

“Ali Mazrui” ... An Afro-Arab case

I met with the prominent Arab-African intellectual, Ali Mazrui, early in December, 1976 at a symposium on Arab-African relations held in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. I met Mazrui there in my capacity as one of the coordinators of the symposium along with Professor Mohamed Omar Bashir. The symposium was held at a time when there were difficult economic conditions in Africa due, mainly, to a hike in global oil prices, with the media blaming the Arab “petrodollar” for causing the crisis. There was psychological and media pressure on the Arabs to address the invented crisis which was believed to be behind their great prosperity!

On that day, Ali Mazrui, as an intellectual of Omani-Emirati origin, started to pay attention to his Arab identity along with his actual Africanity, considering that his ancestral family had spent several centuries in Mombasa, Kenya.

Prof. Ali Mazrui was a known critic of any type of despotism especially among African leaders. He also confronted *extreme* leftist groups as well as several *dictatorial figures* including the former-Ugandan dictator, *Idi Amin* and others.

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His pre-occupation went beyond criticizing “oriented” development policies and was extended to the field of international relations where he had many intellectual confrontations even in UNESCO circles.

Due to the cultural and intellectual conflicts he was involved in, Mazrui had an uneasy relationship with several young African political scientists, including myself and others like Mahmood Mamdani, Dan Nabudere, Yash Tandon, Issa Shivji, Okwudibia Nnoli and Archie Mafeje. We saw him as a conservative and liberal intellectual, who was more of a Western figure teaching in their largest universities in Michigan, New York, and Binghamton, and behaving like their intellectual conservative leaders.

Despite his divergent views and confrontation with some young African political scientists, Mazrui was the one who led the campaign to restore the standing of Walter Rodney in Guyana,

after he was assassinated by the imperialists in June 1980, while defending the people’s rights.

Mazrui’s writings focused on different types of colonialism. This made him to link Zionism in Israel with Apartheid in South Africa in his defence of the Palestinians.

Mazrui was always keen to attend any conference on African political sciences because of his love for debates. His intellectual battles with some members of CODESRIA and other social scientists, especially the late South African scholar Archie Mafeje, on the issue of colonization and self-colonialism reveal his permanent desire for debate.

We translated and published the proceedings of this debate in Arabic, as it raised a new awareness among the new generation of scholars in the Arab world. This initiative encouraged more than one Arab nation to translate his famous work about culture and Islam.

Following the “Sharjah” symposium, Mazrui became more preoccupied with the Arab Islamic culture and he therefore became, in my opinion, “An Afro-Arab case”



Most of Mazrui's writings went beyond his Arab origin in Africa, as he espoused his triple African heritage, which constitutes an integrated body and not a stratification of his identity.

Mazrui believed that Islam and Arabism are more closely related to African traditional beliefs and national cultures than Western Christianity. He also thought that the different varieties in the elements of the African and Arab Islamic culture provide a fusion among Arab and Africans, which is preferable to the confrontational relation between Africans and the world of Western Christianity.

Ali Mazrui's debate with *Fukuyama led to a revelation of the spirit of hegemony in Western culture. Also, his fierce debate with Huntington* about conflict of civilizations shed light on Western cultural

biases, which do not exist in any of the Islamic cultures.

Mazrui also contended that women's rights and how the status of women was perceived was better before colonization in Africa and also in the Arab world. The situation deteriorated during the time of "conservative" colonial state which claimed modernization as well as under the rule of patriarchal tyrant Arab-African states.

Mazrui also tackled historical, geographical and social events relating to Africa and the Arab world. For instance, he questioned the logic behind placing Yemen and Ethiopia, which are just a few kilometers apart, in two different continents, whereas Madagascar and Ivory Coast are regarded as "African States" in spite of the distance between them. He also contended that the spread

of AIDS disease in the Islamic regions is less drastic than the other regions, because of the rules of Islam.

Mazrui's views have always been clear about the need for a coalition of peoples in the South; especially the Arabs and Africans. Indeed, he wrote extensively on the importance of Afro-Arab cooperation within the framework of his hope in political peace and global culture. His arguments about "Afrabia" affirm the responsibility of Africans and Arabs to work together towards development and peace in Africa and the Arab world. It is possible, according to Mazrui, to merge the resources of wealthy Arabs and Africans in order to meet the needs of poor peoples in Africa and the Arab world under a joint Arab-African administration. We can, therefore, say that Ali Mazrui was truly an "Afro-Arab case"!