

**THE BIOGRAPHY OF ALI A. MAZRUI:  
A CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH**

**A FRAGMENT**

I. The Formative Mombasa Years:	1933–1955
II. The Huddersfield Years: Finishing High School in England	1955–1957
III. The Manchester Years: Life as an Undergraduate	1957–1960
IV. Introduction to America: The Year at Columbia and After	1960–1961
V. The Oxford Years: In Search of the D.Phil.	1961–1963
VI. The Makerere Years: Early Years of East Africa's Independence	1963–1973
VII. The Michigan Years: Family and Fame	1974–1989
VIII. The Binghamton and Cornell Years: Towards Stability	From 1989

## CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH

MAZRUI:

I: THE FORMATIVE MOMBASA YEARS  
1933–1955

### FAMILY BACKGROUND

Born February 24, 1933 in Kibokoni—Brought up in a devoutly Islamic family.

Historical significance of belonging to Mazrui clan

Colonial significance of being classified as “Arab”

Educated in Arab Boys’ School, Mombasa up to Cambridge School Certificate, Third Grade

Cambridge results not good enough for admission to Makerere College in Uganda. Ali’s father, *Sheikh Al-Amin Ali Mazrui*, the Chief Kadhi of Kenya. Exceptionally learned Islamic jurist, writer of books, pamphlets and didactic gazettes.

Ali’s mother, *Swafiya Suleiman Mazrui*, compassionate matriarchal figure. Widely influential among women because of her own credentials, because she was the wife of the Chief Kadhi, and because she was the daughter of the late Sheikh Suleiman Ali Mazrui, another major Muslim jurist and leader.

### **Decline and Rise**

Ali’s early signs of leadership qualities manifested themselves partly in sports—as Captain of Lion Soccer Club (his own soccer team) and Vice-Captain of My Flag Soccer Team.

In secondary school sports Ali Mazrui excelled as a short-distance sprinter.

Ali’s Dad died in April 1947 when Ali was only fourteen years old and before Ali graduated. On graduating from Secondary School in 1948 Ali Mazrui was considered for the job

of a bank-teller at Barclays Bank in Mombasa. Quite unexpectedly, he failed a urine medical test—a test which later turned out to have been a misdiagnosis. But the mistake was enough to cost him the job.

Ali Mazrui was hired by a Dutch multinational company—the Twensche Overseas Trading Company in Mombasa, dealing with perfumes and toilet preparations. He was supposed to be a trainee for a managerial job. But at the age of fifteen he was too young for the responsibilities envisaged. The Dutch company let him go with a strong letter giving the reason why they could not keep him.

While Mazrui's first job application (to Barclays Bank) had resulted in his not getting a job at all, his second application (to the Dutch company) had got him a job but only very briefly. His third job application (to an emerging technical college) got him a temporary job but without any pay at all. Although he did not know it at the time, this third opportunity was destined to shape his life forever. At first his new employer did not have any budget for this junior clerk—but they were prepared to let him learn on the job. The new employers were the Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education (MIOME), at the time little more than an idea being pursued at Government House, the residence of the Governor of Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell. Fifteen year old Ali was given a rickety little desk in one corner of the temporary offices of MIOME.

Had Ali Mazrui been successfully hired by a branch of Barclays Bank in Mombasa, he might have remained an employee of a junior branch of Barclays in Mombasa for the rest of his life. Had he been successfully trained by the Dutch multinational to be a branch-manager in an East African town, he might have become a local dignitary but not an international figure. But when Ali Mazrui was finally hired by the Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education (MIOME), the stage was being set for his unique role in what he was later to call "Africa's triple heritage."

## **From MIOME to Huddersfield**

In the early years all the academic staff of MIOME were Europeans (primarily Christians). All the students were Muslims (Africans, Indians, and Arabs of East Africa). The mission was to produce technologically skilled East African Muslims. The whole concept was rooted in Africa's triple heritage- indigenous, Islamic and Western considerations.

However, Ali Mazrui began as a mere junior clerk without pay at MIOME, and was then regularized as a clerk with pay. He finally rose to become Boarding Supervisor (or Warden) of the Halls of Residence of MIOME. The students addressed him as "Shiekh Ali"—one more symbol of the triple heritage at work.

It was in the course of his years at MIOME that Ali Mazrui met his first "Head of State"—the Governor of Colonial Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell. MIOME was the brainchild of Sir Philip Mitchell—who wanted to see African Muslim subjects of Great Britain catch up with the twentieth century through technology.

On the last of Sir Philip's periodic visits to MIOME he heard Ali Mazrui give a speech as part of the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday at MIOME. Ali Mazrui in subsequent years was to give thousands of other speeches in different parts of the world—from Sweden to New Zealand, from Kano to Kuala Lumpur, from Lansing to Lahore. But perhaps no single speech played a bigger role in changing the course of his life than the one which Sir Philip Mitchell heard on the Prophet's Birthday in Mombasa, in 1952.

The next day the Governor sent for the young speaker to chat with him about his future educational aspirations. It is probable that the Governor subsequently wrote a memorandum to the Director of Education in Nairobi about the young man the Governor himself had virtually

interviewed in Mombasa. By the time Ali Mazrui applied once again for a Kenya Government scholarship to study in Great Britain, he did not receive the usual letter of “regrets” to which his poor Cambridge Certificate results had made him accustomed. Instead he received a letter inviting him to go to Nairobi for an interview.

Nor was the interview of this unknown twenty-year old boy from Mombasa done by lower-ranking officers at the Education Department. Ali Mazrui was interviewed by no less a person than the Director of Education himself, helped by his Deputy. These were the highest-ranking educational officers in colonial Kenya. Why else would they have been interviewing a young unknown from Mombasa but for the prior recommendation of someone of the rank or caliber of Sir Philip Mitchell? The little speech by Ali Mazrui at MIOME on the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday was on the verge of re-directing Ali’s entire life.

A couple of weeks later Ali Mazrui received a letter from the Department of Education confirming that he had been awarded a scholarship, first to complete his secondary education at a college in Huddersfield, England, and later to go to a British University for Bachelor of Arts. In spite of his third class Cambridge School Certificate results, Ali Mazrui had been given a second chance. And Africa’s triple heritage on Prophet Muhammed’s birthday at MIOME had a lot to do with the change of destiny.

But Ali Mazrui was taking to Britain more than his experiences at MIOME, very formative as those were. He was also taking with him the writing skills he acquired serving as the local “Arab correspondent” of the *Mombasa Times* for which he produced a whole page of “Arab news” every fortnight. Ali Mazrui was also a regular contributing editor to a local communal newspaper called the *Arab Guardian*. These experiences were immensely valuable in

developing Ali Mazrui's skills in popular reportage and eloquent analysis in the English language.

In developing his skill in Kiswahili as a public discourse, he was aided more by the radio than by newspapers. He had a weekly half-hour as a storyteller in Kiswahili on the local radio station, SAUTI YA MVITA ("The Voice of the Isle of War").

Ali Mazrui had also been in demand as an after-dinner speaker in the English language for local clubs in Mombasa. All these experiences turned out to be more significant as formative influences than might have appeared at the time.

In 1955 the day arrived when Ali Mazrui had to leave East Africa for the first time. He boarded a slow plane which stopped in Khartoum, Cairo and Rome before arriving in London. The colonial authorities had given him a second chance to compensate for his poor results in the Cambridge School Certificate. Would Ali Mazrui be able to vindicate himself in this new opportunity? Or would his third grade Cambridge results turn out to be the true measure of the man after all? England was ready to test the young man more directly at last.