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ALI A. MAZRUI, WITNESS TO HISTORY?

AN INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEW WITH MWALIMU MAZRUI

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1) *You have met (and continue to meet) leaders after leaders in Africa and beyond, from Idi Amin to Muammar Khadafy, from Kwame Nkrumah to Nelson Mandela, and the list is long. Of the leaders you have met who impressed you most, positively and/or negatively, and why?*

Of the African leaders I have known personally over the years, the one who impressed me the most *negatively* was Uganda's Idi Amin. Although Idi Amin had great personal charm, he was also a brutal dictator. He ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979. Ironically, I was for a while Idi Amin's intellectual hero. He even wanted to send me to apartheid South Africa in a bid to persuade the white racists that Black people could *think*. I was to be Exhibit A. fortunately for me, the South African government rejected Idi Amin's offer of this kind of intellectualized cultural exchange!

There was another irony in my relationship with Idi Amin. Precisely by his being a brutal dictator, he changed my life more fundamentally than did any other African leader. When I fell out of favour with him, my life was at risk. Idi Amin forced me to leave Africa for the United States. This semi-exile was virtually for the rest of my life, though there were continuing links with different African countries. Sometimes evil has a bigger impact on its victims than goodness has on it beneficiaries.

The African leader who influenced me most positively was Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, although I met him face-to-face only a couple of times. I had far less personal contact with him that I have had with at least a dozen other African leaders. So in what sense was Nkrumah such

an influence on me? The impact was intellectual and political rather than personal. My doctoral thesis at Oxford University was partly influenced by his ideas on Pan Africanism [See my first book ever *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition* (Chicago University Press, 1967).

Kwame Nkrumah also stimulated my vision of Africa as a convergence of three civilizations—Africanity, Islam and Western culture. Nkrumah called that convergence "Consciencism." I later called it "Africa's Triple Heritage." I was able to elaborate on my own concept in a BBC/PBS television series titled *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986).

My critique of Nkrumah became one of my most influential articles about Africa. My article in *Transition* magazine (Kampala, 1966) was titled "Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar." It has been featured in anthologies, and been debated across the decades.

The fact that Nkrumah had a greater positive impact on me than has any other leader does not necessarily mean that I admire Nkrumah the most. Intellectually, I admired Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania higher than most politicians anywhere in the world. Nyerere and I also met more often over the years from 1967 to 1997 approximately. I am also a great fan of Nelson Mandela. By ethical standards Mandela is greater than Nyerere; but by intellectual standards Nyerere is greater than Mandela.

What about the President of my own country, Kenya? The first two Presidents of Kenya were less familiar to me than were the Presidents of Kenya's neighbors. In fact, I was introduced to President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya by President Milton Obobe of Uganda at a graduation ceremony at the University of Nairobi in the late 1960s. Kenya's second president, Daniel arap Moi, imprisoned some members of my Kenya family, and turned me into a'pariah at Kenyan universities for some fifteen years. It was Kenya's third president—Mwai Kibaki—who restored

my national credentials and made me Chancellor of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology.

2) *You have been rightly described as "Multiple Mazrui." You have made seminal contributions to various disciplines ranging from political science, comparative culture to philosophy, literature, Islamic studies, and of course, African studies. To which field, if any, do you swear the greatest allegiance and to which one have you contributed most intellectually? What do you think about your characterization as "Multiple Mazrui?" Is it a good thing to be described as such?*

Why have I been described as "the Multiple Mazrui?" One aspect of my "multiple nature" is my interdisciplinary style of writing and lecturing. I regard myself not just as a political scientist, but much more as a comprehensive political analyst. My interest is not just in politics as matters of governance, but in the politics of the human condition as a whole. My range is from the politics of religion to the politics of language and literature. There is a sense in which I am also a political philosopher. My colleagues in political science do not always approve of my approach to the study of political phenomena. But quite early in my life I demonstrated that I could publish in such political science journals as the *American Political Science Review*, *World Politics*, *Political Studies*, Political *Quarterly*, and the *International Journal* in London. But having established my political science credentials, I then felt free to publish in interdisciplinary journals as I wished.

3) *You had once categorized cultures as calculus-friendly and calculus-challenged, depicting Africa as representing the second. Given "calculus" is so central for the mastery of*

modern science and technology, and given cultures take a long time to change, am I correct in concluding that your thesis condemns Africa to poverty and backwardness for a long time to come? If not, please explain.

