

Jamal Ali Mazrui

THE MAXIMS OF MAZRUI

Life Lessons from a Wise Professor

Jamal Ali Mazrui

DESCRIPTION

Professor Ali Mazrui is one of the most influential scholars ever to have come from the African continent. Over a career spanning half a century, he wrote many books, lectured around the world, and received numerous honors.

In this work, Jamal Mazrui, is eldest son, shows that the late professor's wisdom was personal as well as professional. Jamal shares lessons learned, not from academic insights, but from the life example of his father.

Ten maxims are summarized with simple language and memorable anecdotes. The appendix contains an extensive obituary written by family members.

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QUOTATION

The first of all civil liberties is the freedom to point out publicly if a human right has been violated.

ALI MAZRUI, 2008

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DEDICATION

To the personal legacy of Professor Ali Mazrui

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PREFACE

This work is Adapted from a eulogy for my father, Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, that I presented at a memorial service on December 6 2014 in Binghamton, New York.

The appendix contains the official obituary, written by family members, which is a majority of the content of this publication. I thank its lead author, Kim Forde-Mazrui, as well as fellow contributors, Alamin Mazrui, Sr. and Alamin Ali Mazrui.

Jamal Mazrui
December 14, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Physicists have still not found a “theory of everything,” which reconciles the principles of quantum mechanics and general relativity in a consistent manner. As a social scientist, Ali Mazrui did not attempt a grand theory of human behavior. Rather, he analyzed many issues by applying relevant theories with insight and wisdom.

What wisdom about life did I learn from my father, and what lessons might he have wanted his legacy to teach? Without a pretense of comprehensiveness, here is a selection of maxims that I present as triplets in three categories:

- Ali Mazrui, the Virtuous Man;
- Ali Mazrui, the Public Intellectual; and
- Ali Mazrui, the Community Hero.

THE VIRTUOUS MAN

These maxims are be honest, be respectful, and be there for family.

Be honest. I never heard my father tell a lie in his life. Not once. He had opinions but always held to facts. That is how important honesty and truth were to him.

Be respectful. I am ashamed to say that, as a child, I occasionally exchanged ethnic jokes with other kids. Once while in the company of my father, I thought it would be OK to tell an anti-Semitic joke, knowing of his criticisms of the state of Israel.

I learned something. He scolded me immediately! My father taught us to be respectful of all people.

Be there for family. Despite many, demanding responsibilities, my father made time for family when crises arose. When I lost my sight at the age of sixteen, due to a rare genetic disease of the optic nerve, he shared a poem with relatives called “Ode to the Optic Nerve.” He also wrote to organizations that serve blind people in the United States, asking whether they had resources that could help his son. I remember when he took me on a trip to visit potential colleges.

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

These maxims are listen to all sides, think independently, and have the courage of conviction.

Listen to all sides. Frankly, there are some commentators on TV or radio that I can hardly stomach! My father, on the other hand, would listen attentively to multiple views even if he might strongly disagree. He thought it was important to understand opposing perspectives.

Think independently. After listening to all sides, my father thought we should make up our own minds. His intellectual thought was hard to categorize. In his personal life, he encouraged his children to think for themselves and choose their own paths in life.

Probably one of the most difficult things for my father was when, as an adult, I decided on an identity as a secular humanist. His Muslim faith was unshakeable. Nevertheless, he accepted my decision, and we moved on as father and son.

Have the courage of conviction. Once you have thought independently and reached your own conclusions, my father thought you should stand up for what you believe is true. He was known for taking public positions on issues that sometimes risked his job security or even personal safety.

In retrospect, I think a reason I was able to do something in my life that was widely considered courageous by peers is from what I received from him through a combination of nature and nurture. Many years ago, due to a policy difference with a prominent leader of a national association, its board expelled me as a member. I knew that the decision was unjust, but would I have the nerve to appeal against charismatic leadership that made the chances of reversal low, and of vilification high?

Somehow, perhaps from what my father transmitted to me, I found the courage to run a campaign asking for the membership as a whole to overrule the board at the next convention of the association. Through political maneuvers by powerful individuals, my case was prevented from coming up for a debate and vote on the convention floor. Still, I was proud to have stood up for democracy in the association through the strength of my conscience, and I won the respect of many. Subsequently, the board and I reconciled, and I was welcomed back.

