

Reflections

Ali Mazrui: Beacon at the Intersection of Islam and Africa

Ebrahim Rasool

On the occasion of the passing of Ali Mazrui, Rashied Omar, imam of the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, invoked probably the most appropriate verse of the Qur'an to memorialize him: "God bears witness that there is no god but Allah, and so do the angels and those possessed of knowledge, standing firm on justice. There is no God but Allah, the Exalted, the Wise" (Q. 3:18).

There are many who testify to belief in the unity of God, and fewer who accept its corollary, the unity of creation and the unity of humanity. There are many who qualify for the description of possessing knowledge by virtue of qualifications obtained in institutions of learning, whether Islamic or other. It is, however, the third angle of this triangle – the triangle of belief, knowledge, and justice – where the world experiences a deficit. Standing for justice is the point of the triangle that is least populated, or if it is populated, it may well be populated in the absence of understanding the implications of belief in the unity of God or understanding the dynamism of knowledge. Mazrui will be remembered for epitomizing the completeness and perfection of this golden triangle, for indeed his knowledge was founded in his unflinching commitment to *tawhīd* (unity) and this, in turn, impelled him toward utilizing his intellect both for identifying the sources of injustice in the world and positing theoretical and practical solutions towards justice.

The Proud African

Born in Mombasa, Kenya, the son of the eminent Shaykh Al Amin Ali Mazrui, an Islamic scholar and the country's chief judge of Islamic law, the young

Ebrahim Rasool is a South African politician and African National Congress member who served as South Africa's ambassador to the United States (2010-15) and premier of the Western Cape province (2004-08).

Mazrui was steeped in the knowledge and tradition of Islam, good enough and pious enough to be considered a candidate for al-Azhar University. Mazrui had deep roots not only in Islam, but also in the points where Islam and Africa intersect. This was a source of inspiration and nourishment for him, because he was always aware that unlike the Jewish branch of the Semite family that had gravitated toward Europe, the Arab branch had oriented itself toward Africa. The result of this intersection was that scholarship and learning flourished at these critical points of intersection with Islam, with pre-eminent centers of learning in Fes (founded 859), Cairo's al-Azhar (founded 972), and those in thirteenth-century Timbuktu.

In the cauldron of this intersection between Islam and Africa, and later the further intersection – albeit coerced – with European colonialism, he learned the seemingly elusive art for Muslims, namely, the art of the oxymoron, the use of juxtaposition, and the embrace of paradox. This ability to combine two seemingly opposite concepts, to place in the same space the apparently unconnected and to harmonize that which has been held to be in perpetual contradiction, is the hallmark itself of the combination of knowledge and wisdom. So much knowledge in the world today, let alone the Muslim world, is based upon making binaries out of difference, whereas the ability to combine, reconcile and harmonize must remain germane to the very concept of *tawhīd* – unity and integration.

This ability is expressed delightfully at times, such as the concept of *Afrabia*,¹ to denote a natural convergence of the Arab and African worlds. He described Africans as “the people of the day before yesterday, and the people of the day after tomorrow.”² Intriguingly, Mazrui looked at Shakespeare and found in that author’s consciousness a historical continuity of fear and ignorance, prejudice and discrimination. Who else but Mazrui would find in *The Merchant of Venice* insight into anti-Semitism, juxtaposed with Islamophobia in *Othello*. Where others have seen only tragic heroes, Mazrui saw the fault lines of injustice. The same ability to integrate what appears competitive or conflictual is at the very heart of Africa’s “Triple Heritage”: indigenous, Islamic, and western. This integration of thought allowed him to salvage from each tradition that which is positive for the African world, the Muslim world, and humanity at large. In a book that he co-edited, *Africa’s Islamic Experience* (2009), this idea is articulated through a delicious use of juxtaposition: “Christianity and Islam are in an ecumenical relationship when they appear to accept each other as divergent paths towards a convergent truth.”³

The *Tawhīdī* Mind

This ability to combine ostensible opposites and harmonize apparent contradictions is more than the integrative capacity of a *tawhīdī* mind, and indispensable to the extrication of meaning and wisdom from knowledge. It is crucial to grappling with complexity in a world gripped by contending makers of meaning: the often fossilized meaning of traditional orthodoxy trapped in inertia, the cynical (anti-)meaning fashioned by post-modernism and often dispensing iconoclasm, the nihilistic meaning forced on the world by fundamentalist extremism, and the incoherent meaning struggling to emerge as the alternative to the preceding three. Mazrui skillfully navigated his way through this complexity, realizing that orthodoxy is more victim than perpetrator, that post-modernism disparages people's anchors in life and then blames them for behaving like the anchorless, and that while fundamentalist extremism is pernicious in its impact and must be defeated, it feeds off the inertia and cynicism of the latter two.

