'Benign' Recolonization and Malignant Minds in the Service of Imperialism*

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Alarm Bells Ringing

Some time in October last year I received some frenzied telephone calls from some Egyptian intellectuals and scholars, enquiring indignantly: ' What kind of African scholar is this Ali Mazrui? How can he say that Africa needs recolonisation?' ' Where and when?' I asked in my bewilderment. It turned out that some had seen it as a commentary in Arabic newspapers and others had heard it in the newsreel. However, none could identify the source of the news. This seemed to be of lesser importance than the message itself. It was that dramatic and probably this is what Ali Mazrui had intended. Of course, being an African myself, I had to see it to believe it. This proved very difficult and frustrating. It was not until I went to Europe in January, 1995 that I could get hold of a copy of the original text from African colleagues. Significantly enough, they had been discussing the article among themselves while their European ' hosts' looked on smilingly.

The conjuncture is most unfortunate as it coincides with the period when European racism has reached new heights under the leadership of the Christian Democrats or Conservatives. This might not have entered Mazrui' s mind whose extreme egocentrism is well-known among African scholars within the continent and in the diaspora. Suffice it to say, the article had appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* of August 4, 1994 but distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate. Ironically enough, the particular copy I received was printed in Pretoria, where Africans have just ascended to power. The juxtaposition must have infuriated them, as it did the OAU and some ECA representatives in Addis Ababa. But, as will be seen later, Ali Mazrui spares the South Africans for entirely different reasons. Some African scholars I talked to over the phone were also shocked but not surprised, including those who are personally close to Ali Mazrui. Among other things, this makes it possible to discuss Ali Mazrui' s utterances, without personal rancour.

Ali Mazrui's Record

Ali Mazrui is by some reckoning the most prominent African professor. According to report, he is at present one of the three ' mega-professors' in the social sciences in the USA. He is also one of the only two African scholars who have ever been asked to give the Reith Lectures in England. Likewise, he has had the rare privilege of being put in charge of a multi-million dollar programme for the BBC called *The Africans*. Furthermore, he has had the honour of being invited to join the Advisory Board of the World Bank. There are many lesser honours which Ali Mazrui would reel out without any prompting for there is one thing he did not learn from the British, namely, that self-praise is no recommendation. His pride lay elsewhere. As he declared in an Afro-Arab conference in Sharja in 1977, this was part of what he described as ' counter-penetration' of the colonizers by the colonized. Nobody was convinced. In fact, one of the African scholars from the USA walked out of the conference room, protesting that ' This fellow is obscene' . It was not to Ali Mazrui' s Freudian metaphor that he was objecting so much but rather to his grotesque intellectual rationalisations. But even so, what Ali Mazrui had going for him was enough to excite the envy of many a professor in Africa and, indeed, elsewhere.

For these accomplishments Ali Mazrui is often described in the Western media as a ' leading African scholar' . Even in the article under review, the editors did not forget to project him as a ' Kenyan author' .Why not Albert Schweitzer Professor of African Studies in New York? The fact of the matter is that Ali Mazrui is serviceable to the Americans or the British as an African. The latter is more relevant than anything else for there are other outstanding African scholars but who might not be so serviceable. Samir Amin is first and foremost among them. Not only has he made a lasting contribution to the devel-

opment of social science in Africa but also his scientific integrity and scholarship is of a different order altogether compared to Ali Mazrui' s. Owing to the fact that his is not serviceable to imperialism, instead of honouring him, they dishonoured him in the UN system, despite the fact that IDEP was flourishing under his intellectual leadership. (Ali Mazrui might not even remember this, given his preference for airy-fairy-effusions.) Needless to say, all this was done with the complicity of the same putrid African governments whose countries Ali Mazrui is recommending for ' recolonisation' .

Another interesting and illustrative example right next door to Ali Mazrui is Edward Said, the illustrious Palestinian Professor of Literary and Cultural Criticism at Columbia University. His scholarship and erudition would put Ali Mazrui to absolute shame. Yet, in the same way as in Samir Amin' s case, his unserviceability to imperialism (see his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993) has brought him nothing else but Levitical abominations. This makes one wonder whether what we are talking about is scholarship or something else.

There is no doubt that Ali Mazrui has a brilliant mind that by all counts he is a prolific writer. He has written more than 20 books and numerous articles. He is a gifted writer, a master at coining catchy phrases and at conjuring up images of the grotesque and the ridiculous. For the same reason his oratory is unsurpassed and attracts big audiences. Yet, with all this in his favour Ali Mazrui has hardly any followers among African Scholars. He has produced no body of knowledge which they could use for building sustainable systems of thought about African societies. Like newspaper articles or commentaries, his books are read albeit with pleasure and forgotten. Even worse, in immediate encounters he tends to draw a negative intellectual and ideological response from African scholars – young and old. This is something one has observed since our days at Makerere College in the mid-1960s. He has been called names in his face by angry or outraged African scholars.

