

Conference to explore life and times of Ali Mazrui

What came out of the professor's pen inspired, annoyed and aroused envy

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Renowned Kenyan scholar the late Prof Ali Mazrui. Mazrui was buried at Fort Jesus, Mombasa, in October 2014, but he continues to excite people of ideas. PHOTO | FILE

In Summary

- The derailment was temporary, though. Colonial connections, and verbal wizardry, most likely rescued Mazrui from oblivion. His father, the Chief Kadhi of colonial Kenya, and colonial Governor Philip Mitchell, shared views on educating Muslim boys.
- Mazrui had ability to annoy diverse groups. With the British having cleared his path to intellectual stardom, he initially pandered to Euro wishes. He had deliberately tried to provoke Nkrumah with his "Leninist-Czar" article only for Nkrumah to escape the trap by dismissing Mazrui as a tool of the white man.



Prof Ali Mazrui was buried at Fort Jesus, Mombasa, in October 2014, but he continues to excite people of ideas. This explains the Twaweza Communications and SUNY-Binghamton symposium from July 14 to 17, at

Southern Sun in Parklands, Nairobi, on Mazrui's impact. Although he achieved his childhood dream of engaging in intellectual swordsmanship, a Cambridge School Certificate almost derailed him. It stopped him from going to Makerere University to train in the use of English language as a tool of verbal warfare.

The derailment was temporary, though. Colonial connections, and verbal wizardry, most likely rescued Mazrui from oblivion. His father, the Chief Kadhi of colonial Kenya, and colonial Governor Philip Mitchell, shared views on educating Muslim boys. Mitchell, an Oxford dropout, opened the Muslim school and later gave Mazrui, dropped by Cambridge, a chance to improve his English in England.

Mazrui flew from Nairobi to London along with another beneficiary of British educational generosity, Bethwell Allan Ogot, a mathematics teacher at Alliance High School; Mazrui for pre-university polishing at Huddersfield College and Ogot for a degree at Andrews University in Scotland. Both became prominent scholars and taught at Makerere, Ogot in history and Mazrui in political science.

Having received needed verbal warfare skills from Manchester, Columbia, and Oxford, Mazrui entered Makerere from the top. He then skyrocketed into the intellectual ozone layer, standing out above his contemporaries. This reality will bring several intellectual giants to Nairobi next week to re-examine Mazrui's continuity.

POST-COLONIAL TEAM

What are they likely to examine? It will not be his naughty childhood, his Mombasa escapades as a journalist and evening entertainer with English wizardry, or his college antics in England and the United States. It will be comparing, at two levels, his ability, despite Cambridge, to rise to the top of the intellectual world.

There will be comparison with his predecessors, intellectual giants of the past that include two North Africans, St Augustine and Ibn Khaldun. Outside Africa, predecessors would have Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, Rene Descarte, Thomas Aquinas, John Maynard Keynes, imperial propagandist Rudyard Kipling, and a Mazrui favourite called Edmund Burke. Mazrui tried to 'Africanise' Burke.

There will be comparisons with his contemporaries, mostly of the 20th century, divided between those of African descent and the others. There are two African intellectual warriors groups — anti-colonial and post-colonial. In the anti-colonial team are W.E.B. DuBois, Jomo Kenyatta, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Aime Cesaire.

Mazrui belonged to the post-colonial team along with Walter Rodney, Wole Soyinka, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Frantz Fanon, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Claude Ake, and Samir Amin. Away from Africans, he compares with Immanuel Wallenstein, Samuel Huntington, Hedley Bull, Raul Prebisch, Noam Chomsky, Jurgen Habermas, and most important, Oxford-man Colin Leys.

Leys systematically cleared the path for Mazrui's unusual academic 'jumps' in Makerere. Besides recruiting and leaving the chairmanship/professorship to Mazrui, Leys capped path-clearing with his 1967 declaration that Mazrui was incapable of writing dull paragraphs. The issue, however, was/is what came out of Mazrui's pen which inspired, annoyed, and aroused envy.

Participants will note that Mazrui attracted admiration with his wonder boy intellectual qualities. When they first met at Makerere, Nyerere's greeting was, "Tunasikia sifa tu!" Symposium participants will reflect on Mazrui's

public debate with Uganda's Chief of Security in 1969 on the role of intellectuals in state building and be bemused by his 1970 encounter with the unassuming socialistic Walter Rodney at Makerere. Mazrui received an intellectual whipping, took it in stride and mended fences with Rodney when both were in the Americas. One of the master minds of that 1970 Rodney-Mazrui debate, Peter Anyang Nyong'o, is a participant at the symposium.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Mazrui had ability to annoy diverse groups. With the British having cleared his path to intellectual stardom, he initially pandered to Euro wishes. He had deliberately tried to provoke Nkrumah with his "Leninist-Czar" article only for Nkrumah to escape the trap by dismissing Mazrui as a tool of the white man. Nyerere reacted to "Tanzaphilia" by denying that he was an intellectual cannibal and was also angry at Mazrui for questioning his Biafra position.

Mazrui then re-engineered his social and intellectual identity and turned into a Euro critic. This made Nkrumah and Nyerere mild compared to the anger from Lynn Cheney, who had sponsored Mazrui's *The Africans: Triple Heritage* TV series.

Mazrui's ability to spark envy is likely to feature in the symposium. The envy was from those who wished their idols, or themselves, were the ones receiving accolades. Prof William Ochieng, representing this category of people, kept complaining that Mazrui was intellectually overrated, at the expense of Ogot.

With these types of symposia, the world acknowledges Mazrui's place in intellectual history. In hosting it, Kenya accepts that he was one of their best exports. The challenge is whether Kenya and African states will produce others like Mazrui; whether there will be continuity.