Mazrui certainly assisted in laying foundations for an alternative to these mindsets. It was in his idea of, and commitment to, justice that the seeds of this alternative could be found. Our scholarship today needs to contribute to identifying, understanding, interpreting, and making available the seeds for the very troubled world in which the ummah, Africa, and humanity finds itself. In the post-colonial Africa of 1973, as professor of political and social sciences at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, his impulse for justice made him question the disappearance of the university's vice chancellor and brought him into conflict with President Idi Amin (r. 1971-79). He chose exile when less committed people would have imposed on themselves a silence to indulge post-colonial Africa's teething problems, or the silence of fear and conformity. Mazrui could easily have accepted Amin's invitation to be his Kissinger. This was the quintessential Mazrui: He understood that the harbinger of justice was often provocation. His provocation was in the realm of thought.

Despite occupying the Albert Schweitzer Chair at Binghamton University, he could have let sleeping dogs lie, but instead spoke about Schweitzer as a "benevolent racist,"⁴ referring to the medical missionary in pre-independence Gabon calling Africans "primitives" and "savages" and treating them in segregated hospitals. Even in this critique, he could not resist paradox, saying that: "Schweitzer made a considerable study of Indian thought without going to India. In contrast, he spent many years in Africa without studying African thought."⁵ Then why did he accept the Albert Schweitzer Chair? "Partly," he answered, "in the conviction that Albert Schweitzer must have had a similar dilemma when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. The philosopher

of Reverence for Life (Albert Schweitzer, 1875-1965) was receiving a prize named after the inventor of Dynamite (Alfred Bernhard Nobel, 1873-1916)!⁶

Lessons from South Africa

I encountered Ali Mazrui for the first time in 1990. By that time Nelson Mandela had been released from prison after 27 years, other political prisoners were being freed, the exiles were returning, and tentative processes toward negotiations were commencing. Non-white South Africans could at last dream of freedom. Besides being in the leadership of the liberation movement, I was also the national coordinator of the interfaith movement, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, whose annual flagship event was the Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture. That year we invited Mazrui to deliver that lecture as the keynote address to the first National Interfaith Conference, which was designed and timed to influence the values and character of the new South Africa of which we were all dreaming. He initially refused to attend, because he believed that the academic and cultural boycott of South Africa had not been officially lifted. We convinced him, with letters from the African National Congress and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that he would be most welcome.

In retrospect, asking him to come was our own act of irony. We wanted Mazrui to be part of the team of midwives who would give birth to a free, non-racial, united, and human rights-oriented South Africa. We had all watched the compelling television series “The Africans.” In the last episode, he had categorized the struggle in South Africa as the “final racial conflict” in which the defeat of the whites would allow black South Africans, and thereby Africa as a continent, to gain control of “the most advanced nuclear infrastructure,” giving Africa enormous leverage in global politics. He told *The Los Angeles Times*: “I want black Africa to have the bomb to frighten the system as a whole.” We all know, of course, that after negotiating the apartheid regime out of political power, one of the first decisions Mandela made as president was to order the dismantling of South Africa’s nuclear arsenal and to put the enriched uranium to peaceful use.

At this moment of promise, preceding Mandela’s historic accession to political leadership, Mazrui gave enormous momentum to the coherence of a future united South African nation in an address titled “Africa’s Pro-Democracy Movement: Indigenous, Islamic, and Christian Tendencies.” He spoke to us about the convergence in principle of seemingly divergent parts. He legitimized our own thoughts about fashioning, from the conflictual and contradictory inheritance of the South African complexity, the best in our variety of tendencies to achieve our goals. He appeared happy to be disproved regarding his fear of

a final racial conflagration in South Africa. But it was his expectation that the fall of apartheid would usher in Africa's second liberation struggle. Whereas the first liberation struggle was the struggle for independence from colonial rule, the second one that could now commence was a struggle for social democracy and social justice.

