

The Contributions of Ali Mazrui to African Historical Scholarship

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Abstract: *Professor Ali AL-Amin Mazrui was a political scientist, writer, scholar and commentator of many intellectual issues whose books, documentaries and lectures have created a positive image for Africa. Although with no historical background, Mazrui's widely watched TV series and works generally challenged the Eurocentric perception of a stagnant, colorless, stateless, unscientific and predatory Africa. This research, therefore attempts a search light on the life, times and works of Mazrui with emphasis on his contribution to African historical scholarship. The paper relies on secondary sources, Mazrui's interviews with the press as well as documentaries on Africa. It concludes that in spite of the toga attached to him as a controversial figure; this celebrated political scientist was a historian at heart and a torch bearer for the Africa continent.*

1. EARLY LIFE / EDUCATION

Professor Ali Mazrui, the celebrated African scholar and professor of political science was born on the 24th February, 1933 into the renowned Mazrui dynasty of Mombassa in Kenya, East Africa. The Mazrui clan from which he descended was a highly religious Islamic family whose descendants were known in history as great scholars, rulers and jurist that ruled Mombassa for more than 100years-up to 1837 (Mazrui, 1995). Ali Mazrui's father was a chief judge also called Grand Khadi and a descendant of Islamic jurists (Mazrui, 1985).

With a strong Islamic heritage it was not surprising that young Ali's education would revolve around Quranic schools where Islamic studies and theology were taught to young Muslims. The older Mazrui was enthusiastic that after his son's secondary education, he would attend the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt one of the great citadels of Islamic learning. This plan failed to materialize as the older Mazrui died leaving his son at the age of fourteen (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). Mazrui grew up and taught at the Mombassa Institute of Muslim Education (MIOME) where he had contact with British instructors who assisted him in securing a scholarship to school in Britain. In spite of Mazrui quest for Western education, he upheld the Islamic religion and improved upon his knowledge of Arabic through Arabic courses he offered at the University of Manchester.

2. THE MAKING OF AN AFRICANIST

Ali Mazrui obtained a first degree in political science at the University of Manchester, Britain (1960), Masters at the Colombia University of New York, USA (1961) and PhD at Oxford University, Britain (1966). Yet ironically, it was his schooling abroad, not at home, that sowed the seeds of Africanism in him. The reason may not be farfetched. Indeed, the years that spanned between his under graduate and post graduate years were the years (1950's to 60's) when the agitation for independence among African countries were at their peak. Accordingly, students of African origin in Europe were clamouring for independence, and back home, political parties like the Action Group and Nigeria Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) in Nigeria and CPP in Ghana amongst others were formed with the aim of providing a medium of expression to secure political freedom (Olusanya, 1980). Kwame Nkrumah's words aptly justify this:

Throughout a century of alien rule, our people have with ever increasing tendency, looked forward to that bright and glorious day when they shall regain their ancient heritage, and once more take their place rightly as free men in the world (Nkrumah, 1959).

In furtherance of the above, OkonUya maintains that the 1960's marked a watershed in the development of African history and historiography as it witnessed an explosion in African studies

generally which resulted in the multiplication of African Studies and Research Centers in the United States (Uya, 2004). Similarly, the Black Studies Movement of the late 1960's gave impetus to African studies. It was in this milieu that Ali Mazrui wrote and successfully defended his PhD thesis in 1966 which dwelt on the post-colonial Anglophone Africa. There is no doubt that the cultural setting at the time of his studies in Europe made Mazrui a champion for the cause of Africa. His publications, series of lectures and commentaries, even his activities in student unionism portrayed that, in a country where the majority were Europeans, Mazrui still believed in being an African. As a student, he showed signs of a political activist who contested for and was elected president of the African Students Association in Manchester. This enthusiasm to play a key role in African affairs even while based abroad and a student continued during his Master's programme in the United States and his PhD at Oxford.

3. ALI MAZRUI'S CONTRIBUTION TO AFRICAN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Ali Mazrui has contributed to various disciplines such as political science, Islamic studies, African studies, cultural studies and literature. This has earned him the name "multiple Mazrui." Yet his greatest contribution has been in African and Islamic studies.

Mazrui is believed to have inherited the art of writing from his father who was a pamphleteer in the Swahili and Arabic languages stating that "my father was constantly engaged in debates over social reforms and theological interpretations of Islam." (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008).

