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Ali Mazrui: The Global Muslim Thinker

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CONTENTS

Editorialv

Reflections

Ali Mazrui: Beacon at the Intersection of Islam and Africa
Ebrahim Rasool..... 1

The Master Synthesizer: Africanity and Islam in
Ali Mazrui’s Scholarship
Seifudein Adem..... 11

Articles

Mapping Mazrui’s Mind: Assessing the Mazruiana through a
Bibliometric Lens
Muhammed Haron..... 19

Localizing Islam in the West: Mazrui’s Journey from the Study
of African Politics to Global Cultures
Ahmed Ali Salem..... 44

Making Africa Legible: Kiswahili Arabic and Orthographic
Romanization in Colonial Zanzibar
Caitlyn Bolton..... 61

Islam, Politics and Globalization: Mazrui’s Struggle for a System
of Universal Values
Rachid Mrani..... 79

Obituary

Mumtaz Ahmed: Model Scholar, Educator, and Public Intellectual
Tamara Sonn..... 95

Book Reviews

Religious Secularity: A Theological Challenge to the Islamic State
(by Naser Ghobadzadeh)
Banafsheh Madaninejad..... 99

Reimagining Malcolm X: Street Thinker Versus Homo Academicus
(by Seyed Javad Miri)
John Andrew Morrow..... 102

Writing Self, Writing Empire: Chandar Bhan Brahman and the Cultural World of the Indo-Persian State Secretary (by Rajeev Kinra) <i>Aria Fani</i>	106
Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone (by Behnam Sadeghi, Asad Q. Ahmed, Adam Silverstein, and Robert Hoyland, eds.) <i>Emmanuelle Stefanidis</i>	110
Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation: Forough Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath (by Leila Rahimi Bahmany) <i>Babak Elahi</i>	115
Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene (by Hamid Dabashi) <i>Negar Davari</i>	119
After the American Century: The Ends of U.S. Culture in the Middle East (by Brian T. Edwards) <i>Mojtaba Ebrahimian</i>	123
The Muslim Question in Canada: A Story of Segmented Integration (by Abdolmohammad Kazempur) <i>Kathy Bullock</i>	127
Shi'i Islam: An Introduction (by Najam Haider) <i>Husein Khimjee</i>	131
The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia (by Harry Munt) <i>Rose Aslan</i>	134

Forum

A Muslim Reflection on <i>Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds</i> <i>Amina Inloes</i>	138
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Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Second International Congress on Islamic Civilization in Southern Africa: Developments and Future Perspectives <i>Muhammed Haron</i>	150
Reaching Consensus on Organ Donation <i>Jay Willoughby</i>	154
IIIT Intellectual Panels <i>Saulat Pervez</i>	157
ISIS and Islam: How a Terrorist's Ideology Twists Religion <i>Jay Willoughby</i>	162

Editorial

Mazrui: Man, Mission, Movement

In the checkered history of Africology, from early colonial endeavors to the brave new world of postcolonialist dissections, few scholars elicited the excitement and adoration that Professor Ali Al-Amin Mazrui (1933-2014) did. On the very continent that he studied so intensely, libraries, educational centers, and roads have been named for him posthumously in recognition of his manifold contributions. And yet, although rare by the standards of academic aloofness, the adulation of his defenders was matched by the abrasive disdain and aberrant hostility of his detractors, some of whom were undoubtedly driven by intellectual or political opposition to his underlying project of reviving non-western consciousness during an era so marked by the supposed universalism of western finance, culture, and militarism.

To be certain, though, Mazrui was not fazed by such criticism or challenge; instead, it would appear that he rather thrived on controversy, relishing each emergent opportunity to provide correctives to the received wisdom. Indeed, when writing, Mazrui was often schooling. His deliberately provocative pronouncements, in prose and speech, would question and rattle, but always make, in demonstrative (rather than didactic) terms, poignant points about errors perceptual and praxeological. In so doing, Mazrui – clearly inspired by the finesse of his Oxford doctoral training – was not shy to adopt riveting rhetorical devices: irony, hyperbole, and simile abounded. Such devices, however, did not obscure the structured ways, even if implicit, through which his analysis unfolded. When he took the time, he would reason as well as argue in clear schemata by employing binaries, triads, dichotomies, and juxtapositions. His eye for detail was as pronounced as his mastery of history: microhistory could give way to *longue durée* in a paragraph, the local and the global would intertwine, and the ideational and the material would interact dialectically.

