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TO: Friends and Relatives

A TRIPLE HERITAGE: PHASE II

Here I am again, with my Mazrui newsletter! Boy! Do I have news for you! Brace yourself!

But first, our felicitations to you and your loved ones. My children, Brenda and I wish you a stunning holiday and a most rewarding 1985! Please keep in touch.

As I indicated in my last newsletter, I now have three "bosses"--the University of Michigan in the United States, the University of Jos in Nigeria, and a television project called "THE AFRICANS" being jointly produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and Public Broadcasting Service in the United States (through WETA in Washington, D.C.). My! Have they kept me busy! I have been crossing the Atlantic and the Mediterranean multiple times throughout the year. We have been filming all over the continent. The range is from the castles of Ethiopia to the camels of Somalia, from the wheat of Tanzania to the wines of the Ivory Coast--some would say from the wilderness of exile to the wildness of the domestic scene. The theme is Africa's Triple Heritage--indigenous, Islamic and Western influences.

The television series will tell the story of Africa through my eyes, but certainly the range of experiences we have had is wide. In one West African village we asked for a menu at a canteen. We were told that there was no paper menu, but monkey stew and bush rat soup were available. I then discovered that strictly on food I was more Muslim than African, perhaps simply more East African than West African or Zairean. I could not make myself order either monkey stew or bush rat soup. But my English producer put me to shame! "May I have rat soup with a cold beer, please?" He ordered. I knew then what breed had built the British Empire--the tough and the unflappable! My producer's beer was not cold--but his soup was decidedly rat soup! He consumed it without ostentation--just an aspect of the local cuisine. I was almost ashamed of my own Islamic inhibitions on diet! My West African and Zairean brethren have almost as wide a range of "meat" dishes as the Chinese have. And yet, if on the issue of food, I am more Muslim than African, am I, on the issue of drinks, more African than Muslim? Good question for the triple heritage.

At my most ambitious and arrogant, my only hope has been to offer Africa occasionally some food for thought in compensation!! This ambition has from time to time created headaches for the BBC and WETA. I have on occasion been ready to give public lectures at local universities at times when the film-makers preferred to have me available for television work instead! Some passionate debates have occurred, but with a lot of goodwill to go round. I did win the battle to give a lecture at the University of Addis Ababa--but Ethiopian political prudence resulted in the indefinite postponement of my lecture. On the other hand, Somalia authorized a somewhat controversial

lecture on "African-Arab Relations". The Somali were prepared to debate my thesis about "Somali expansionism", as well as my thesis that the Amhara were closer to the Arabs linguistically than the Somali. The world of dialogue is full of surprises. I was impressed by the candour in Mogadishu.

My BBC/WETA filming tour also took me to Kenya. In Mombasa we visited some of my old haunts--including the little playfield by the side of Fort Jesus where I used to play soccer as a boy. They are still playing soccer on the same little patch of land, with the Fort on one side and the Indian Ocean on the other. It was a nostalgic visit. It was also wonderful catching up with my brother Harith, with my sisters in Mombasa, and with my friend, Shariff Kimwinyi. Many friends and relatives helped with the BBC filming of Mombasa. Incidentally, the television series will be on the screen in Britain and the U.S.A. in 1986.

My 1984 visit to Zanzibar was surprisingly even more nostalgic for me than Mombasa. Being in Zanzibar during the fast of Ramadhan took me back decades. My most startling experience in Zanzibar in 1984 happened on Idd el Fitr, the day of breaking the month-long fast. I was walking out of the official celebrations, which had been held in one of the palaces of the Sultan in the ancien regime. A man dressed in full Arab regalia--colourful and resplendent--was looking at me intently. He could then bear it no more. He came towards me and said in Kiswahili: "I am sorry, Sir, but who are you?" "My name is Ali Mazrui," I said. "Ali Al'Amin Mazrui?" he enquired. "Yes," I replied.

And then, to my astonishment, the man burst into tears and embraced me like a long lost brother. It turned out that I was indeed a "long lost brother". His father--Sheikh Abubakar Bakathir--was my father's best friend when I was a child. Sheikh Abubakar looked after me in the 1930s when my father left on a slow pilgrimage to Mecca. I was then only a tiny child. The Sheikh also looked after me during World War II when women and children were evacuated from Mombasa (under threat as a major port)--and Zanzibar played host to my family. As a child I grew so fond of my Zanzibari "uncle" that when he died suddenly towards the end of the war, I wept for three days. And now in 1984--right there in front of me and my BBC colleagues--was Sheikh Abubakar's son, Abdullah, in tears at finding me again! It was a moving experience.

