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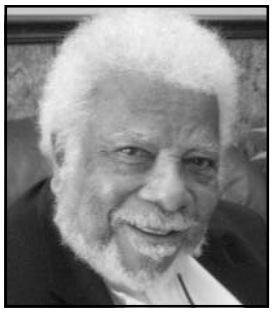
Tribute

Ali A. Mazrui (1933–2014)
A great man, a great scholar



Kathy Whyte/WNBFnews

In November 2012, Ali Mazrui wrote an article titled "Barack Obama: A great man, not yet a great president." He said Barack Obama was a great man but we would have to wait and see if he would become a great president. That is a fair point, I think; but let me also venture to say this. We would not have to wait any longer to say Ali A. Mazrui was a great man and a great scholar. Now some reflections on this man of ideas—a beautiful mind. The mathematical genius depicted in the 2001 Oscars-winning eponymous movie is called "a beautiful mind". And so was Ali A. Mazrui—a beautiful mind. It was this mind which inspired me to write my first book *Paradigm Lost, Paradigm Regained: The Worldview of Ali A. Mazrui* (2002), with a Foreword by Kazuto Suzuki, a rising Japanese academic/diplomat and former colleague of mine at the University of Tsukuba in Japan. So, here was an Ethiopian Oromo in Japan, writing his first book, about a Kenyan in the United States; and the Ethiopian had even never met the Kenyan before he wrote the book. Such was my passion for Mazrui's scholarship—a passion which, now I understand, is shared by so many in Africa and around the world.

I first met Mazrui in the summer of 2002, in Binghamton, New York, when he invited me to his Institute of Global Cultural Studies (IGCS) as a research associate. I was at the time teaching political science just outside Tokyo, in Japan.

I could say that how I felt when I met him for the first time was almost like what he had said he felt when he met one of his intellectual heroes, James Coleman, in 1964 at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Mazrui was intimately familiar with Coleman's scholarship before he met him; I too knew quite a bit about Mazrui's scholarship before I met him in person in 2002. Mazrui said there was an element of hero-worship in his response when he met Coleman; I would say the same about my immediate reaction when I met Mazrui.

These are two dialogues about and with Mazrui I wish to have. I suppose, first, a social scientist approaches me and says: since I never heard about Ali Mazrui, describe him for me in one or two sentences. I will be tempted to retort: can there be a social scientist who has not heard about Ali Mazrui? I allow for the possibility that this

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social scientist was from another planet before I concede that the question has nevertheless an immediate relevance: how could we describe Ali Mazrui in one sentence? So, I decided to summon up the judgments made by South Africa's Nelson Mandela and Ghana's Kofi Annan.

In 1995, Mandela wrote, Ali Mazrui is "an outstanding educationist and a freedom fighter." In 2000, Kofi Annan described Mazrui as "Africa's gift to the world." (The quotations are not imaginary.) I say to myself, I have found the answer to the intriguing question. Ali Mazrui is "an outstanding educationist and freedom fighter, and Africa's gift to the world." The other imaginary dialogue is with Mazrui himself. In his *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), Mazrui let his fictional characters, all dead, speak to each other. But I wish to speak to Mazrui directly. I ask him: "What do you think about the description of you by Mandela and Kofi Annan?" His answer from After-Africa would have been something like this. "First and foremost, let us bear in mind that Mandela's description of me is *mission-oriented*; and Annan's description is *mission-neutral*." (The phrases are my own coinage.) "If Mandela and Annan were slightly exaggerating about my place in the Herebefore," Mazrui would add, "their exaggeration was logically respectable. The fact that one is in the After-Africa and the other in the Herebefore is also only of marginal relevance from the point of view of the matter under discussion. What is more significant is the fact that both Mandela and Annan qualify as *Africans of the blood* and *Africans of the soil*." (The phrases are Mazrui's coinage.) "By the way," Mazrui would say in closing, "life beyond the grave is vastly more democratic than most religions in the Herebefore had implied."

The New York Times published Ali Mazrui's obituary by Douglas Martin on October 20, 2014: "Ali Mazrui, Scholar of Africa Who Divided U.S. Audiences, Dies at 81". If Mazrui was to read this obituary, he would probably say that Martin has committed two of the three sins of the media in the age of globalization, namely, the *sin of commission* and *the sin of omission*. A factual error was committed in Martin's piece, the sin of commission, even if it originated elsewhere. The error was in the claim that it was the governor of a school in Mombasa who sent Ali Mazrui to Britain for his secondary education; in fact, it was the Governor of Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell, who did so. Then there was the sin of omission. Martin mentions what the then Head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, had said objecting to the "anti-Western tone" of Mazrui's TV series, *The Africans*. But Martin "omitted", advertently or inadvertently, a statement made by the then Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts. Kerry argued that the TV series had to be shown to the American audience.

I agreed with Mazrui's imaginary stance, but I did not wish to stop there. I did what I thought Mazrui would have done under the circumstances: write to the editors directly and point out this sin of omission and set the record straight. One of the things I decided to do after we laid Mazrui's body to rest in Mombasa, Kenya, was therefore to write the following letter to *The New York Times*:

Dear Editor,

Douglas Martin's "Ali Mazrui, Scholar of Africa Who Divided U.S. Audiences, Dies at 81" (Oct. 20) appears to minimize Mazrui's legacy, however inadvertently. Martin suggests that Mazrui's 1986 TV series, *The Africans*, was about Africa and nuclear weapons. It was much more than that. If Mazrui had said in the 1980s that Africa should go nuclear, it was an idea which he quickly abandoned, and since then, he has written extensively on a wide range of topics. Martin mentions Lynne Cheney's strong reservations about the series which her institution partially funded. For "balance", Martin should probably have also referred to what the then Senator John Kerry said about Mazrui's TV series: "While I cannot endorse all of the conclusions [of the TV series][…] its showing has provided the American people with an all-too-rare look at Africa from an African perspective." Additionally, such a quote could have reinforced what the title implied.

