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OBITUARY

Mazrui and Barkan: a tribute

2014 was a very bad year for African and Africana Studies. The large communities of scholars that study and explore the worlds of Africa and the African Diaspora lost two intellectual giants. The first to go, on 10 January, while on a family visit to Mexico City, was Joel Barkan, formerly a professor at the University of Iowa, but at the time of his passing a senior associate at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.[1] Then on 12 October, Ali Mazrui, another giant, departed while at his home in Vestal, New York outside Binghamton University.[2] Within one year, the college of scholars concerned with Africa lost two of its leading lights. The two were separated by a decade – Mazrui died at 81, while Barkan passed on at 72. Both had witnessed Africa come of age in its post-colonial iteration. They watched keenly the growth pains of a maligned continent, and prodigiously wrote about it with a zeal and insight that knew few parallels. This much was clear – they were both attached to Africa with a contagious philia. They were not polar opposites, nor could they be; paradoxically, their differences resided within their similarities. In this brief essay, I explore the legacies of these two titans and link them within Africa's journey for full membership in the community of nations.

Mazrui's and Barkan's origins could not have been more different; they literally came from opposite ends of the earth. Barkan was born of Jewish parents in Middle America – in Toledo, Ohio. Yet this kid from America's heartland would become an unabashed cosmopolitan. Mazrui, on the other hand, was born a prince in the real sense of the word. He was a native of Mombasa, scion of the Mazrui dynasty which ruled part of the Kenyan Coast and managed to keep the British at bay. He came from a devout Muslim family, although he was in many respects a liberal. Thus although they came from different branches of the Abrahamic faiths, Barkan and Mazrui were joined by religion. While Mazrui made the biggest leap from his traditional roots to formal Western education, however, Barkan stayed closer to home. Barkan was educated in his own cultural milieu. He attended Cornell as an undergraduate and received his MA and doctorate degrees in political science at UCLA. In contrast, Mazrui, initially a poor student, had trouble making it to college. Once he got there, however, he graduated with a BA with Distinction from Manchester University in the UK, going on to obtain an MA from Columbia University and a PhD in Philosophy from Oxford (Nuffield College) in 1966, a bare two years after Kenya won its independence from the UK. These early years from their respective ancestral homes and traditions – and college and graduate educations – had a profound impact on both men and forever shaped their intellectual outlooks.

Location and identity

Even though Mazrui was born a Swahili, from the coastal people of Kenya with a heavy Muslim and Arab influence, he was a Brahmin. His family was conspicuously wealthy and powerful. His pedigree was Arab-like although he was considered racially a black African.[3] He was born in British colonial Kenya even though his family enjoyed substantial autonomy from the British colonial state. The family's vast land holdings were specifically protected from encroachment

by the Mazrui Land Trust Act of 1914 (Chapter 289 of the Laws of Kenya), a colonial-era parliamentary law. The Kenya government repealed the law in 1989, but a subsequent court ruling in 2012 restored the land to the Mazrui family. Mazrui's social status – as a British colonial subject from an autonomously wealthy and powerful family, was one of the many dualities that would come to define him. Embedded in his person were so many contradictions that it is remarkable he was able to harness all the competing energies to become one of the leading intellectuals of our time. A few examples will suffice. He was an African Muslim educated in the finest institutions in the West. He embodied – as he later wrote – Africa's triple heritage (Mazrui 1986), the documentary of the same title produced jointly by Mazrui and BBC as a TV series with him as the narrator. In it, Mazrui captured the reality of the African as an alloy of three heritages – the indigenous African, the Islamic tradition brought through jihad and evangelism, and the European colonial/Christian/capitalist encounter. He was a child of all these traumas and a medley of their African fact. More than anything, it is this work that crystalised in the mind of the world Mazrui's torture of the African soul, the roots of his faith, the basis of his liberal Muslim outlook, and the brilliant cosmopolitan that he was. He was a product of the contradictions of the Arab slave trade in Africans, of the brutal European colonisation of Africa, and of the resilience of the African. He had a love-hate relationship with the West, although his affection for the liberal West clearly trumped any disquiet of the Occident.