A comparativist *par excellence*, Mazrui would leap from case to point and vice versa, often in such passionate pursuit of an overarching argument that pauses for clarifications, problematizations, definitions, and disclaimers would amount to mere obstacles on the rhetorical race-course. Stylistically and in terms of ratiocination, he was indeed an enemy of commas.

To bracket Mazrui, in terms of epistemology, as either Durkheimian, Weberian, or Hegelian is probably not pertinent to any attempt to understand his method. Not only was Mazrui a non-conformist, he was an iconoclast and thus unbound by precedent or convention. This was true both in regards to western epistemic techniques and in relation to the Islamicate traditions, where he also did not see *ijmā'* (scholastic consensus) as necessarily binding for posterior scholarship. Although cognizant of methodological interparadigm debates in the North American social sciences, as well as in western literature and in global area studies, Mazrui sought subscriber status to no established methodological school. Presumably, the deep-seated intramural sectarianism among adherents to rival meta-theories would, to Mazrui, be a distraction rather than a condition of practice, even as for him the library was a second home and critique a life-long vocation.

Within the purview of the Islamic sciences, in which the late Mazrui took a keener interest, the insistent lack of subscription to a canon and established precedent could not elicit the same gravitas as when exercised within those fields in which he had been trained. His father, the shaykh or *mwaliimu* al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui (1891-1947) had, of course, initially hoped that his son would be able to add the honorific *al-Azhari* to his name, but the educational path of this scion of the Mazrui family took him to western seats of learning instead. Thus Mazrui did not have the opportunity to seek or obtain advanced accreditations (*ijāza*) in the classical sciences. In the end, therefore, Mazruian *ijtihād* was strictly opinion (*ra'y*) only, rather than a rigorous engagement with the text or the interpretative tools of the *fuqahā'*. One could reasonably assume that public benefit (*maṣlahah*) would be Mazrui's guiding concern, although he never pretended to be constrained by the deductive principles of the ancestors. Nevertheless, the point remains that the professor's eclecticism and originality were persistent across disciplinary divides, even in areas that were outside the remit of his original expertise. His ideas did not amount to a "school," but they did provide for an "ap-

proach” that was meticulously anchored in incessant interrogation and critical rethinking.

Unaffiliated with novel epistemological trends in the discipline of international relations (IR), as well as in the emergent fields of post-colonial and subaltern studies, Mazrui thus avoided the jargon in order to speak to the concerns. He was motivated, indeed moved, by the big questions of the day: colonialism, racialism, sexism, deprivation, civilization, coexistence, and security. He was concerned with the individual, the community, the nation, the tribe, gender, and humanity at large, but, in a departure from the dominant political science approach of the global Cold War, his motif was never the preservation or imposition of order. He understood, I suspect, order to be hegemonic and against the creative flow of history itself. Hence, uproar and “shaking up” were manifestations of progress (or simply social life), whereas imposed inertia and structured stagnation were anomalous and elite-serving. To Mazrui, the systemic preoccupations of positivist political science and “realist” IR – often predicated on law-like regularities, immutable constants, and persistent universals – were both unhelpful and counterintuitive: human beings were not mechanical entities but living, sentient, and also sometimes irrational actors. The analyst’s job was not to impose situational or ideational constraints on social forces or to serve those who attempted to do so, but to raise awareness of intellectual and institutional biases.

None of this is to say that Mazrui was uninterested in drawing universal lessons and, deeper still, devoted no time to the generic – over generic – complexity of the human condition. Amid the mountains of pages, even if unexplicated, the persistent ethico-moral edifice of his work remained *pluralism*: that human beings were continuously shaped by, and allowed themselves to continue to be shaped by, a plurality of social, cultural, and ideological thought complexes. To sterilize plurality was not only unnatural but, as sterilization goes, infertile. Mazrui’s animosity to western power projection was thus strategic only: It was not a negation of liberal norms or Enlightenment values, but rather a demur to the naked, or even embellished, aggression carried out in the name of those norms. Orientalism, whether in ivory towers or on Capitol Hill, was erroneous not because it took ideas seriously, but because of the exclusionary and impositionist aims to which it subjected those ideas. Of course, Orientalism was errant also in its irretrievable linearity, in

its assumption that actions follow maxims absent contexts. In this sense, Mazrui was preoccupied with culture but was no culturalist, for culture was neither self-referential nor, in the academic vernacular, an independent variable.