Yes, I do regard some cultures in Asia as calculus-friendly—cultures in India or Korea which produce a disproportionate proficiency in mathematics. But where do I place African cultures in the rank order of calculus-friendly (mathematically proficient) and calculus-challenged (mathematically slow)? In reality African cultures differ from one ethnic group to another. Igbo and Yoruba cultures in Nigeria are more calculus-friendly than Hausa culture. Kikuyu culture in Kenya is more calculus friendly than are the cultures of Kenya's coastal peoples. Indeed, Luo culture in Kenya has produced more intellectuals and scholars than any other ethnic systems of values in that country.

4) *I remember an aphorism, a version of which you sometimes use in your writings: Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. Your own greatness is now beyond doubt, but what is its source? Were you born great, did you achieve greatness, or was greatness thrust upon you? Or some combination of these? Please Explain.*

You ask if I was born "great." I say "No!" But I was born within the distinguished clan of the Mazrui, who were noteworthy in history as rulers, scholars and jurists. My father was the Chief Islamic Judge [Chief Kadhi] of the British colony of Kenya. My father was in turn descended from earlier Islamic jurists. Please consult my father's own book *The Mazrui Dynasty of Mombasa* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, annotated by _____JM Ritchie]

5) *I've heard some people say that if you had written as much in the field of economics (and made comparable contributions) as you had done in the fields of comparative politics, history and cultural studies, you would have won a Nobel Prize for economic. Do you think this situation would and should change in the future?*

It is indeed true that since I am not in the field of economics, or in peace-making, or in creative literature, I can never be eligible for the Nobel Prize of either Economics, Peace or Literature. It is my misfortune that none of my own disciplinary fields of specialization (especially history, political science and social philosophy) have Nobel Prizes focusing on special achievements in those particular fields. But on at least one occasion I was instrumental in helping another African win the Nobel Prize for Peace.

6) A*lmost all the time you seem to be doing something—traveling, lecturing, writing, etc., and this has made you one of the most productive scholars. But my question is this: do you work when you rest? Or do you rest when you work? What is your idea of the relationship between work and rest anyhow? And where does all this energy come from?*

It is indeed true that writing in my case is more like a pastime than work. Sometimes writing in my case is almost like a compulsion. I believe I have inherited this compulsion to write from my father who was a pamphleteer in the Swahili language and Arabic. My Old Man was constantly engaged in debates about social reform and theological interpretations of Islam. My father used to say that there were two areas of life in which he had not tried to emulate the Prophet Muhammad—my father did not try to marry as many wives as the Prophet Muhammad had done, nor did my father limit himself to producing only one book as the Prophet had done.

[Muslims believe that although the Prophet Muhammad was himself totally non-literate, he dictated a book which became the most widely read volume in its original language in human history—the Qur'an]. The Christian Bible is the most widely book in translation.

7) *African studies and Islamic studies are not mutually exclusive fields, or at lest they should not be, and you have intellectually contributed to both of them considerably. In the last two decades you have given more attention to Islam than you had done before. What was the impetus? Tell us, if you will, also the ways in which the expansion of the scope of your interest affected, if it did, your Africanist credentials and African constituency.*

Let me first define a couple of terms. An *Islamist* is a person to whom Islam is not just a religion, but is a radical political ideology. An *Islamicist*, on the other hand, is a scholar who studies Islam. As for a *Muslim*, that is simply a believer in the religion of Islam.

Of course, I have been a Muslim all my life, but I did not become an Islamicist (a scholar in Islamic studies) until the 1980s. As you know, I was born into a highly religious Muslim family in colonial Mombasa, Kenya. My father was the Chief Kadhi (the Chief Justice in Islamic law) of Kenya under British rule. His dream for me was that I should become a learned scholar in Islamic studies like himself. He hired an Arab to teach me classical Arabic, and I learnt Islamic theology in evening classes at our local mosque. He hoped that after finishing secondary school in British-ruled Mombasa, I would find my way to Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, one of the most distinguished seats of learning in the Muslim world.

My father died when I was only fourteen years old. His dream of having me educated at Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo died with him, although I would have loved to go to Al-Azhar if someone had offered me a scholarship.

What did not die with my Dad was my being a believer in Islam. Indeed, my first regular job was at the Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education [MIOME] in which all the students were Muslims, whereas almost all the instructors were Europeans. My bosses at MIOME played a crucial role in my getting a Kenya Government scholarship to study in Great Britain. This was the most decisive departure from the dream of pursuing Islamic Studies in the Arab world. However, I did include the study of the Arabic language as a minor in my undergraduate programme at the University of Manchester in Britain.

