site/dirton3.htm).
14. G. Viswanathan, ed., *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 221.
15. *Congressional Record*, no. 1444 (part III), October 17, 1986.
16. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.
17. Ali A. Mazrui, "Islamic and Western Values," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 5 (1997): 118-32.
18. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 188.
19. Alamin Mazrui and Willy Mutunga, eds., *Race, Gender, and Culture Conflict: Debating the African Condition. Mazrui and His Critics* (Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2003), 2:38.
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21. Ibid., 366-68.
22. Ali A. Mazrui, Shalahudin Kafrawi, and Ruzima Sebuharara, eds. *Islam: Between Counter-terrorism and Globalization* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004).
23. Seifudein Adem et al., eds. *Black Orientalism and Pan-African Thought: Mazrui and His Critics* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013), 3:83-85.
24. Ibid., 89.
25. Adem, "Ali A. Mazrui: Witness to History (Interview)," November 2007.
26. Adem et al., eds., *Black Orientalism*, 208-09.
27. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. F. Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44.