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Unfortunately, it was not published, but, separately, I drew the editors' attention to the aforementioned sin of commission. The editor was quick to admit the error, in effect, and add the following at the bottom of the online obituary: "An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to the person who was impressed by a speech Mr. Mazrui gave on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, leading to new educational opportunities. It was the governor of Kenya, not the governor of the technical school where he was working as a clerk." I drew one conclusion from my first-hand experience with *The New York Times*. In journalism, as in some other vocations, committing a factual error is viewed as perhaps a more deadly sin than omitting a relevant fact. Or, is it the case that what is a relevant fact—like beauty—is in the eye of the beholder?

Was I Mazrui's "right-hand man"? One of Mazrui's sons used to describe me in those terms in any case, and Mazrui himself seemed genuinely appreciative of my contribution to the Institute. He wrote in 2012: "I can say categorically that one of the most valuable things which have happened to the Institute of Global Cultural Studies in the last two decades has been the appointment of Seifudein Adem." I was in charge of the affairs of the Institute when Mazrui was on his extended lecture tours nationally and abroad, including teaching his classes and my own. But why should I believe what he said about me? The answer is simple—he didn't have to say it.

Mazrui gave me the opportunity to develop myself intellectually by enabling me to learn more about him and his scholarship in different settings. I often accompanied him during his numerous lecture tours. I must admit I was sometimes mistaken for his

son, especially in the airports. I was, therefore, most eager to know what Mazrui thought about my familiarity with his scholarship. And that day came in February 2013, when I received from him an email titled "Mazruiana for Heirs". In the list of recipients of that email were also members of his family. The email contained Mazrui's books, articles, lectures, reports, tapes, and so forth. The message in part read: "…you are the primary heirs—though Seifudein may know more about my work than most of any family-members!!" And, in closing, it said: "When I am gone you may find this 'guide to Mazruiana' very helpful for the record." I was greatly encouraged by Mwalimu's open testimonials, especially coming as it did in the evening hours of his life.

Mazrui had also made other observations about me. On one occasion, he told me I was often successful in disguising my originality. At first I did not know whether he was suggesting that that was a good or bad thing. On another occasion, he wondered why I was often too deferential. In response, I said, that was perhaps due to my Ethiopian up-bringing and my extended stay in Japan. I had lived in Japan for thirteen years. On yet another occasion, he rhetorically asked me: "Who is the Director of this Institute, you or me?" He was apparently less pleased with the administrative assertiveness I occasionally dared to show. The years I was blessed to spend with Mwalimu were extremely rewarding to me not only in the opportunity they offered to study him and his scholarship intensively and closely but also in the simulative effect they had on the growth of my intellect. Thanks to him, I have come to know what I had not known before, including some things about myself. Most importantly, I hope, I have learned one thing from him: learning how to learn.

In a letter I wrote to Mazrui on October 6, 2013, about one month before he was hospitalized (on November 10, 2013), I sought to reflect on the shared benefits of our scholarly bond. The letter, which was also copied for not so mysterious reason to the chairs of three academic departments at Binghamton University, included the following passage:

> In the past seven years, you have given me the opportunity to work with you closely, allowing me to explore different areas of inquiry. The topics range from Africa's experience to Japan's predicament and from the end of the Cold War to the rise of China, and so forth. But your vast scholarship, too, has been a stimulating research project for me. In this context consider, for example, my two books which were published in 2013, and the other two, which are forthcoming before end of the year. These books are either about you, or are co-authored with you, or have in them a chapter by you—also a clear evidence of the fruitfulness and maturity of our intellectual partnership.

One of the last professional acts of Ali Mazrui on Binghamton campus was to forward, upon my request, the above letter to the Dean of Harpur College of Arts and Sciences.

In his writings, generally, Mazrui loved to use three rhetorical devices: rhyme, alliteration, and tricolon. His magic number was therefore three. As those of us who taught classes with him know, even the themes of some of Mazrui's lectures came in "triads". Mazrui's flagship concept was, of course, Africa's *Triple Heritage* which, incidentally, Wole Soyinka once sought to debunk by calling it, rather cruelly, Mazrui's "Triple Tropes of Trickery". These are in any case examples of triples which Mazrui contrived for his discourse. Now let me relate a positive story about the triple events of 2013, it is a story about Mazrui and I, one year before he passed away.

In 2013, we celebrated Mazrui's 80th birthday under the auspices of the 38th annual meeting of the New York African Studies Association in Binghamton which I organized. The meeting was praised as best ever. If so, I have no doubt that that was mainly due to Mazrui's international superstardom. Attendees at the event included the former Head of State of Nigeria, Yakubu Gowon; the noted Kenyan writer, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; President of Binghamton University, Harvey Stenger; Vice Chancellor of Makerere University in Uganda, Ddumba Sentamu; Director of the South Africa-based Center for Conflict Resolution, Adekeye Adebajo; and many other distinguished guests. The Chief Justice of Kenya, Willy Mutunga, was also expected to attend.

In 2013, I published my most ambitious academic article about Mazrui's scholarship in *African Studies Review,* entitled "Ali A. Mazrui, the Postcolonial Theorist".

In 2013, President Barack Obama visited Binghamton University, and we sought to make sure that he would receive Professor Mazrui's work entitled "Barack Obama in Comparative Perspective". Mazrui was in Kenya at the time.