He exhorted all religious communities to continue their active involvement in this struggle, as they had during the anti-apartheid struggle, so as to underpin the second liberation struggle with the same ethical and moral underpinnings for Africa to transcend its painful past. He believed that Africa was truly poised to provide leadership in the world. Referring to Leopold Senghor, Catholic poet and the first democratically elected president of Senegal, he said: "Only in Africa can you find a Muslim country accepting a Christian as a head of state, not for one or two terms, but for 20 years [1960-80] without riots on the streets or objections about being dominated by an 'alien' religion."⁷

In the world in which we live, and in a pre-election United States, Mazrui's challenge to western democracies on that occasion to become as accepting of a Muslim leader – or even of Muslim citizens – resonates. But what should also resonate with Muslims, especially those who find themselves in minority situations, is his assessment of the Muslims' integration in the South African struggles against colonialism, slavery, segregation, and apartheid. He found this to be almost as important as the end of apartheid. He said: "In the 1990s, the RSA [Republic of South Africa] celebrated not only its first multi-racial democratic elections, but also the 300th anniversary of the arrival of Islam in the country – a minority religion which has proven more historically resilient than anyone expected."⁸

The example of Senegal and the resilience of the South African Muslim minority, together with the commitment of the South African Christian majority, to build an inclusive democracy and to construct a nation that is at once diverse and united offered Mazrui proof of his thesis that Africa could become ecumenical, that conflict and competition between Islam and Christianity could be transformed into cooperation, and that where missionaries and evangelists shift the emphasis from "saving souls to saving lives," there is the hope of a Christo-Islamic ecumenism and the consequent rise of a service-oriented religion for the twenty-first century. This ecumenism was central to one of Mazrui's principal intellectual themes: the achievement of a *Pax Africana*, the great African peace based on his notion of "racial sovereignty" where Africans will take charge of the future, where Africa will be freed of the influence of the colonial past, and African empowerment could be built.

Anti-Colonial, Non-Conformist

No one could doubt that Mazrui was anti-colonial to the very fiber of his being. When his documentary series “The Africans” was ready for broadcast, one of the main sponsors, the National Endowment for the Humanities, insisted that its name be removed from the credits. Its then-chairperson, Lynne V. Cheney, criticized the series as a “one man soapbox” permeated by “the idea that the West is to blame for all of Africa’s problems.”⁹ However, to accept this assessment of Mazrui’s anti-colonial thought is to miss his true courage. It required enormous courage in post-colonial Africa for an intellectual from Africa to refuse to conform to the prevailing dogma and received wisdom. It was a time when few political leaders and intellectuals could see beyond the damage of western colonialism and capitalism, beyond the wanton extraction of minerals and brutal enslavement of people. It was a time when few political leaders and intellectuals in Africa dared to critique Africa’s experimentation with socialism, Marxism, and communism. It was a time when the belief was pervasive that there was nothing to be retrieved from western capitalist democracies.

The intellectual courage of Mazrui allowed him to consider the idea of African liberalism, thereby going against a rejectionist tide. He understood that the capitalist West had not lived up to its liberal or capitalist ideals and believed that the perversion of both had effectively led to a global apartheid, with a part of the world excluded from economic development and overlooked for democratic rights. The baby, however, should be saved from the bathwater. Liberal ideals such as democracy, human rights, freedom, the rule of law, equality and the separation of powers would find fertile ground on the African continent, as would entrepreneurship and human development. This was counter-instinctive in post-colonial Africa, to the extent that the Nigerian author and Nobel Prize winner in literature, Wole Soyinka, suggested in 1986 that Mazrui had been “brainwashed.” By 1989 the world had been turned on its head: the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed; communism proved an unworkable system and the market returned with too great a vengeance; and the peoples of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Africa, and Asia all yearned for the very things about which Mazrui had been speaking and writing.