The same thing happened 25 years later at a CODESRIA symposium in Kampala in 1991. Some of the people involved were fairly senior e.g. President Museveni, Tarsis Kabwegyere and, of course, Mahmood Mamdani. I also tried to have a quieter dialogue with Ali Mazrui. All seemed to be of no avail. This was most embarrassing because during that symposium there was a deliberate effort to rehabilitate Ali Mazrui at a time when the Zionist lobby in the USA was doing everything possible to undermine him, including some unworthy personal attacks in *Newsweek*. This aside, once in a review of some of Mazrui' s work Christopher Fyfe, who has long been associated with African Studies, asked rhetorically, ' Need our author be such a gadfly?' This raises question about the role in which he is cast by this western admirers. If Ali Mazrui is a leading African scholar, whom is he leading and where to?

Apart from ideological divergences, Ali Mazrui' s African Scholarship is in doubt. Since he escaped in 1971 from the clutches of Idi Amin whom at first he had given support against Milton Obote' s ' violent constitutionalism' and ' The Move to the Left' , Ali Mazrui has been visiting Africa like an intellectual tourist. Not that this matters much as he has never been a believer in solid scientific work. In 1966 when we were gathered in Makerere to discuss field work and its importance, Ali Mazrui' s only question was whether in our considerations we had left room for library work. Everybody laughed knowingly. As is revealed by the references in his books, his data is culled largely from newspaper cuttings, radio newscasts, and conversations with leading politicians when the opportunity offers itself. Using his known mental agility and great sense of imagination, from these he produces bright but ephemeral ideas like white phosphorus in a bowl of water.

In 1966 in Makerere he dramatically asserted that, if it had not been for the English language, there would have been no African nationalism. This assertion disconcerted African nationalists but delighted British ex-colonial officers who had turned academics after independence. In 1970 in Dar-es-Salaam University he castigated the leftists for their intolerance and declared that everybody was entitled to his ideas, including racist Verwoerd in South Africa (he could have included Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany). The implicit contradiction here is that while ideas are perceived as primary, their practical implications are eschewed unless they come from the ' left' .

In 1991 in Kampala Ali Mazrui had come full circle. Along with others, he declared that a nation which does not produce knowledge in its own language cannot develop. But according to his 1966 testimony, English had developed African nationalism. And why not an African ' nation' ? Fully aware of the fact that the total eclipse of Eastern European communism was a foregone conclusion, he for the first time put socialism on a part with capitalism. He ostentatiously observed that socialism is best at redistribution and poor at production while capitalism is best at production and poor at redistribution. With great aplomb, he suggested that in the event what would be ideal is to combine the socialist redistributive system with capitalist production – a perfect recipe for African countries which took into account neither the practical implications of the actual existing crisis of accumulation in these countries nor the history of social democrats in Scandinavia and other countries such as Holland and the problems they are facing now under the drive for greater concentration of capital in Europe. Barely three years later; in 1994 Ali Mazrui has yet another ideal solution for Africa: ' recolonisation' .

'Benign Colonization': Intellectual Bankruptcy or Self-prostitution?

Ali Mazrui' s discourse on ' benign colonisation' is intellectually bankrupt, analytically superficial, sensational, and downright dishonest. First, as is typical of him, he uses what would be social science concepts as mere words or slogans e.g. social ' decay' , ' decomposition' , ' dependent modernisation' , ' national freedom' etc. Historically, the concept of ' social decay' or ' social decomposition' is used with reference to old societies that were once cohesive and viable but were getting *outmoded* under changed socio-economic conditions. Post-independence states in Africa are only one generation old nor could it be proved that during this short period they had become cohesive and self-sustaining. In fact, the opposite is generally true of most of them. Power struggles ensued within them almost immediately after independence. These took the form of competition between political elites with different regional or ethnic backgrounds and later between different fractions of the bureaucracy e.g. the civilian vs. the military establishment. This was a reflection of the artificial nature of the colonial state. African leaders were fully aware of it, as is shown by their perpetual concern about ' nation-building' . This presupposed the attainment of a unitary nation state. But the conception

itself was ill-founded and inevitably degenerated into one-party state dictatorships. This in turn exacerbated centrifugal tendencies within the African ex-colonial state and destroyed the necessary conditions for economic production and social reproduction. In this sense Africa is definitely undergoing a process of political and economic disintegration.

However, it cannot be assumed that this necessarily means social decay. The successive collapse of African states in the 1990s that Ali Mazrui finds so alarming has been accompanied by new democratic social movements which have brought to power new regimes or at least held at bay the old dictatorships. True enough, there is hunger and civil strife in Africa. But there is also social vibrancy and militancy we have not seen since the independence movement. Popular civil wars like in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Togo, Somalia, Western Sahara and so on might be the social price that has to be paid in order to deconstruct dominating and coercive structures. The collapse of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe was celebrated in the West, as would be expected. What is of interest to us is that the same processes of political and economic disintegration that are found in Africa are taking place in the various Eastern European countries. In several of them is increased poverty among the mass of the people and there are civil wars which are epitomised by the war in Bosnia, which the UN and NATO have not been able to stop, despite Ali Mazrui' s illusions about an ' African Peace-keeping Force' . By failing to recognise these obvious historical parallels Ali Mazrui can be accused of being an unconscious agent of Western racism.