Barkan, on the other hand, was a child of the American Empire. He was born during WWII, a contest that would catapult the United States to global leadership and supremacy. During most of his life, the United States was the most dominant state in world history. He died just as the United States, though still clearly the dominant power, had become one of several key players in an increasingly multi-polar world. Barkan and I often debated the implications of the less dominant leverage of the United States in global affairs. He remained convinced that the United States could be a force for good. Even though the US was not an empire in the classic European nineteenth and twentieth century sense – and certainly not in Africa – it was the most successful state to come out of the Age of Europe, the epoch of white European domination of the globe. In that sense, America could be seen as an extension of the Anglo-Saxon domination of the world. For much of the post war period, America came to see itself as the centre of the universe and its values as a gift to the rest of humanity. Nothing exemplified this attitude better than the use of human rights as a weapon in the foreign policy arsenal of the United States. Democracy promotion and human rights crusades became an integral part of Americana. These were the languages used by Washington to bludgeon states and cultures that were either anti-Western or not liberal. Barkan, as a child of this era, refused to subscribe to naked imperialism. Instead, he believed that 'soft' American power could be used to promote political democracy and basic freedoms around the world.

Thus both Barkan and Mazrui saw the world through the historical distortions of their lenses – from differing vantage points. Mazrui was opposed to the notion of the hierarchy of cultures. He did not think one culture could be superior to another. He thought all cultures had something to contribute to the common fund of human wisdom. There was no doubt that he was a liberal who spent the vast majority of his life teaching and writing from the West. Many of the societies that he defended against imperialism – like Uganda – were either illiberal or outright dictatorships. He never made Kenya, his native country, his intellectual home because of the hostility of the state towards his support for democracy and human rights. This is where I believe Mazrui's nuanced pragmatism converged with Barkan's more determined view of democracy as an 'Enlightenment' project. Barkan believed that societies can evolve into more humane polities. And he believed that it was the obligation – the duty – of those in wealthier and more powerful countries to pay their 'debt' by fostering democratisation in opaque,

corrupt, and impoverished states. It is in this sense that Barkan believed in the use of 'soft' American power abroad.

Career and scholarship

Barkan and Mazrui enjoyed academic careers that took them to the pinnacles of higher education. Barkan taught in some of the finest universities in America. In his early career, Barkan taught at UC-Irvine before settling into a long and celebrated career at the University of Iowa where he taught political science with a bias towards Africa. It was while at Iowa that he emerged as one of the fathers of Kenyan studies in the US. He established himself as a key voice on scholarship and policy on Africa; writing and editing several books (1976, 1984, 1994, 2009) and writing numerous articles for scholarly and policy journals and newspapers. His works were analytical, carefully written, and often laced with doses of policy recommendations and critiques. Barkan left no doubt that he was not a bystander to history. He believed in reforms to create stronger and more effective institutions. His particular focus was the role that legislatures play in passing good reform-oriented laws, holding the executive accountable, and forging a responsible political class. He was concerned with elections and the role they play in creating a legitimate state capable of projecting popular will to advance democracy and political liberalisation. These are themes to which he often returned in his shorter pieces in journals like *Foreign Affairs* and in opinion articles in newspapers. Barkan's pragmatic side was highlighted by his work on the ground in East Africa when he served as the US Agency for International Development's Regional Democracy and Governance Advisor for Eastern and Southern Africa in 1990s. One could say he fell in love with his work as he repeatedly returned to Kenya and other parts of Africa after his tour to do short term projects on democratisation, elections, and development for the World Bank, USAID, and other agencies. On these trips, he would meet with numerous local academics, senior politicians, US embassy officials, and common citizens to share ideas and receive information. This is what he focused on mostly in the last stanza of his life while based at CSIS in Washington.