Undoing Muslim Binaries

In the works of Ali Mazrui, we see the same courage displayed in his analysis and prescriptions for the Muslim community. Just like in Africa, he did not see an incompatibility between the Shariah and democracy, Islam and women’s rights, Muslim nations with non-Muslim leaders, the Muslim world and mod-

ernization, and Muslim life and liberal ideals. But, as in all aspects of his thought, Mazrui brought complexity and nuance to his thinking. This allowed him to distinguish between theological Islam – its system of rules, restrictions, and doctrines – and historical Islam – the way Muslims have lived their lives:

- Many Muslim scholars would hold, for example, a theological restriction on women in public life and leadership positions, whereas entire Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have preceded even advanced democracies in the election of women as presidents or prime ministers.
- Mazrui refused to conflate liberal Islam with moderate Islam: Moderate Islam would be a faith tailor-made for assimilation into the West, whereas liberal Islam would not tolerate living under dictatorships and illiberal, repressive regimes.
- He distinguished between the liberalism described above and libertarianism as an essentially individualistic and permissive ideology.
- He distinguished between modernization and westernization, where the latter may include capitulation to the geostrategic considerations, economic interests, and cultural uniformity of the West. The former, on the other hand, may include the gamut of liberal reforms, institutional design, and economic development so necessary in the Muslim world.

Today, Mazrui may well argue that the wrong side of all of these distinctions is precisely the cause of the proliferation of fundamentalist extremism and the radicalization of some Muslim youth. He identifies four key reasons for such radicalization:

- The imperial policy of the West, manifested by war and occupation;
- The Israeli oppression of Palestinians, given a free pass by the West;
- The humiliations after 9/11, as seen in the growth of Islamophobia; and
- Domestic factors in the Muslim world, such as authoritarianism, economic stagnation, corruption, and the absence of freedom.

Against this, Mazrui would make a case for liberalism in the Muslim world using as evidence (1) the approval for democracy in that part of the world, (2) the growing advancement of women, (3) the rise in interfaith cooperation, and, finally, (4) the growing opposition to extremism. He could, of course, also have cited the initial energy and enthusiasm evident in the Arab Spring.

He saw, however, the Muslim world currently as being, on the one hand undemocratic (although one may go so far as to suggest that significant parts

are anti-democratic), and pre-democratic on the other hand. I suspect that from his identification of the pre-democratic phase, as was a country like Egypt in 2012, the United States and the West could have learned lessons before allowing the gains of the Arab Spring to be stillborn or either strangled in their infancy. As a consequence, the impediments identified by Mazrui to democracy remain in place: royalism, particularly in the Arab world; militarized rulers, whether in uniform or not; weak or failed states; and infant, vulnerable democracies. In typical Mazruian fashion, he impudently proceeds to ask the question of whether the United States is not possibly in a post-democratic phase? He asks this at the hand of the repeal of freedoms and civil liberties occasioned by the “war on terror.” He asks this at the hand of the growing inequality and limited participation of ordinary Americans in the economy. He asks this at the hand of the dysfunctionality of the political system and its domination by moneyed interest groups and the distortion of democracy as a result.

Provocation Precedes Thought

But as we have already seen, Mazrui was not without controversy, whether in his production and defense of “The Africans,” or in going against the tide in the ideological or philosophical streams of post-colonial Africa, or in asserting a distinction between theological Islam and historical Islam. He set out to provoke thought as the precursor to justice, even at the risk of being controversial. “My life,” he once said, “is one long debate.”¹⁰ And debate he did!

But there were those who appreciated Mazrui’s abrasiveness and provocation, and particularly his television series. *The Washington Post*’s Tom Shales wrote: “The alternative would be an innocuous, safely ‘balanced’ documentary on Africa that made no ripples, provoked no discourse.”¹¹ This assessment accorded with Mazrui’s goal for his anti-colonial discourse in *The Africans*. He said unapologetically: “I was invited to look at Africa as an African. I wasn’t trying to run for election in the US.... The last thing I wanted to do was pander to Western prejudices.”¹²

In one of Mazrui’s last lectures delivered on South African soil in 2008 at the University of Cape Town, titled “Barack Obama and the Black Atlantic: Towards a Post-Racial Global Africa,” he praised Barack Obama as the first black American president and called it a breakthrough in race relations. Courageously, to some controversially, he subsequently revised his position in a 2009 lecture, titled “Fighting Evil from Nuremberg to Guantánamo: Double Standards in Global Justice.” He criticized Obama’s “war

on terror”: “One question which the Obama ‘war on terror’ has posed is whether the drone has become a weapon of ethnic-specific targeted assassinations.” He posed the question: “If the alleged terrorists against the United States had been Europeans, like a Russian Communist or Austrian Nazi, would any American president have chosen targeted assassinations as an answer to the problem?”

