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The Eve of 1981

Dear Friends and Relatives,

Permit me to take liberties with an immortal line - "The curfew tolls the knell of parting year"! We wish you an enjoyable festive season and a fulfilling new year.

This season letter is partly personal and partly professional. Some of you may have written to me in connection with the B.B.C. Reith Lectures, or with the death of my uncle, or with the visual tragedy of my children or with some other business. Your concerns may vary considerably. Please forgive me for sending you all the same response. I am flattered that you cared enough to write a letter or send a card. In response I am sending you a Mazrui newsletter! Please forgive me.

Those of you who are especially close to my wife, Molly, may conceivably receive a supplementary separate letter from her. I am keeping her news to a minimum in this letter on that assumption. But I know you will be pleased to know that she has an academic appointment at Eastern Michigan University, teaching English as a second or foreign language. And yet this has not prevented her from being as active as ever in the Alliance Francais - promoting the fortunes of the French language and culture in the Mid-West of the United States! I have never been sure about Molly's cultural patriotism. Is she English or French? God knows! Or did I mean to say "Gaul knows"?

I have been trying to cope with the fallout and reverberations of my B.B.C. Reith Lectures! The lectures have turned out to be the most controversial thing I have done since my evaluation of Kwame Nkrumah after he was overthrown in 1966. ("Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar", Transition, 1966). The Reith Lectures have been rebroadcast in entirety in several countries - including Canada, Australia, the United States and parts of the Caribbean. The most controversial was the sixth lecture recommending nuclear proliferation in the Third World as a necessary strategy if the Big Powers are to be shocked into taking universal nuclear disarmament seriously. I have had to defend those views before audiences from Canberra to New York, from Oxford to Yokohama, from Lisbon to Denver. My critics have been almost entirely Northerners (Western Europeans, North Americans and Japanese). Most Third World commentators have shared my concerns on this nuclear issue.

I have just arrived back from Yokohama. My most moving experience in Japan was being introduced to hibakusha, survivors of the atomic martyrdom of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sitting with them round a table at a symposium of the International Peace Research Association at Yokohama, discussing the weighty issues of war and peace, was one of my more memorable moral experiences of any year. Hiromu Morishita, bearing visible scars of the nuclear event of August 6, 1945 in Hiroshima, was particularly evocative as he quietly told us about his efforts in peace education in Hiroshima schools. What was once said of Auschwitz might well be said about the barbarity

of 6 & 9 August, 1945-"I wonder if, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, poetry is ever possible again?"

We must find ways of shocking ourselves out of false security and nuclear complacency. If nuclear proliferation will not create the necessary sense of urgency, let us pray for a miracle of moral conversion.

But not all death is apocalyptic. There is also a routine side to death in our lives. This year we lost our beloved uncle, Sheikh Abu Suleiman, who had shared with Sheikh Muhammad Kassim Mazrui the leadership of our extended family in Mombasa. Abu Suleiman, my mother's brother, helped to bring me up as a child. He and I loved each other dearly. For me Mombasa will never be the same again without him. He leaves a void. No single death since my mother passed away some years ago has shaken me more.

Right up to the end Abu Suleiman used to send my children first day stamped covers from Kenya. I explained to him that since two of the children were now blind, they were no longer stamp collectors - and could not enjoy the beautiful colours of the stamps he sent them. Abu Suleiman ignored my explanations - clinging to his hope for a miracle which he thought would one day give back to the children their eyesight.

Actually a minor miracle has indeed occurred. Kim, inspite of being almost blind, has a new interest in stamp collection. He has teamed up with his brother Al'Amin, who helps him in identifying the names of countries on the different stamps. This gives a clue about the morale of the afflicted children.

Jamal's morale in the spring and early summer was somewhat low. This was his first summer without tennis - and he felt the deprivation deeply. He then agreed to go to a special summer camp for the visually handicapped. He came back refreshed, with renewed self-confidence. He had intermingled at camp with fellow blind people, some of them much more self-reliant than he was at the time. He developed new targets of performance for himself.

Almost immediately afterwards we took a risk. Jamal joined me and the other two boys at an ordinary camp where he and Kim were likely to be the only blind people. And since Kim still had some vision left, Jamal was likely to be the only person at camp who was completely blind. Would this experience undo the self-confidence he had acquired at the previous camp of the visually handicapped?

Fortunately the risk paid off. Jamal took horse-riding lessons. So confident was he that he even cleared an obstacle on horse-back - when the instructor gave him the signal when to jump. Watching him on horse-back in his new condition was a moving experience. He is now a resolute young man.

Kim has enough vision not to need a walking stick. He can even ride a bicycle - though it scares me when he does! But his vision is low enough to have been classified as "blind" by the visual measurements of the State of Michigan.

Al'Amin is devoted to his two brothers, and is certainly a godsend to Jamal. They all help each other. Al'Amin's vision is perfect. He can help the other two in some things. They in turn help him in his studies and on his newspaper route. Psychologically, the three kids seem to be exceptionally well-adjusted -

which is perhaps a little more than one can say about their parents with their own unresolved special problems!

We consulted the former Chief Kathi of Kenya, Sheikh Muhammad Kassim Mazrui, if there were any religious objections to the use of a guide dog by a blind Muslim. We were assured that if either of our children needed a dog, there would be no religious objection. Indeed, Sheikh Muhammad observed that while Muslims were almost unanimous in regarding the pig as unclean, there was far less consensus among Islamic jurists as to the unclean status of the dog.

Kim has joined Al'Amin in Junior High School. They share a class for seventh and eighth graders. Jamal is in his last year of secondary school before going to college. He is agonizing about which college to explore. Because of his visual condition we have abandoned the scenario of his going to a British university or to the University of Nairobi. We have been given to understand that American universities are better equipped to handle the blind. In any case Jamal would prefer to remain in the United States for his college education - and his preference must prevail in this instance!

This year I also "discovered" a significant Muslim community scattered across the Caribbean. The "discovery" was made when I gave lectures on "Islam in World Affairs" in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. The audiences included both Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean Muslims, some of whom introduced themselves to me after the lectures. Some months later I received an invitation asking me to address the annual meeting of the Missionary Guild of Islam in the Caribbean and Latin America. I was very curious about the organization, but unfortunately the dates clashed with the summer camping I had promised the children. I had to say "No" to my Caribbean co-religionists. Maybe there will be another opportunity in the future. (Incidentally, whenever I go to the West Indies I am exceptionally well looked after by such old Makerere friends as Locksley and Dorothea Edmondson and Joy and Selwyn Ryan. Dhiru and Laura Tanna are more likely to be abroad themselves!).

This letter is already much too long. But I should mention other Makerere "re-unions" I have had this year in places which have ranged from Adelaide (Australia) to Bellagio (Italy), from Calabar (Nigeria) to Tobago (West Indies), and from Paris (France) to Philadelphia (U.S.A.). It is always delightful to meet former Makerere colleagues and former students. What now remains is to visit Makerere itself - which I am planning to do before long. We have been trying to follow Uganda's fortunes with both hope and anxiety.

Meanwhile, we wish you and your loved ones all the very best in the coming year.

Yours warmly,



(Ali A. Mazrui)