My formal study of Africa began at Columbia University in New York when I was studying for my Master's degree. As for my doctoral dissertation (Oxford calls it "thesis") at the University of Oxford, it was entirely about postcolonial Anglophone Africa.

In reality, it was Oxford which turned me into a professional Africanist. I successfully defended my doctoral dissertation in 1966, and in 1967 I published three books in one year, all of them about Africa. Indeed, as early as 1963, when I was still a graduate student, I had published four articles in professional journals—including the *American Political Science Review* in the United States and *Political Studies* in Great Britain. Almost all the subject matter was Africa's political experience.

In the 1970s the British Broadcasting Corporation invited me to deliver their most prestigious Radio Lectures called the Reith Lectures. The lectures were named after the Founder Director-General of the BBC, Lord Reith. These lectures were broadcast in 1979 and entitled "The African Condition," with a book which was published in 1980 by Cambridge University Press in New York and by Heinemann Educational Books in London.

Just as it was Oxford which helped to turn me into an Africanist, it was the British Broadcasting Corporation which (inspite of itself) helped to turn me into an Islamicist.

When the BBC invited me in about 1980–1982 to do a television series with them about Africa, what they had in mind was a story about "Africa and the West." Instead, I insisted that the TV series be about what I called "Africa's Triple Heritage—Africanity, Islam and the West." In the TV series I drew attention to Islam as a major part of the African condition.

This became a major turning point in my career. Instead of my being viewed exclusively as an Africanist and political scientist, I began to be viewed also as someone who had important and distinctive things to say about Islam. Before long I was receiving an avalanche of invitations to speak about Islam or to play other roles in Islamic institutions. Since then I have served in several Boards of Islamic organizations, been Chair of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, been elected a Trustee to the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies and been elected President of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists.

When I coined the concept of Africa's triple heritage, I already knew that I personally was an embodiment of those three legacies—Africanity, Islam and the West. But I did not yet know that my whole career was also being transformed into focusing onto those three civilizations. Since then I have been publishing books and articles either about Africa and the West, or about Islam and the West, or about all three civilizations in convergence and divergence. My entire scholarship has been a case of a triple heritage. What is more, I have since lectured at Al-Azhar University, and have had Al-Azhar filmed sympathetically for my television series. It was not quite what my Dad had in mind in his dream for me. But I hope he approves of the historic compromise which we have forged in Africa's triple heritage.

8) *You don't drive, but you top your peers in mobility—both on land and in air. Could you please explain your shyness about driving cars? Is there anything which made you loathe driving?*

When I was a child in colonial Mombasa our family did not own a car. But there was quite a good bus service for most of the distant places we needed to go to. Taxis were too expensive for our family except for an emergency. Against this background, my first ambition as a schoolboy was to become a taxi driver. I assumed every taxi-driver owned his own car, and used it to make a living. The very few taxi drivers there were in colonial Mombasa were all men. There were also rickshaws, pulled not by horses but by men (black Africans, of course).

I nursed this ambition of becoming a taxi driver for years. It is the more ironic that when I grew up I never learnt to drive. When I was psychoanalyzed by a therapist many years later, my therapist concluded that my failure to learn to drive was an unconscious rebellion against my childhood dream to make a living as a taxi-driver. According to the therapist, I have since compensated by flying across vast distances. Do you think the therapist's diagnosis made sense?

9) *You have written extensively on problems of governance in Africa. Was there ever a time when you wished you were a leader of an African country to turn things around? How should African governance and African(ist) scholarship relate? And how have they related in the past?*

Yes, I did have political aspirations when I started studying political science at the University of Manchester in England in the 1950s. I became a leader among African students when I was elected President of the African Students' Association in Manchester. I also wrote for the general university students' magazine. When I came to the United States for the first time

to pursue a Masters' degree at Columbia University in New York, I was active in students' activities at International House in Riverside Drive, New York, where I lived.

In my students' years at Oxford I tried to get more experience in media-activities rather than students' activities. I became a regular contributor to the BBC radio service beamed at Africa. I wrote short radio commentaries on some item of African news. I broadcast in both English and Kiswahili from London to Africa.

The BBC's confidence in me grew. While still at Oxford they invited me to deliver two half-hour talks on their most prestigious domestic radio channel. At that time the channel was called The Third Programme—whose constituency was the intellectual and cultural elite of Great Britain. Many talks were delivered in 1963 when I was still a graduate student at Oxford.