Concerning civil wars in Africa more could be said. Ali Mazrui, like a breast-beating liberal, flaunts to the world ' the bitter message that has emerged from the horrifying events in Rwanda' . Africans know better than that. We do not know yet with certainty what happened in Rwanda and for that reason CODESRIA is planning a special workshop on the Great Lakes social formations. What happened in Rwanda is not new in Africa and contrary to Mazrui' s facile assumption, it might have nothing to do with ethnic imbalance between Ba-Tutsi and Ba-Hutu. The civil wars in Angola and Mozambique cost millions of lives. The same imperialist countries that are now crying, ' wolf' , contributed to the tragedy in no mean way. The US Strategy of ' low-intensity warfare' adopted since the Angolan and Mozambican civil wars means that when it is necessary warring Africans will be helped to engage in mutual extermination or genocide. For southern Africa this has been fully documented by Horace Campbell, among others. Therefore, conflicts in Africa need not to be associated with ethnicity. Since independence Lesotho, a single-ethnic country, has had a series of coups and countercoups. Lately, another single-ethnic country, Somalia has been plunged into the worst kind of civil war in Africa.

The proposition that Africa be recolonised is not only preposterous but is also mischievous in that it is not meant for African consumption. It is again Ali Mazrui playing up to his Western gallery. He is acutely aware of the racist and imperialist connotation of the term and for this reason he tries to dispense with the ' white man' s burden' (a crude cliché). He does this by inviting Asians and Africans to be custodians of the envisaged ' benign colonisation' – a contradiction in terms, as ' colonisation' implies political imposition by whosoever does it. In trying to deal with this hare-brained scheme Ali Mazrui makes suggestions which verge on lunacy. For instance, he proposes a ' Trusteeship' system – like that of the United Nations over the Congo in 1960' . He seems to be oblivious of the fact that it was under the same imperialist trusteeship that Patrice Lumumba was eliminated. Likewise, as an East African, he should have known that the relationship between Asians and Africans still suffers from an unresolved imperialist legacy. Ali Mazrui definitely goes overboard and loses all sense of reality when he imagines that Egypt could be called upon to ' re-establish its " big brother" relationship with Sudan' , or that Ethiopia, despite the challenge from former oppressed nationalities, could resume not only its imperial role but also ' run Somalia on behalf of his supposed ' United Nations' , or that South Africa and Nigeria could be invited to play the role of benign sub-imperialist powers in their regions. How absurd!

This is most amazing because every political scientist in Africa knows that these are huge incompatibilities and that Ali Mazrui' s prescription is in fact contrary to popular sentiments on the continent. ' The rejection of the monolithic one-party state, the demand for ' democratic pluralism' and regional autonomy or ' decentralisation' are a sufficient indication of current trends on the continent. Hegemonic powers are resented or at best treated with suspicion. This is true of South Africa in the SADC region and of Nigeria in ECOWAS. It is also true of Egypt *vis-à-vis* the Sudan. The Ethiopian empire has already been dismantled and will not be resurrected. All these facts cast serious doubt on Mazrui' s sense of reality and renders his claim that there is a ' colonisation impulse that is resurfacing' in Africa spurious. Above all, he is basically confused because he cannot advocate ' recolonization' of Africa and at the same time proclaim that regional integration is the order of the day and that:

> If Africa does not follow this path, the lack of stability and economic growth will push the entire continent further into the desperate margins of global society.

Johan Galtung, a brilliant but hard-headed European professor, addressing the European Parliament, warned that in the coming division of the globe into regional blocs, Africa will be cut adrift. In the same vein he advised that Africans should see this as a blessing in disguise because for the first time they will be left alone and in the event they will be forced to find their own solutions to their problems. There is a certain wisdom in this which is lost to our African professor.

Instead of fantasizing about ' recolonisation' and the reproduction of the UN system (which is itself under review) in Africa, Ali Mazrui could have contemplated the question of why our own UN, the OAU, has not been able to fulfil all the functions he ascribes to his ' benign colonisation' ; second, why the ECOWAS Peacekeeping Force in Liberia has not been able to fulfil its mission; third, why the real UN failed in its intervention in Somalia; and four, why it proved impossible for the OAU to intervene in the Rwanda crisis, even though it had been invited to do so by the UN Secretary-General – something which France did unilaterally? It would seem that, far from needing recolonisation, we need decolonisation in Africa not only of the body polity but also of the mind.

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