The first three books published by Mazrui includes, "Towards a Pax Africana" (Mazrui, 1967a), a published version of his PhD thesis; *The Anglo-African Commonwealth* (Mazrui, 1967b) and "On Heroes and Uhuru Worship: Essays on Independent Africa" (Mazrui, 1967c). As a graduate student, Mazrui had written extensively on Africa's political experience in professional Journals like "American Political Science Review" in the United States and "Political Studies", a British journal. His first article in a major western newspaper in Britain, "Why does an African feel African" was accepted and published with no corrections or alterations whatsoever (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). Mazrui also became a regular face of the British Broadcasting Service in the 70s where he lectured on topics and issues relating to African condition. These lectures culminated in the publication of a book, "The African Condition" in 1980 (Mazrui, 1980). Mazrui's lectures and commentaries were not only broadcast in English but in Kiswahili and heard on radio from London to Africa (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008).

Towards a Pax Africa, Mazrui's first book emphasizes the need for Africans to be their own policeman by being less dependent on the western world and assuming responsibility for their own peace and stability on their continent. Similarly, in a public lecture he delivered in Lagos in 2000, thirty-three years after his first publication, his theme remained the same in this lecture titled, *The African Renaissance: A Triple Legacy of Skills, Values and Gender* (Mazrui, 2000). He defined development as, modernization minus dependency (Mazrui, 2000), and insists that one strategy of overcoming dependency is through indigenization hence increased utilization of indigenous techniques, personnel and approaches to purposeful change (Mazrui, 2000). He maintained that indigenized modernization would include the greater use of African languages in the pursuit of scientific, economic and constitutional change. Mazrui added that, no country had ascended to a first rank technological and economic power through the excessive dependence on foreign languages. Citing Japan and Korea as case studies, Mazrui averred that the former rose to its dazzling industrial height by scientific ting the Japanese language and making it the medium of its own industrialization (Mazrui, 2000).

A comprehensive study of Mazrui's works reveals that his Pan-African and anti-colonial stance which were emphasized in his first book became strongly expressed in all his over 20 books and hundreds of articles between 1967 till date. Some of his works include : *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), Heinemann Educational Books; *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective* (1976), Free Press, New York; *Africa's International Relations* (1977), Heinemann and West view Press; *Political Values and Educated Class in Africa* (1978), Heinemann Educational Books and University of California Press; *The African Condition* (1980), Cambridge University Press; *The Power of Babel : Language and Governance in the African Experience* (1998), James Currey and University of Chicago Press; *Nkrumah's Legacy and Africa's Triple Heritage Between Globalization and Counter Terrorism* (2000), Ghana University Press amongst others.

Ali Mazrui's books, lectures and commentaries made him a celebrated scholar although it was his first three books published in 1967 when he started his career in 1963 at the Makerere University, Uganda that propelled him to enviable heights. He rose to become the first full African professor in Political Science in East Africa and the first Black professor in social sciences in English speaking Africa.

Ali Mazrui had role models, one of which was President Julius Nyerere whom he admired for his intellect. He believed that by ethical standards Mandela was greater than Nyerere while Nyerere was greater intellectually (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). Mazrui also maintained that President Kwame Nkrumah stimulated his vision of Africa as a convergence of three civilizations which he (Nkrumah) called "conscientism" but which he (Mazrui) refer to as "Africa's Triple Heritage" (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). This concept was later elaborated upon and televised in the popular BBC/PBC television series titled, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986). This television program became widely televised and viewed by millions of people from across the world. Part of the Triple Heritage clips captured civilizations from Africa which punctured the Eurocentric perspective of Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, professor of modern History at Oxford and his European cohorts that "Africa had no history". It was always a delight to watch Professor Ali Mazrui moving from one civilization to another showcasing Africa as a historical part of the world where scientific development were present and civilization took place. For this writer, Mazrui's contribution to African historical scholarship reached its peak through this memorable project.

4. ALI MAZRUI: AN ASSESSMENT

Although Ali Mazrui's works in various disciplines earned him the name "multiple Mazrui", yet scholars have criticized his inability to examine subjects in an in-depth manner. Ironically, among Mazrui's critics were African scholars. Like the proverbial saying "a prophet is never respected in his country", James Kariuki maintained that Mazrui was criticized because of his non-commitment to the aspirations of Africa (Kariuki, 1974). Kariuki further states that "they perceive him as an aloof polemicist who is quick to announce and condemn the failure of the continent without suggesting seriously thought-out alternatives" (Kariuki, 1974). One tends to disagree with this perception of Mazrui and notes that Mazrui has actually contributed and made suggestions on the way forward for the African continent in the various books he authored. There are others who see Mazrui's works as always causing controversy, and heated debates. All these never worried Mazrui in his life time. He believed in his interdisciplinary style of writing without owing allegiance to any discipline. In his words,

"My interest is not just in politics as matters of governance, but in the politics of the human condition as a whole. My range is from the politics of religion to the politics of language and literature. There is a sense in which I'm also a political philosopher (Mazrui, 2000).