In the course of his octogenarian lifespan, Mazrui shook the foundations of African studies, while making important contributions to political science and Islamic studies. A figure so imposing, yet so humble, Mazrui began as an intellectual and ended as an institution.

This Issue

The present issue constitutes what the Germans call a *Gedenkschrift*: an anthology, crafted in gratitude, in memoriam of a recently departed figure of authority, in this case Professor Ali Mazrui. Leaving behind an extraordinarily rich and diverse legacy, he engaged with a plethora of themes, methods, and formats, some of which are discussed in this thematic issue. The majority of papers derive from a seminar in his honor of hosted by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in October 2015, coinciding with Mazrui's first death anniversary. The seminar brought together scholars from Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East to reflect on the life and legacy of this towering figure.

This issue opens with a revised version of the keynote address, delivered by Ambassador Ebrahim Rasool, entitled "Ali Mazrui: Beacon at the Intersection of Islam and Africa." Possibly Mazrui would, with a twinkle in his eye, demur at the idea of this proposed "intersection," for Islam, as opposed to Africa, is not cartographically defined. Indeed, the purport of the "triple heritage" is that Africa is itself only with reference to Islam. But this is, perhaps, a mere academic indulgence, for Mazrui's legacy is certainly more complex. In his testimony to Mazrui's motivational impact on the post-Apartheid political constellation in South Africa, Rasool depicts Mazrui as a tireless agent for change, somebody who embodied the possibility of combining progress, pluralism, and ethnic pride. Rasool's reflections at once capture the erudition of an intellect pierced by monism – resisting any ephemeral fascination with postmodern anti-foundationalism – and the principled and compassionate striving of a man not content with mere accolades. Until his last breath, Mazrui was a man on a mission, a scholar who could be neither bought nor bullied.

In a second piece of reflective writing, Seifudein Adem's brief meditation on the life and works of Mazrui provides an insightful discussion of a scholar who was not only the academic equivalent to an *agent provocateur*, but also a bridge builder. He sought to condemn western transgressions only to rectify western consciousness (much akin to the peace-building method of "truth and reconciliation"). Adem, a long-standing colleague of Mazrui, suggests that Mazrui would self-consciously seek to synthesize in his works activism and academia, western scholarly credentials with an eastern heritage, and a positivist method with normative commitments. In all of these ways, and more, Mazrui was indeed a "master synthesizer."

In the first research paper of this thematic issue, Muhammad Haron painstakingly charts Mazrui's awe-inspiring publishing career in a bibliometric study of Mazrui's scholarship (colloquially known as *Mazruiana*). The total output spans over half a century (1963-2014) and amounts to a staggering figure in excess of 500 items – journal articles, book chapters, monographs, and edited volumes – a feat that is probably unparalleled in western humanities and social sciences. Haron demonstrates not only the exceptional productivity of Mazrui and his incomensurable contribution to knowledge, but also, by means of citation statistics, suggests the continued impact of this scholarship upon later generations of Africanists. Indeed, since the last two decades of the previous millennium, any young scholar of Africa could agree or disagree with Mazrui, but none of them could ignore him.

Although Mazrui was published in the most prestigious journals of his field even in the emergent phase of his decades-long career, a cursory view interestingly suggests that over time he became rather unconcerned with the rank of the publication house, the seniority of the editorial boards, and the circulation and citation figures. It is possible that Mazrui saw in the increasingly interventionist peer-review processes an obstruction to expeditious production: his turbo-driven creative flow allowed for no month-long negotiations of revisions in the face of often fairly conservative editorial practices. It also appears to me that he may have seen in the hyper-selectivist publication houses of Oxbridge and research-intensive universities in North America (RIs), an elitist and exclusionary circle of constraint in relation to the production and circulation of knowledge beyond institutional boundaries. In this sense, Mazrui's utilitarian and globalist inclusivism went hand in hand with his passion-filled productivity.