Mazrui's career was solely based in the academy. His world was governed by ideas right from his controversial tenure early in life at Makerere University before he ran afoul of Idi Amin, the late Ugandan dictator. Kenya would not welcome him home because of his sharp pen, but the United States took him in. His first stop was at Stanford and then Michigan where his academic career truly blossomed. Finally, he chose Binghamton University, New York, as his last academic home. He was also a visiting professor in many leading universities. In all these institutions, including at Makerere, he either held distinguished chairs or headed important departments. He was a much sought after speaker and in 1979 he delivered the prestigious BBC Reith Lecture famously entitled 'The African Condition'. Widely regarded as an orator and an unequalled wordsmith, Mazrui was a master of the turn of phrase. His witty and humorous deliveries were almost as famous as his jarring debates in which he challenged convention and mercilessly attacked some of the totems of the West. In all, he was gripping and totally insightful. He could not be ignored. When he spoke, African dictators and democrats alike listened. He was so prolific in virtually every written genre that a compendium of his writings traverses large swathes of the human intellect. He was such a towering intellectual that in 2005 the US journal *Foreign Policy* and the British publication *Prospect* named him one of the world's top 100 public intellectuals. Like Barkan, Mazrui moulded and influenced generations of academics and policy-makers. Lofty rhetoric and the seductive cadence were not Barkan's forte but he was an agile debater on TV and radio programmes and at academic conferences, where he was widely respected. Like Mazrui, he got his message across and he had a messianic zeal when it came to making the case for a more enlightened US policy towards Africa.

Barkan, unlike Mazrui, was not a controversial academic. He did not seek to challenge the ideas of his colleagues the way Mazrui did. Mazrui relished intellectual combat. There are many surviving and departed academics – African and American – who are still smarting from his verbal jabs. The late William Ochieng, a Kenyan academic who held unpopular views about the role of the Mau Mau in Kenya's independence, was one of those at odds with Mazrui.[4] A famous slugfest pitted Mazrui against Nigerian Nobel laureate and writer Wole Soyinka after the former attacked *Wonders of the African World*, the TV series by Harvard academic Gates (2000). Soyinka, a close associate of Gates, was upset by Mazrui's review of the Gates documentary. These hot spats between Mazrui and Soyinka go back to *Transition*, the Kampala-based leading intellectual African magazine in the 1960–1970s.[5] Another notable debate pitted Mazrui against Archie Mafeje, the South African academic, where the latter bitterly accused the former of advocating the recolonisation of Africa (Mangu 2008; Mafeje 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Mazrui 2008a, 2008b). Both Mafeje and Mazrui proved to be effective pugilists, but the debate was not the finest moment for either of them. Even so, such epic encounters came to define Mazrui. He was unafraid to provoke controversy – in fact, he courted it.

Barkan was the exact opposite. He preferred gentle persuasion more in the tradition of diplomacy, which he greatly valued, rather than the bare-knuckled world of university corridors. I suspect that Barkan's approach was influenced by his desire to keep doors open to policy-makers and key diplomats with whom he had frequent contact. He always strove to reach them at the individual level and sought to convince them of the wisdom of one policy choice over another. He knew how sensitive diplomats and policy-makers could be, and so he kept their confidences unless there was a compelling reason to call them out. In contrast, Mazrui preferred the blunt instrument of public denunciation but ironically ended up attracting senior policy-makers and officials wherever he went by the passion and persuasiveness of his thought. Thus, while Barkan straddled the worlds of diplomacy/policy and the academy, Mazrui stayed within the academic podium and the written word to convey and foster his vision of the world. Barkan could, however, take off the gloves and hit out at African kleptocrats, as he did in a number of articles on Kenya under President Daniel arap Moi[6] and President Mwai Kibaki.[7]

Barkan's academic and policy work was designed to educate American academics, students, diplomats, and policy-makers about Africa and why it mattered to the United States. Since his first trip to Kenya shortly after independence, Barkan was convinced that Kenya could prosper and achieve a larger destiny in Africa. He strongly believed that a more enlightened US policy towards Kenya – supporting effective and accountable institutions like the legislature and legitimate electoral systems – would solidify Kenya as an anchor state in Africa. He worked prodigiously to make possible visits by Kenyan academics, politicians, and diplomats to the United States to attend meetings and be exposed to their counterparts. He believed that strong and ethical Kenyan upper and middle classes were necessary for the incubation of a viable democracy. He fought hard against US State Department views that denigrated Africa's place in its calculus. He wanted American diplomats, politicians, and policy-makers to understand why Africa mattered to the United States – for Africa's sake and for the larger US interests abroad. To this end, he nurtured many an African academic and introduced them to the larger worlds of American academy, policy, and politics. He kept strong links with Kenya's young civil society and often collaborated with it: collecting data and information for use in his policy advocacy as an academic and within the corridors of power in Washington. I argued in a eulogy for Barkan that he was the closest an American could come to being a Kenyan without actually being one.[8]