For this writer, Ali Mazrui has done an excellent work in African studies and by extension promoted African historical scholarship. His consistency in preaching Africanism which runs through all his works in spite of his education abroad marks him out as a true patriot, a worthy son and a torch-bearer for the African people. Kenya's president, Uhuru Kenyatta, described Mazrui as one of Africa's greatest scholars whose "Intellectual Contributions played a major role in shaping African scholarship (www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-29595175). History will always remember him as an intellectual genius, whose scholarly contribution placed Africa in the limelight of world history.

5. ALI MAZRUI: AWARDS, HONORS AND TESTIMONY

Ali Mazrui, formerly the Director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies and Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at Binghamton State University of New York died on the 12th of October, 2014 at the age of 81. During his lifetime, Mwalimu, as he was fondly called, experienced a rocky road to greatness. In spite of the several challenges he faced as a youth he was able to overcome them through dint of hard work. He was named among the top 100 intellectuals in the world by the Foreign Policy Magazine, Washington DC (2005). In the New African Magazine London, Mazrui was mentioned among the top 100 greatest Africans of all times. In Perspectives, London, Ali Mazrui was recognized as the top 100 public intellectuals of the world. Similarly, he had been recognized as a Living Legend by ECOWAS and the African Communication Agency, Abuja, Nigeria. This revered intellectual was also Albert Luthad, Professor-at-Large at the University of Jos, Nigeria; IbnKhalidun, Professor-at-Large, graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences Leesburg Virginia, U.S.A; Andrew D. White, Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies, Cornell

University, Ithaca, New York (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). In addition to the above, Mazrui, during his youthful days obtained a Kenyan Government Scholarship to complete his secondary education in England from where he proceeded to a British University. There he obtained a distinction (1st Class) in the class, won a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship to do a Masters in Columbia University, New York and also a Nuffield College Fellowship for his PhD in Oxford, England (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008).

In spite of all these achievements, Mazrui accepted that he faced various challenges before attaining this height. He confessed to having a third grade (just Pass) in 1949 in the Cambridge School Certificate Examination in Mombasa and was not qualified for college; He was rejected by various institutions in Europe, North America, India, Australia and even the Arab world when he applied for scholarships for about four to five years; He failed to be employed as a junior clerk in Mombasa (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). Yet Mazrui said, "I refuse to accept that situation as a final word about my career" (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). This is because this brilliant teacher and researcher believed in the adage "if at first you don't succeed try and try again."

Ali Mazrui had strong reasons to profess Africanism. His physical ties to various African countries knew no bounds. Yet there were some particular African countries that stood out and had strong bearings on his life. These include Kenya, his birth place and Nationality; Uganda, the birth place of his academic career and country where he first attained professional prominence; Nigeria, the country of his wife, Pauline Uti and place which inspired emotions of his novel-The Trial of Christopher Okigbo (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). It was also here that the Nigerian Television Authority accepted to partner with the British Broadcasting Authority and Public Broadcasting Service in the U.S to produce his television series, The African: A Triple Heritage. Ghana had an impact of Mazrui's PhD thesis while undergoing the program at Oxford. Tanzania, according to Mazrui was the vanguard of his Kiswahili culture. He further recalled that, although Kiswahili was his mother tongue, the language was promoted even more than it was in Kenya, his land of birth (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). Finally South Africa was the first country other than his own to award him a national honor (Grand Companion of Oliver Tambo) in April 2007 (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). It was also in this country that Abdul Bemath, a South African Liberian and Biographer produced the first annotated biography of his works from 1963 to date (Media Chat with Ali Mazrui, 2008). This was done in both electronic and print forms.

6. CONCLUSION

Professor Ali Mazrui has, through his works, challenged historians to author more books on Africa. His ability to identify and proffer solutions to Africa's technological challenges should also encourage scholars to conduct researches, identify societal problems and make recommendations aimed at bringing to an end challenges that mar national development.

Finally, for the youths, Ali Mazrui's life should be a testimony for all. He failed the Cambridge examination and was denied admission to college; failed to secure a job and applied for scholarship for about five years without any success. Yet he forged ahead and later became a celebrated scholar of international repute. His resilience is worthy of emulation.

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