THE COMMUNITY HERO

These maxims are defend your kin, empower others, and appreciate art.

Defend your kin. In his own ways, my father defended African countries against colonial exploitation and control, and he defended Arab countries against foreign invasion and occupation. He felt connected to his ancestral lines and sought to protect them against insults to their flourishing.

Empower others. Since my father's passing, tributes to his life from around the world have often mentioned his qualities as a mentor. This was so, not just as an inspiring role model, but through tangible forms of help that he gave to aid the careers of many. He also empowered his children to determine their own lives.

Appreciate art. My father liked to use poetry as a way of communicating ideas expressively and memorably. During leisure, he enjoyed romances, mysteries, and comedies in various creative forms.

A fond memory comes from a get together at my father's apartment over winter holidays with my brothers. Dad was reading out loud to us from a book I gave him of politically correct fairy tales, which satirically adapted traditional tales with contemporary language. My father had a contagious laugh, and this was one of the funniest times I heard it, to the point where one could not hear him but for a periodic squeak as he was catching his breath! We all ended up roaring with laughter that evening.

REMEMBER HOME

There is one more, tenth maxim that caps the wisdom of Ali Mazrui: remember home.

I think my father would have been pleased by the symbolism of how he died. Remembering home was a theme of his life and an expression of his death.

No matter where he traveled around the world, he stayed connected to his home town of Mombasa, Kenya, supporting relatives there and visiting regularly. When he knew the end was near, he made sure that he was not at a hospital but at his personal home. He was comfortable and surrounded by the love of family and friends on October 12, 2014 in Binghamton, New York.

Later that night, news of his passing was reported by the BBC, one of the world's largest broadcasters. From then until his burial a week later, newspapers, TV, and radio stations in Africa covered the story of his return journey, from his American home in Binghamton to his ancestral home in Mombasa, completing the circle of life.

My father valued home in both literal and metaphorical senses. Aware of and informed by his own blend of heritage, it is fitting that he was returned home through Western technology, treated with Muslim customs, and buried at a place called Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Kenya.

My father spoke of Africa as the original home of the human species, from which we all have roots and which deserves to be cherished. He and his wife Pauline built a home in Binghamton, New York that, for decades, has been a hub of caring and fellowship for people of all ages, whether local community or world colleagues.

CONCLUSION

Finally, let me summarize the maxims of Mazrui in another way that recommends a life journey with a series of key steps:

- Know yourself
- Believe in yourself
- Educate yourself
- Think independently
- Pursue your passion
- Conduct yourself honorably
- Remember home

A site for sharing information on *Professor Ali Mazrui* is the Facebook page hosted by our family: <http://facebook.com/Professor-Ali-Mazrui-28889396430/>.

APPENDIX: OBITUARY

*Renowned Pan-Africanist, Scholar
and Teacher,
Ali Mazrui, Dies at 81*

Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, 81, died peacefully on October 12, 2014 of natural causes at his home in Vestal, New York, surrounded by family. A political scientist, Mazrui was the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, State University of New York, until his retirement on September 1, 2014. He had also been serving as the Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies at Cornell University and as the Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large at the University of Jos, Nigeria. He was a renowned scholar, teacher and public intellectual with expertise in African politics, international political culture, political Islam, and North-South relations. His prolific writing over the past half century has shaped ideas about Africa and Islam among scholars and the general public, earning him both international acclaim and controversy. He authored over forty books and hundreds of scholarly articles and book chapters. His political analyses appeared frequently in news media around the world. He is best known for the nine-part television series he wrote and narrated, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. A joint production of BBC and PBS, the series originally aired in numerous countries in 1986. The series, and the book on which it is based, reveals and analyzes the complex ways in which African communities exhibit a blend of three cultures: indigenous, Muslim and Western.