In his contribution, Ahmed Ali Salem, who served as co-editor for parts of this collection, dissects Mazrui's transition from the study of Africa to the study of Islam, primarily *qua* cultural and political force. In my reading, Mazrui saw Islam as both particular and universal: It had an import on identity formation, but not to the exclusion of other identities, and its impulses were political without necessarily being politicizing. Mazrui had no patience with the various western secularization theses that invariably linked social progress to the retreat of religion. Nor did he have patience with the specific ostracism of Islam from public life, and its depiction as, in western contexts, an alien religion – demography, theology, and intellectual history notwithstanding. Of course Mazrui was always adamant about the fallacy of the Lewis-Huntington “clash-of-civilizations” prism, and yet he simultaneously posited that while Islam could be liberal (*viz.*, freedom-enhancing), it should not aim to be moderate (understood as subservient to western foreign-policy designs). One may detect, therefore, a tension between Islam as a force of resistance and Islam as (to use a concept that Mazrui does not invoke) “social capital.” But this tension is, yet again, a creative one. Nevertheless, Mazrui was one to recognize that there were, in a tangible sense, “sharp edges” that had to be softened in order to admit Islam as part of the cultural and political repertoire of contemporary West-centric civilization. Much of his career was devoted to softening these edges.

Caitlyn Bolton's article, “Making Africa Legible: Kiswahili Arabic and Orthographic Romanization in Colonial Zanzibar,” engages a theme that was close to Mazrui's concerns, namely, how orthographic and linguistic practices are not value-neutral, but are instead the consequences of particular constellations of power. Drawing upon archival material in English, Arabic, and Swahili from the Zanzibar National Archives, she shows how European colonialism quite literally sought to rewrite Africa by decoupling it from its Arabic heritage. Her case study displays how Kiswahili's Arabic letters were forcibly converted into Roman orthography by means of the missionaries' language standardization reforms and imposition of new orthographic standards in public schools in colonial-period Zanzibar. This “purification” of Kiswahili from “foreign influences” and, without any hint of irony, the “improvement” of the “illiterate” natives' written language sought, by design, to decouple Africa from Islam. Expressing, perhaps, an attempt to remake Africa, imperial-era orthographic initiatives came to signify also an estrangement of Africa from

itself. The resultant rootlessness and generational anomie is one that Mazrui not only diagnosed, but also sought to treat.

In a befitting final contribution, entitled “Values and Gender Equality between Islam and the West: Mazrui’s Struggle for a System of Universal Values,” Moulay Raschid Mrani offers a tribute to Mazrui’s efforts to “normalize” Islam in global political ethics. Writing against the backdrop of increased intercivilizational militancy and the public equation of Islamic politics with radical violence, Mrani sees in Mazrui’s distinct approach an attempt to redeem Islamic politics by anchoring it in a profound engagement with, and revival of, the ethico-moral compass of religion itself. The author shows that according to Mazrui, religious injunctions must be understood in the light of underlying religious values and that any *tajdīd* (revival) must be premised precisely on such valuational bases. The traditional understanding of *tajdīd*, Mazrui lamented, did not distinguish between cultural mores and scriptural imperatives, an oversight that eventually caused scholars to lose sight of the undergirding as well as axial values that religion seeks to preserve or enhance. On the other hand, when religion does become grounded in values over rule-following and actors in the public domain internalize such values, their adherence to a politics of ideals will usher in a display of confidence within their civic engagements, even within minority contexts. Thus the normative has pragmatic effects.

It should be emphasized, of course, that Mazrui sought no universal valuational isomorphism but simply, in my words, valuational “accords” that would effectuate mutual respect, acceptance, and tolerance among faith traditions. In this reading, the spiritual is thus not anathematic to the political, but rather is integral to it because it allows adversarial participants in any political contest to transcend the calculus of immediate gains and move beyond the baser desires of revenge and (dis)empowerment. Nevertheless, in an intellectual move that closes the possibility of misusing religious identity in politics, Mazrui applauded secularism for its protective effects. Secularism, when understood as the spatial and functional division between religious and political institutions, safeguards religion against its opportunistic corruption at the hand of power-seeking political entrepreneurs. Secularism, in other words, is beneficial not only because religion can corrupt politics, but also because politics can corrupt religion.

Overall, the present special issue testifies to the extraordinary volume, breadth, and depth of the scholarship produced by the towering figure who was Professor Ali Al-Amin Mazrui. His determined challenge to the presumed teleology and hegemony of western ideas from Plato to NATO, while refusing to succumb to any inferiority complex associated with the subaltern, was as original as it was profound. Global in outlook and gentle in demeanor, his words spoke of liberty, his actions of dignity, and his dreams of equity.

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