Mazrui wrote about many subjects, even trying his hand at literature when he penned *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971) a novel that critiqued the Nigerian writer for allegedly betraying the larger Nigerian project and art by joining the civil war on Biafra's side. The works he produced early on in his career painted a young man with large ideas full of intellectual ambition. He was serving notice that he would be playing on the global stage with the biggest minds of the era. His 1967 books (*Pax Africana* (1967c), *On Heroes and Uhuru Worship* (1967a), *and the Anglo-African Commonwealth* (1967b)) foretold a controversial penmanship. Several other books, including *The African Condition* (1980), *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (1990), *and Islam: Between Globalization and Counterterrorism* (2006) solidified his iconic status. He was an intellectual pugilist in the best sense of the word. While their styles were contrasting – and their reach different – both Mazrui and Barkan wrote and acted with passion and conviction. One got the impression they lived for their ideas and work. Each seemed prepared to defend his work to the death. In the end, it must be conceded that each succeeded in his chosen path and the uses to which he put his intellect. While Barkan closed his life at a think-tank doing largely policy work, Mazrui's career ended the way it started – in the academy. Each hued to his strengths toiling at the corner in which he was best suited.

Philosophy and worldview

Both Mazrui and Barkan were born and lived during a time of roiling ideological ferment. Both men lived during the height of the Cold War, and they saw the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union as well as the unification of Germany. But most importantly for them, they witnessed Africa's Independence Decade – the virtual political liberation of a continent, except for Western Sahara. They saw the end of Apartheid in South Africa. They were jubilant about Africa's decolonisation, but depressed by the inertia and dysfunction – dystopia – of many an Africa post-colonial state. They watched as early experiments in liberal constitutionalism collapsed under the weight and pressures of a scandalous international economic order, ravenous tribal elites, and corrupt political classes. In their place, one-party dictatorships and brutal military regimes proliferated in the African continent as it entered one long night of tyranny. Infrastructures collapsed, economies were brought to their knees, genocides and pogroms became all-too common, and the African university virtually died. Africa became a byword for human misery. But neither Mazrui nor Barkan lost faith in Africa's humanity and its ability to bounce back from adversity. For Mazrui, Africa's resurgence would be a matter of time. After all, the continent had already endured two of the largest historical traumas the world had ever seen: slavery and colonialism.

Although Mazrui and Barkan came from contrasting cultural milieus, they both believed – deeply – in human dignity. People like them – men of their era – were generally forced by history to choose which side of the political divide to inhabit. This was particularly true for men of ideas such as themselves. For an African like Mazrui, the pressure to join the Marxist column in vogue throughout sectors of the African intelligentsia during the 1960s–1980s was intense. One's bona fides as a true African patriot depended on which side of the fence one fell. Liberal ideologues were mocked as 'capitalist running dogs'. Even worse, they were viewed as traitors to the cause of full African liberation from the West, capitalism, and exploitation. Mazrui, one of the first Africans truly steeped in the literature of the West and its politics, did not accept this easy schism. He thought that this dichotomy demagogued the complexity of the African condition. The East African circles in which he started his career were dominated by leftist academics, many of them expressing an openly Marxist/Maoist/Leninist view of the world. But Mazrui never ceded ground to them. He eschewed most forms of fundamentalism

and his worldview was decidedly liberal, although he remained throughout his life a critic of the West.

Mazrui could be the consummate provocateur and truth teller, especially in polite company. Many times he wrote to kill totems. For example, although he held the Dr Albert Schweitzer Chair at Binghamton, he once said that the revered doctor was a 'benevolent racist' for calling Africans 'savages' and 'primitives' and treating them in separate and unequal wards in pre-independence Gabon.[9] In the documentary: *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Mazrui rooted for a black-ruled state to inherit South Africa's nuclear arsenal once Apartheid was defeated. Blacks, he argued, would have nuclear arms for the first time in history and could use it for leverage in white-dominated global affairs. A hue and cry followed but Mazrui was unfazed by his American critics who included Lynne Cheney, the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and wife of Dick Cheney, the future Vice President under President George W. Bush. Though a liberal – and a Muslim who was known to enjoy good wine – Mazrui was a fierce critic of the West's treatment of Islam and Muslims. He defended Islam, which he saw as part of Africa's rich heritage, from demonisation. But he also virulently opposed Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. He believed that sharia was not compatible with democracy. An equal opportunity critic, he denounced Marxism as unsuited to Africa but was also deeply critical of capitalism and its imperial exploitation of Africa. In sum, Mazrui opposed all forms of domination and instead sought a new humanism for Africa – an ideology grounded in liberalism but an economic system that was anti-imperial and respectful of the dignity of Africans and Africa's resources.