It was also when I was at Oxford that I published my first article in a major Western newspaper. I published an op-ed article in *The Times* of London. My fellow students were so incredulous that I had an article published *The Times* that many of them suspected that I had been assisted by Dame Margery Perham, the most distinguished Africanist at Oxford at that time. Actually, Margery Perham had absolutely nothing to do with it. I wrote the article under the title "Why Does an African Feel African?", and simply mailed it to the newspaper. To my own astonishment, the newspaper promptly accepted it as it was, with virtually no alteration whatsoever.

I regarded my media experiences not as preparation for an academic career, but as a promising preparation for a political career in Kenya. My country's independence was imminent during my years at Oxford, but Kenya did not emerge from colonial rule until December 1963.

It was earlier in 1963 that I started my career at Makerere College in Uganda. Also appointed at Makerere was another young Kenyan social scientist, Mwai Kibaki. It was predicted

at that time that I would become the first African full professor in political science in Eastern Africa, and Mwai Kibaki would become the first African professor of economics in our part of the continent. The prediction about me did come true—I became the first Black Professor in the social sciences in Anglophone Africa. But the prediction about Mwai Kibaki did not come true. He left Makerere and entered Kenyan politics. He lived to become a Minister in independent Kenya, then Vice-President, then leader of an opposition party, and was finally elected President of Kenya by popular vote in 2002.

On the other hand, I chose to remain in academic life, with part-time participation in electronic and print media in Africa and the Western world. By a strange twist of destiny, President Mwai Kibaki as Head of State appointed me Chancellor of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, my first major appointment at a Kenyan University. Also ironically, the Chancellorship was a position he himself had held jointly as Head of State, which he then chose to relinquish in my favour. He was the first President of Kenya to delegate the Chancellorships of public universities to ordinary citizens instead of the Head of State.

When Kenya returned to multiparty politics in the 1980s (after a couple of decades of the one-party state), my name circulated as a potential leader of one of the opposition parties. But I did not encourage those who were trying to promote me. This was a totally secular option. But there was another option. Kenyan Muslims started to form a party of their own on the model of the Christian Democratic parties of Germany and Italy. The Kenyan Muslim Democratic Party would be based on Muslim values, but was to be open for membership to all Kenyans who shared Muslim values of sobriety and social discipline.

The interim leaders of the Muslim party sent a delegation to ask me to lead them. I offered to be their political advisor, but not their party leader. Fortunately or unfortunately,

political parties bearing the name of a religion were banned under President Daniel arap Moi in Kenya. Christian Democrats in Italy and Germany had clearly enjoyed more freedom than Muslim Democrats in Kenya.

10) *We know that you have intimate links to several African countries both at professional and personal levels. The countries that come to mind in this regard include Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and your own country of birth, Kenya. Which of these countries is your favorite other than (or in addition to) Kenya, and why? I understand choosing one of these countries is a daunting task in practice, but please assume, in theory, that you had to.*

In one sense, I indentify with all African countries and with the African Diaspora. But it is true that there are some particular African countries which have intersected with my own life more than others. Kenya is the land of my birth and my nationality; Uganda is the birth place of my academic career and the initial engine of my rise to professional pre-eminence; Nigeria is the land of my African wife's birth [Pauline Uti] and the country which inspired the emotions of my only novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo*. Nigeria is also the country which made it possible for me to combine an appointment in Africa (University of Jos) with an appointment in the Western World (University of Michigan). The Nigerian Television Authority also joined forces with the BBC in Britain and the PBS in the US to produce my television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. Ghana was the country which had a greater impact on my Oxford doctoral dissertation, and Tanzania is the vanguard of my own Swahili culture. Kiswahili is my mother tongue, and Tanzania has done more to promote it than even my own country of Kenya. Of the three founding presidents of Anglophone East Africa, I knew Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania and

Milton Obote of Uganda far better than I knew my own Jomo Kenyatta or Daniel arap Moi of Kenya.

South Africa is autobiographically important for different reasons. Of all the Black intellectuals outside South Africa who tested the apartheid system at its most raw, I was probably in a class by myself. Because my first wife was English, and I was invited by the University of Cape Town, I deliberately challenged apartheid on the issue of racially mixed marriages. My challenge provoked a response from the Prime Minister of South Africa himself at the time.