Mazrui's own upbringing reflects this triple heritage. He was born on February 24, 1933, in Mombasa, Kenya, to Swafia Suleiman Mazrui and Sheikh Al-Amin Mazrui, an eminent Muslim scholar and the Chief Qadi (Islamic judge) of Kenya. Immersed in Swahili culture, Islamic law, and Western education, he grew up speaking or reading Swahili, Arabic and English. He pursued his higher education in the West, obtaining his B.A. from Manchester University in England (1960); his M.A. from Columbia University in New York (1961); and his doctorate (D.Phil.) from Oxford University in England

(1966). While studying in England, he married his first wife, Molly Vickerman, and they began a family in Kampala, Uganda, where he launched his academic career at Makerere University. He taught at Makerere for ten years, during which his first three sons were born: Jamal (1963), Alamin (1967) and Kim Abubakar (1968). At Makerere, he served as head of the Department of Political Science, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and Dean of the Faculty of Law. During his tenure at Makerere, dictator Idi Amin became increasingly repressive toward critics, ultimately forcing Mazrui into exile with his family to the United States.

Mazrui's career in the U.S. began at Stanford University, where he visited for two years (1972-74). He then joined the Political Science Department at the University of Michigan for seventeen years (1974-91), where he also served as Director of the Center for Afro-American and African Studies (1978-81). In 1989, the State of New York recruited him to Binghamton University to assume the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, previously occupied by Toni Morrison. At Binghamton, he founded the Institute of Global Cultural Studies and regularized his at-large affiliation with Cornell University. In 1991, he married Pauline Uti of Jos, Nigeria. They had two sons, Farid (1992) and Harith (1993), and adopted a daughter Grace (b. 2004) in 2012.

Mazrui's publications are influential and voluminous. He made his mark early in his career, before completing his doctoral studies, when in 1963 he published articles in the most prestigious political science journals in the United States and Britain: "On the Concept of 'We Are All Africans,'" *The American Political Science Review* (Mar. 1963) and "Consent, Colonialism and Sovereignty," *Political Studies* (UK) (Feb. 1963). His many books began with the publication of three in 1967 alone: *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition* (1967); *On Heroes and Uhuru-Worship: Essays on Independent Africa* (1967); and *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Friction and Cultural Fusion* (1967).

Other Mazrui books include *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective* (1976); *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis* (1980); *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (1990); *Islam Between Globalization and Counterterrorism* (2006); and *African Thought in Comparative Perspective* (Seifudein Adem, Ramzi Badran & Patrick Dikirr, ed., 2014). *The African Condition* also formed the basis of the prestigious annual Reith lectures that Mazrui delivered in 1979 for the BBC. His book, *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in Africa's Experience* (co-authored with nephew Alamin M. Mazrui) (1998) was launched in the British House of Lords at a ceremony honoring Mazrui's work. He and Alamin M. Mazrui also published *Black Reparations in the Era of Globalization* (2002). The project stemmed from his appointment in 1992 as one of twelve Eminent Persons by the Organization of African Unity Presidential Summit in order to explore the modalities and logistics of reparations for enslavement and colonization. He also published a novel, *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), which was inspired by his anguish over the Nigerian civil war and the tragic death of a childhood friend, Mohamed

Salim Said (nicknamed “Giraffe”). For an annotated bibliography of Mazrui’s work, comprehensive to date of press, see *The Mazruiana Collection Revisited* (Abdul S. Bemath ed., 2005). Books containing scholarly papers about Mazrui’s work include *The Global African: A Portrait of Ali A. Mazrui* (Omari H. Kokole ed., 1998) and *The Politics of Global Africa* (Seifudein Adem ed., 2011).

Mazrui served in numerous capacities in addition to his primary professorships. He was a visiting scholar at Australia, Baghdad, Bridgewater, Cairo, Chicago, Colgate, Denver, Guyana, Harvard, Leeds, London, Malaysia, McGill, Nairobi, Ohio State, Oxford, Pennsylvania, Singapore, Sussex, Teheran, UCLA and Washington. Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki appointed him Chancellor of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture & Technology in Nairobi, Kenya, a position he held for six years (2003–09). He was awarded honorary doctorates by several universities in such varied disciplines as Divinity, Sciences of Human Development, Humane Letters, and Political Economy. He also served in leadership roles in several organizations, including as President of the Muslim Social Scientists of North America and President of the African Studies Association of the United States. He also served as Chair of the Board of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy and as Special Advisor to the World Bank. Mazrui was a principal contributor to several United Nations projects on matters of global significance, such as human rights and nuclear proliferation. He served as editor, for example, of Volume VIII (Africa since 1935) of the UNESCO General History of Africa (1993), and as Expert Advisor to the United Nations Commission on Transnational Corporations.