Barkan, like Mazrui, had no time for Marxism. I think he was never tempted, or seduced, by the logic of Karl Marx. A true liberal in the American sense within the Democratic Party, he believed in the American experiment with democracy and the potential for the United States to play a constructive role in emerging states, especially in Africa. He was particularly interested in three African states that he saw as anchors in Africa. These were Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. He thought Egypt, the fourth anchor state, was an important player, although he did not focus his work there. For Barkan, the American values of democracy and the rights language could be used as a link to cultures emerging out of despotic periods. But he was sensitive to charges of American paternalism, or soft bigotry, under the guise of human rights and development. He frequently argued that democratic values had to be deeply embedded in the bone marrow of other cultures to succeed. Elites and common people had to connect their own aspirations for freedom with these values to legitimise any role that the United States could play through its diplomatic missions and development agencies. The key to success would be a press that was vibrant, a strong civil society, and an expanding middle class. There is no question that Barkan represented the best of the American academy studying and working on policy in Africa. His scholarship, work, and global vision – unlike Mazrui's – were not forged, or born, in protest. It was not anti-imperial, nor did it have to be explicitly so to be a genuine giving of self to the larger humanity. He took the best of the United States and shared it with Africa.

Conclusion

I will deeply miss both Mazrui and Barkan. They were among my mentors and forebears in the academy. I learned a lot from both, and I shared several platforms with them. I remember being on a panel with Mazrui at the OAU in Addis Ababa in 1994. In front of us sat foreign ministers and ambassadors of many African states. Mazrui did not mince words as he blasted them for creating a refugee crisis in Africa. He decried the corrupt and brutal post-colonial African state and wondered whether it would be washed in rivers of blood. That was Mazrui – fearless and

direct before the powerful. In 2003, I invited him to address a truth commission conference in Nairobi when I chaired the Task Force for the Establishment of a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission. At short notice, he made the long journey from Binghamton to Kenya and delivered an unequivocal endorsement for a truth commission for Kenya. That to me underlined his commitment to a just society. Barkan was no different. We spoke on several panels together, one of the last coming at the annual meeting of the American Society of International Law in Washington. He was engaging and invigorating. But he did not suffer fools well either. Barkan's concern for justice was well known. One of his last preoccupations before he left us was the cases against Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto for crimes against humanity at The Hague-based International Criminal Court. He believed the two – who were declared elected President and Deputy President of Kenya – were guilty of the heinous charges against them. But he was aghast at the slow pace of the trials and believed that the Office of the Prosecutor was unlikely to secure a conviction because of witness tampering and poor investigations. These are the memories of my friends and mentors that I am going to keep.

I deliberately chose the contrast/complement of Barkan and Mazrui to show how two leading scholars and actors on the African reality could converge on the project of the continent's renaissance. One was born free and white in the American heartland. The other came into the world black and a British colonial subject in the Kenyan Colony. Both became leaders in the American and global academies on Africa. Mazrui's was the voice of protest – exposing the West's machinations and vices against Africa and asking for fundamental change in Africa-West relations. Mazrui told the world that he, and by extension Africa, could stand in the most hallowed halls of the global academy; that Africa was an equal in global affairs and should be treated as such. Barkan's claims were not that forceful, nor could they be. That is because he saw himself as an outsider to Africa, but an outsider-insider. He was acutely aware of the limitations of the American expatriate and Western Africanist in Africa. But it is what both Mazrui and Barkan did to advance the study of Africa in America and the world that will live forever. Mazrui was deeply involved in the African Studies Association (ASA), and even served as its President. Barkan was a long term member and senior official of the ASA. Both were 'statesmen' within the college of Africanists, the African Diaspora, and Africans within the ASA. The passing of both giants leaves a unique void. Their legacies – and their good works – will live forever.

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