The Intellectual Legacy

Mazrui has proven to be an intellectual who cannot be ignored. His voice has been silenced and his pen has run dry. What we have is a legacy of thought and scholarship, sometimes academic and sometimes polemical, but always provocative and worthy of debate. His aim was not to be loved – yet he was. Even in his exile from Africa, his umbilical cord was never severed. On the contrary, his commitment and advocacy for the continent – what he called “a remarkable continent” – grew proportionately to both his distance and time away from Africa. In an obituary, Amii Omara Otunu, professor of history and international human rights at the University of Connecticut, said that Africa had lost a great thinker who should belong to Africa’s intellectual Hall of Fame. It is rare that intellectuals in the humanities, the political sciences, and the social sciences gather the kind of consensus, or the absence of contestation, that would easily qualify them for such an award. Mazrui would argue that this is the antithesis of the task of intellectuals in these spheres. With his objective of justice, the abrasiveness and provocation of his thought, and his methodology of juxtaposition and paradox, Mazrui was not designed for consensus or platitudes.

For him it was sufficient that he occupied academic seats named for the pre-eminent thinkers and fighters for justice, freedom, and equality in the world: the Albert Luthuli Professor at Jos University in Nigeria, named for the President of the ANC and Nobel Peace Laureate; the Chancellor of the Jomo Kenyatta University in Kenya, named for intellectual, freedom fighter, and founding president of independent Kenya; Walter Rodney Professor at the University of Guyana, named for the theorist of Underdevelopment; and the Ibn Khaldun Professor at the School of Islamic and Social Studies in Leesburg, Virginia, named for the pre-eminent pre-modern Muslim scholar of history and sociology. For Mazrui, it would be sufficient that the International Institute of Islamic Thought conferred on him its Distinguished Scholar Award in 2011 and that today it again gathers us to memorialize his scholarship. True to the paradox and irony that characterized his work, Mazrui may even find affirmation in the discomfort his work caused in the capitals of the West.

Mahmood Mamdani, a colleague who taught with him in Uganda, Tanzania, and the United States, appropriately captures the importance of this intellectual giant who, for decades, was a beacon at the intersection of Islam and Africa: “We should think of Ali Mazrui as a long-distance runner from a continent that specializes in giving the world some of its best... Ali ran to his last breath: the ink kept flowing and the corpus kept growing, and the voice was as booming as ever. Full of zest and fearless... Ali was a public intellectual who defined the terms of political debate for his generation!”¹³

May Ali Mazrui’s work continue to inspire and provoke, elicit debate and cause consternation, all the while moving Africa to justice and pointing the Muslim world to its destiny of freedom!

Endnotes

1. Ali Mazrui, “Afrabia: Is it a mere intellectual fascination or can it be realized?” *The Azanian Sea, An Online Journal of Africa and the Indian Ocean World*, January 27, 2010.
2. The quotation is from Dr. Mazrui’s narration of “The Africans” produced for the BBC.
3. Ali Mazrui et al., *Africa’s Islamic Experiences: History, Culture, and Politics* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2009), 3.
4. Ali Mazrui, “What is a Benevolent Racist?: The Case of Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Laureate,” published online January 31, 2012: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Professor-Ali-Mazrui/28889396430>. The note served as a basis for speeches in 2012.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ali Mazrui, “Africa’s Pro-Democracy Movement: Indigenous, Islamic and Christian Tendencies,” keynote address delivered at the 6th Annual Desmond Tutu Peace Lecture, National Interfaith Conference on Religion and State Relations, Johannesburg, South Africa.
8. Mazrui, *Africa’s Islamic Experiences*, 3.
9. Matt Schudel, “Ali A. Mazrui, controversial scholar of African politics and culture, dies at 81,” *The Washington Post*, 21 October 2014.
10. Douglas Martin, “Ali Mazrui, Scholar of Africa Who Divided U.S. Audiences, Dies at 81,” *The New York Times*, 20 October 2014.
11. Tom Shales, “The World of the Africans,” *The Washington Post*, 7 October 1986.
12. Ibid.
13. Mahmood Mamdani, “Ali Mazrui defined the terms of political debate for his generation,” *Daily Monitor*, 15 October 2014.