

Ali Al'Amin Mazrui — The *Mwalimu*, The *Ali*: A Tribute

Abdul Karim Bangura

During his *zamani* (Kiswahili for “the past”), we called him a renowned Pan-Africanist, an academic professor, a public intellectual, a prolific writer and speaker on African and Islamic issues and North-South relations, a filmmaker, a political activist, a humanitarian, a father, a husband, and many other honorifics. Now in his *sasa* (Kiswahili for the “now and the recent” and, thus, the “future”), we will forever remember and call him The *Mwalimu* (Kiswahili for “Honorable Teacher”) and The *Ali* (Arabic for “elevated”—prophetically, his first name). While all about Mwalimu Ali Mazrui swirled the daily pressures of academic and public life, he kept to a straight course. His extensive scholarly, peace and conflict resolution, interfaith dialogue, political activism and philanthropic activities across the globe are testimony of his dedication to humanity.

Very few great thinkers have inspired me to write many essays on them and their works. One of these great thinkers, I am quite happy to say, is Ali Mazrui. I have been appreciative of his untiring interest in and service to the cause of humanity for a very long time. Having been very close to him, he taught me three very valuable lessons, among many others, that I will try to do my best to pass on to the present and future generations of emerging thinkers.

The first very valuable lesson Mazrui taught me is that we African scholars must strive to make our work African-centered, concisely defined by Molefi Kete Asante as “the placing of African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior”, especially when it comes to the concepts we use in discussing Africa and/or African issues. This is important because most of the concepts used in works dealing with Africa and/or African issues employ Eurocentric concepts that often do not capture the essence of the phenomena being discussed, since Eurocentrism, as Toyin Falola precisely characterized it, involves viewing the world from a Western perspective, particularly European or Anglo-American experiences and values.

In reading the three-volumes of the work entitled *Africanity Redefined: Collected Essays of Ali A. Mazrui* (1992), which represents compilations of Ali Mazrui’s most important essays, it becomes quite evident that with a broad spectrum of his writings, during his many decades as a scholar and public intellectual, he redefined the meaning of Africanity across geographical spaces, time, and cultures. The resulting definition is dynamic. It forces us to reject neo-imperialist paradigms and ontologies of what it means to be African. By encouraging us to think about Africanity as an idea rather than as a point of origin, the ideas contained in these essays force us to reposition ourselves in the debate of our place in global cultures and civilizations, and they prepare us to take a more active role in social and political affairs.

Indeed, to call a thing by its precise name is the beginning of understanding, because it is the key to the procedure that allows the mind to grasp reality and its many relationships. It makes a great deal of difference whether an illness is conceived of as caused by the evil spirit or by bacteria on a binge. The concept *bacteria* is part and parcel of a system of concepts in which there is a connection to a powerful repertory of treatments—i.e. antibiotics. Naming is a process that can give the “namer” great power.

Old Western movies about Africans often have an episode featuring a confrontation between the local “medicine man” (or “witchdoctor”) and the Western “doctor” who triumphs for modern science by saving the chief or his child. The cultural agreement that supported the “medicine man” is shattered by the scientist with a microscope. Sadly, for the children of modern medicine, it turns out that there were a few tricks in the “medicine man’s bag” that were ignored or lost in the euphoria of such a “victory” for science. Even less happy was the arrogance with which many of the cultural arrangements expressed in the African languages were undermined through the supposition of superiority by conquering powers. To capture meaning in a language is a profound and subtle process, indeed.

The second very valuable lesson Ali Mazrui taught me is that in our work, we African scholars must be *âtenu* (Ancient Egyptian/Hieroglyphics) or *mapinduzi* (Kiswahili) or revolutionary (English), as opposed to being *âtenu m’fen* (Ancient Egyptian/Hieroglyphics) or *mapinduzi ya malazi* (Kiswahili) or revolutionary-accommodationist (English) or being *keheberu* (Ancient Egyptian/Hieroglyphics) or *kebadilisha* (Kiswahili) or reformist (English). The term *âtenu* was employed by Ancient Egyptians to describe revolutionaries, rebels or fiends who wanted radical change. Such people were perceived as *Mesti*, the divine parents of the Sun God or God of Day Rā; *Mesu*, the gods who begat their own fathers or divine beings; and *Mesut*, children of God Osiris or divine beings. The concept *âtenu m’fen* was employed by Ancient Egyptians to refer to those who wanted change but would compromise and accept the status quo, listen, obey, or be content as long as their burdens were assuaged. The word *keheberu* for Ancient Egyptians described those who sought change in form, manifestation, shape, similitude, or image.

As Mazrui argued in *Africanity Redefined*, it would be totally inaccurate to even say that the principle of collective self-determination as a nationalist assertion was unknown in Africa before European intrusion. On the contrary, he asserted, the history of Africa is full of instances of resistance and rebellion against the European colonizer, as many Africans were inspired by a desire to maintain their autonomy and were unwilling to capitulate without a struggle against the new European presence in Africa. According to Mazrui, the range of African resistance is from Sultan Attahiru Ahmadu of the Sokoto Caliphate in 19th-century Nigeria to the *Maji Maji* rebellion in Tanzania, and the so-called mad mullah of Somalia to the Shona-Ndebele risings in Zimbabwe in the late 19th century. These activities were, as Mazrui stated, primary resistance movements against colonialism, to be distinguished from secondary resistance movements which came with modern political parties in Africa. Both forms of resistance, for him, can be seen as instances of self-determination in the form of nationalist assertion.

The third very valuable lesson Ali Mazrui taught me is that we African scholars must be seriously engaged in African and African-Diaspora issues to ensure the development of a *Pax-Africana*, which he defined as the need for Africans to develop their own institutions and capacity for self-pacification, if we are to play a major role in global affairs. To do so, Mazrui in his seminal work entitled *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition* (1967) suggested, Africans must have the military and political capacity to resolve conflict and not rely on outside powers to do it for them. He discusses such issues as African identity and dignity, and how they had influenced Africa’s quest for non-alignment in global affairs.

Since much of what constitutes training for any endeavor consists of imitation, we will be well served if we continue the honorable teachings and elevated legacy Mazrui left us. Humanistic public service will appear in numerous locations and situations as a result of the inspiration and direction

he provided us. We can all look forward to continued wide-ranging impact as we call upon our colleagues in varied professions and activities to conduct themselves with humane attention to the needs of their fellow human beings like Mwalimu Ali Mazrui did. While we all know that the task is beyond our fulfilling, we also know that we will not falter so long as we endure as Mazruiana stalwarts.