South Africa is also the first African country other than my own to award me a national honour from the Head of State. President Thabo Mbeki elevated me in April 2007 to the rank of Grand Companion of Oliver Tambo. South Africa also produced the first Annotated Bibliography of my works (electronic and print) from 1963 to the present. The editor and compiler is Abdul S. Bemath, a South African Librarian and Bibliographer.

11) *It seems that there is usually a moment in early life when a potentially genius scholar comes to realize that he may be one of those rare breeds of brilliant human beings. Was there such a "eureka" moment of self-discovery in your experience and, if so, what was the context? You have been nominated by Foreign Policy Magazine as one of the top one hundred intellectuals in the world. Both prior to and following this recognition, various honors have been bestowed upon you by different institutions. How heavy is the burden of fame, and how do you cope with it?*

You are asking me if I ever realized that I was an African genius!! My answer is that I am convinced that I fall short of a genius, although I have had fans who have so regarded me as a genius from my days at Makerere in Uganda. Unfortunately, those who regarded me as a genius

included President Idi Amin of Uganda in the 1970s. That is why Idi Amin wanted to send me to apartheid South Africa as the ultimate refutation that Black people were disqualified as intellectual agents of charge. It stretches our credulity, but I have indeed been designated among the top one hundred public intellectuals of the world (*Foreign Policy* magazine, 2005 Washington, DC), among the top one hundred most dangerous professors in the United States (David Horowitz in his book by same title), among one hundred top public intellectuals of the world (*Perspectives*, London) and, the most preposterous of all, that I am among the top one hundred greatest Africans of all time (*Africa Today* magazine, London). I am flattered that there are people in the world who value me so highly, but let me pray that at least one of my children or grandchildren rises to the real ranks of which I have been so prematurely elevated.

12.) W*hat was the most memorable moment (for you) in 2007?*

A convergence of two events made 2007 extra memorable. I was hospitalized almost for the first time in my life. The problem was limb-threatening (my right leg) rather than life-threatening. On doctor's orders I had to cancel speaking engagements in June in Dublin, Ireland, at The Hague (the Netherlands) and in Accra (Ghana). What made these events particularly memorable was Dublin's refusal to take "NO" for an answer, and their readiness to be addressed by me from my hospital bed by satellite if necessary! I finally agreed to give my lecture by satellite, but from my office at Binghamton University, New York rather than my hospital bed. I could see and hear the audience in Ireland and they could hear see and hear me as I addressed them on "Cultural Forces in World Politics."

Other memorable events in 2007 was my being elevated to the Order of Grand Companions of Oliver Tambo by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and my being recognized as a

Living Legend by the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] and the African Communications Agency in Abuja, Nigeria.

From the family point of view the most memorable events were reunions with my two sisters in Mombasa and with my multiple nephews, nieces and cousins in July 2007. And then there was the grand reunion in Binghamton of all my three adult sons, their families, my former wife, Molly, and her new husband, and of course my usual family and household in Binghamton, New York (my current wife, Pauline, our two teen-age sons, Goretti Mugambwa and her daughter Maria). I was delighted that you yourself managed to join us for that Thanksgiving reunion in November 2007.

12) *Your brilliance as a teacher, researcher and public intellectual is clear. Any advice for those who see you as a model and wish to follow your footsteps?*

As you know, I have critics as well as fans; I have faults as well as talents. But the most compelling lesson which my academic life illustrates is quite simple. It is the old adage "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again!"

I nearly failed the final high school examination in Mombasa—the Cambridge School Certificate examination, which was set and graded by Cambridge University for schools in the British colonial empire. Because I got what was called a "Third Grade" (meaning just a pass) in 1949, I was not qualified to go to college. The only higher education college for East Africans at the time was Makerere College in Uganda. Makerere College understandably rejected my application for admission. I even failed to get a job as a junior bank clerk in Mombasa. But I refused to accept that situation as the final word about my career.

For the next four to five years I applied for scholarships to different parts of the world. I got negative answers from institutions in Europe, North America, India, the Arab world and Australia.

Fortunately for me the British colonial authorities in Kenya rediscovered me through the intervention of British officials in Mombasa. The educational authorities in colonial Nairobi decided that I was much brighter than indicated by my Cambridge School Certificate results. I got a Kenya Government scholarship to go to complete my secondary education in England, and then proceed to a British university. I got a Distinction in my bachelor's degree, won a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to do a Master's degree at Columbia University in New York, and then won a Nuffield College Fellowship to do my doctorate at Oxford University in England. Yes, I had vindicated the old English adage: "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again!"