Mazrui’s honors are numerous. For example, he won the Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award of the University of Michigan in 1988 and the Distinguished Africanist Award of the African Studies Association of the U.S. in 1995. The President of Kenya awarded him the National Honour of Commander of the Order of the Burning Spear and the President of South Africa made him Grand Companion of Oliver Tambo. Morgan State University awarded him the DuBois–Garvey Award for Pan–African Unity. In 2005, the American journal *Foreign Policy* and the British journal *Prospect* ranked Mazrui among the top 100 public intellectuals in the world. He was also featured in the “500 Most Influential Muslims,” (a.k.a. the “Muslim 500”), a publication by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in cooperation with the Prince Alwaleed Center for Muslim–Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Mazrui was elected an Icon of the Twentieth Century by Lincoln University. For a more complete list of Mazrui’s achievements, see the Institute of Global Cultural Studies website, <http://www2.binghamton.edu/igcs>.

Mazrui was also a gifted teacher and orator. His passion, eloquence, and charisma as a lecturer filled classes throughout his teaching career. Similarly, his reputation for insightful analysis and moving oratory created standing-room only audiences at public speaking events throughout the world. Indeed, his “Millennium Harvard lectures” drew

large, engaged audiences for three consecutive days. (The lectures were subsequently published as *The African Predicament and the American Experience: A Tale of Two Edens* (2004).) Mazrui was, moreover, deeply dedicated to his students. One of the things he regretted most about his declining health was the inability to meet his teaching responsibilities. He was grateful to be able to video-record an apology to his students. He was so adored and revered as a teacher and mentor that family and friends referred to him as “Mwalimu” (Swahili for teacher).

Defining features of Mazrui’s intellectual legacy include courage and controversy. A principal theme of his work was to identify and criticize abuses of political, economic and military power, whether by colonial or imperial nations, including the United States, or by leaders of developing countries, including African nations. His original and bold ideas generated passionate debate on African and Islamic issues. Expressing those ideas took professional and moral courage, especially when his personal security was put at risk. While he was still living in Uganda in 1972, for example, he released a widely circulated essay entitled “When Spain Expelled the Jews and the Moors,” an unmistakable criticism of Idi Amin’s expulsion of Ugandans of South Asian origin. In fact, during Mazrui’s tenure at Makerere, he gave several public lectures that criticized Presidents Milton Obote and successor Idi Amin for violations of human rights and the rule of law. Additionally, while he was critical of Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, Mazrui was one of the few famous Muslims to publically oppose the Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa calling for Rushdie’s death. These public stances could have cost him his life.

Mazrui also risked his reputation, even when not his life, by taking positions of principle that generated sharp criticism and condemnation. For example, his long-standing criticism of Israel (not Judaism or Jewish people) for its treatment of Palestinians provoked some pro-Israeli critics to challenge Mazrui’s character; label him (falsely) as anti-Semitic; impersonate him as the author of hateful communiqués; subject him to leaflets that used racial epithets while demanding the termination of his employment; and shut down, through concerted e-mail traffic, the ability of his institute to access the internet. His argument in favor of nuclear proliferation, whereby all countries could obtain nuclear weapons so long as any country could, was denounced by some as irresponsible and dangerous. He insisted, however, that the most effective way to persuade the current members of the “nuclear club” to agree to universal disarmament was to allow other countries they did not control to pursue the power of nuclear threat. His 1986 television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, won praise around the world, including by members of the U.S. Congress in statements published in the Congressional Record. It also generated strong criticism, however, such as by other members of Congress and by the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, who condemned the series as an “anti-Western diatribe” and withdrew the agency’s name from the program’s credits.

