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PARADOXES OF THE HUMAN CONDITION AND OF COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCE

*Extracted from the works of Ali A. Mazrui
from 1971 to 2011*

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I. Global and Comparative Paradoxes

- (a) All life is sacred, but some lives are more sacred than others.
- (b) Asia is the mother of all great world religions; Europe is the mother of all great world ideologies; and Africa is the mother of the human species itself.
- (c) The most successful Semitic religion is Christianity; the most successful Semitic language is Arabic; the most successful Semitic people are the Jews.
- (d) In the destruction of human life, the male is the senior partner (man as warrior); in the creation of human life, the female is the senior partner (woman as mother). Masculinity is war; femininity is womb.

II. Comparative Paradoxes Islamica

- (a) The Qur'an is the most widely read book in its original language in history. The Bible is the most widely read book in translation.
- (b) Beethoven could compose brilliant music without being able to hear a single note; John Milton could compose the long poem of genius Paradise Lost, without looking at a single line; and the Prophet Muhammad could bequeath the most oft quoted book in history without reading a single sura or verse with his own eyes. Never before in history has a book associated with an illiterate man exerted such influence on life and literature across the centuries.
- (c) When Muhammad was an ordinary Meccan citizen, he had only one wife, Khadija. It was after Muhammad became prophet, and needed tribal allies, that he entered into marriages of dynastic convenience. Muslims should emulate Muhammad's preprophetic monogamy.

- (d) Muslim sons respect their mothers better than Euro-Christians do; Muslim husbands respect their wives less than Euro-Christians do.
- (e) Islam gives women more economic rights (e.g. the right to inherit land) than they enjoy under some indigenous “tribal” laws. On the other hand, Islam gives women narrower economic roles (e.g. cultivating the land or marketing the produce) than women pursue under indigenous traditions. There is a conflict here between formal rights [better protected by Islam] and practical roles [better protected by indigenous culture].
- (f) In the second half of the 20th century C.E. four Muslim countries [Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and Indonesia) elected women to be President or Prime Minister long before the United States had a female President, or Italy a woman Premier, or France elected a woman President, or Germany elected a female Chancellor, or Russia had elected either a woman Head of State or Head of Government.
- (g) Muslims are often criticized for not producing the best in human behavior, but they are seldom congratulated for an ethic that has averted the worst. There are no Muslim equivalents of Nazi concentration camps. Islam brings to the calculus of universal justice some protection against the abyss of human depravity.
- (h) Muslims have yet to reach the pinnacles of democracy, but they have also avoided the depths of racism and genocide.

III. Comparative Paradoxes Africana

- (b) Africa is the first habitat of man, but the last to be made truly habitable.
- (c) In modern history Africans have not been the most brutalized of peoples, but they have been among the most humiliated.
- (d) Africa is among the richest regions of the world in resources, but among the poorest in development.
- (e) Africa has been slow in modernizing its skills, but fast in Westernizing its values.
- (f) Africa is the second largest continent in size, but the first in fragmentation.
- (g) Geographically, Africa is the most central of all continents, but politically Africa is the most marginalized.
- (h) African societies are rich in the oral tradition but less well endowed in written legacies.

IV. Select Paradoxes of Dialectical Leadership

- (a) By leading the country to independence, Kwame Nkrumah was a great Gold Coaster. By working hard to keep pan-Africanism warm as a political ideal, Nkrumah was a great African. But by the tragedy of his domestic excesses after independence, Nkrumah fell short of becoming a great Ghanaian.
- (b) Nelson Mandela was a great cause of Pan-Africanism in others. His martyrdom aroused the shared anger of much of the world. Mandela became the focus of Black Solidarity. But was Mandela himself a Pan-Africanist? Here comes the paradox. He was a globalist, on one side, and a South African Patriot on the other. But in action he was less of a Pan-Africanist than people like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere or Muammar Gaddafi.

(c) Muammar Gaddafi was a good African but a bad Libyan. He regarded himself as an African first and an Arab second. He invested more in African projects than in Arab ones. He provided employment to many citizens of neighboring countries. He promoted and financed the pursuit of African unification. On the other hand, Gaddafi was a bad Libyan because he was a dictator and intolerant of dissent. He also remained too long in power – more than four decades.

The above paradoxes are illustrative of Ali Mazrui's dialectical style. The list is far from being exhaustive.