Ironically, the series was also banned for many years in Mazrui's native country of Kenya, not for being too anti-Western, but for being too anti-African. Arthur Unger, a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor, wrote during the airing of *The Africans* that when he told Mazrui that he disagreed with many of his opinions but found the ideas challenging, Mazrui replied, with a smile, "Good, ... Many people disagree with me. My life is one long debate." For an account of some of Mazrui's most prominent and controversial debates, see the multi-volume series, *Debating the African Condition: Ali Mazrui and His Critics* (2003 (Vol. I), 2004 (Vol. II), 2013 (Vol. III)).

Those close to Mazrui loved him for his character and personal qualities. His warmth was enveloping and his laughter was infectious. He was endlessly generous toward family, close and extended, and to people in less fortunate circumstances. He was gracious to all, including strangers and intellectual adversaries. The hospitality of Mazrui and his beloved wife, Pauline, drew hundreds of visitors to their Vestal, New York home from across town and the world. He also kept in touch with relatives, friends and colleagues in far off places with a personal newsletter that he wrote annually for nearly forty years. He enjoyed learning from people from all walks of life and cultures. An egalitarian and humanitarian, he endeavored to treat all people with respect, dignity and fairness. At the same time, he valued spirited debate about political, economic and philosophical ideas. Mazrui modeled integrity and decency.

Mazrui's personal interests included reading murder mysteries by Agatha Christie and Mary Higgins Clark. He enjoyed watching films with his family, especially Hollywood classics, James Bond, Alfred Hitchcock thrillers, and comedies, such as *I Love Lucy*, *Airplane* and *Young Frankenstein*. He also enjoyed television dramas, such as *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Mission Impossible*. He was a fan of boxing great Muhammad Ali and Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum. An avid consumer of daily news through print, radio and television, he especially enjoyed the radio broadcasts of the BBC World Service and NPR's *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, as well as the PBS *NewsHour* and the Rachel Maddow shows on evening television. He loved travelling the globe to speak to audiences of all kinds, enjoying meeting people of different religions and ethnicities, sampling their cuisine, and taking in the natural beauty that different regions offer. A man of faith, he prayed to return Home. As his Mombasa family says, "We are from God and to Him we shall return."

Mazrui is preceded in death by his parents Sheikh Al-Amin and Swafia Suleiman, his brothers Muhammad and Harith, and his sisters Salma, Nafisa and Aisha. He is survived by his wife, Pauline Uti Mazrui; five sons: Jamal Ali Mazrui (and wife Susan) of Takoma Park, Maryland, Alamin Ali Mazrui (and companion Rosalind Holden) of Binghamton, New York, Kim Abubakar Ali Forde-Mazrui (and wife Kay) of Charlottesville, Virginia, Farid Chinedu Ali Mazrui of Vestal, New York, and Harith Ekenechukwu Ali Mazrui of Vestal, New York; and by his daughter, Grace Jennifer Adaobi Ali Egbo-Mazrui. He is survived by three grandchildren: Will Nielsen Forde-Mazrui of Winston-Salem, North

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Carolina, Ali Alamin Mazrui of Vestal, New York, and Nicole Molly Mazrui of Takoma Park, Maryland. He is also survived by the close and long-time members of his Vestal home family: “Mama” Alice Uti, Goretti Mugambwa, and Maria Liverpool. He is survived by his sister Alya of Mombasa, Kenya, and by numerous cousins, nieces and nephews.

On Sunday, October 19, 2014, Mazrui was buried during a private service in the Mazrui Cemetery near Fort Jesus, Mombasa, Kenya. Afterward, a memorial service was held at the Aga Khan Academy in Mombasa.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jamal Mazrui lives with his wife and daughter in Seattle, Washington, where he works as a quality assurance engineer at Amazon. He has lived in Uganda, the United States, and England. His college degree is in operations research and master's degree is in public policy.

Career interests of Jamal have primarily been in the areas of information technology and public policy. Before Amazon, he worked for New England Telephone, Advocate Development Corporation, Harvard University, and the U.S. federal government.

A website offering open source software by Jamal, and essays by his father, is located at the following address: <http://GitHub.com/JamalMazrui>.