My other rediscovery in Tanzania was of a very different kind. I was in the audience in Moshi on the mainland awaiting a speech by President Julius Nyerere. The president arrived and sat down. As he was being introduced his roving eye caught mine. I was surprised that he recognized me at once in spite of my grey hair (he had not seen me for more than a decade). Later on, at another ceremony, he interrupted what he was doing, and rose to come and say hello. It was very pleasant to chat with him again. In fact, I thought I was in disfavour because of my reservations about some of his policies, but I was reassured. Later on I heard Nyerere give one of the most eloquent speeches I have ever heard in Kiswahili. He had no notes. It was an impressive exercise in the oral tradition. I am delighted he has since been elected Chairman of the Organization of African Unity.

In the course of my travels in East Africa I also came across former students of mine from the old Makerere days. This wonderful experience happened several times in both Tanzania and Kenya. I was amazed by how much they remembered from lectures and speeches that I gave years ago! Their memories scared me a little! Who wants every opinion of yesterday to be so carefully remembered today?

I got into trouble at parliament building in Dar es Salaam when I tried to say hello to Prime Minister Salim Salim without clearance from Security! The fact that he was an old friend did not make any difference! I should have known better! Anyhow, it was all cleared up in the end, and the Prime Minister and I were able to meet with the blessing of Security! The fact that it was Ramadhan may have contributed to some of the earlier sensitivities on the part of Security--tiny things loom rather large in daytime during Ramadhan! But everyone was very gracious "at the end of the day"!

My particularly special Eastern African re-discovery was Maureen, Brenda Kiberu's sister. Maureen, and the rest of Brenda's family, still live in Kampala. I called them on the phone when I was in Nairobi. Maureen decided to travel from Uganda to come and see me. It was wonderful seeing her. I introduced her to my nephew, Al-Amin, who had just arrived on leave from his new job at the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria. Being with Maureen and Al-Amin in my last few hours in Nairobi was one of the highlights of my East African visit.

Back in the United States Brenda was helping me look after the other Al'Amin (my son) and Kim. But Brenda this year has also had a rendezvous with a very demanding and compelling stranger--the computer! She has been taking serious lessons in the use of the computer, and seems to be making excellent progress! I am terrified of being programmed by her when she becomes truly proficient--but I could always report her to her younger sister, Maureen, in Kampala!

We in the family noted and celebrated a few Mazrui anniversaries during 1984. Jamal celebrated his twenty-first birthday this December. Alas, he was away at Princeton on the great day itself--but we compensated with delayed festivities on his arrival home the following week. It seems like yesterday when I was running around from neighbour to neighbour in Kampala proclaiming the good news--"It's a boy!" Jamal and independent Kenya had had a race as to who would be born first. Independent Kenya had won the race by two days. For us in the family it was a great week--the week when my first child was born and when I was for the first time a citizen of a free country. Jamal himself missed the historical experience of being a colonial by less than forty-eight hours! Unlike me, he was born free!

Kim celebrated his sixteenth birthday--as Al'Amin was impatiently awaiting his eighteenth the following March (1985). These two younger boys spent the whole of this autumn with Brenda and me at our place. Ours is a flat (condominium)--so we have been a little crowded. But the boys have been superbly cooperative on most days--and the months with them have simply flown. Al'Amin and Kim return to their mother in time for the new year.

Al'Amin accepted a job as a dishwasher for three nights a week at a local vegetarian restaurant. The new responsibility has done him a lot of good. He has gained in maturity and sense of self-reliance. His skill in handling dirty dishes has stood the rest of us in good stead at home. With a little prodding Al'Amin can clear and tidy up the kitchen fast! Blessed are the dishwashers!

Kim was a courier of the Center for Population Studies at the University of Michigan. Kim a courier of "population"? No, I don't mean that Kim played

a stork--carrying babies from mother to mother. He merely carried messages and documents concerning the demography of babies. Later on Kim took on a related assignment--he became a regular baby-sitter for one of the medical families of Ann Arbor! He has spent many hours looking after their two kids. Again, I think these responsibilities have been good for Abubakar (Kim's Muslim name--meaning a father of a kind, in anticipation!).

Talking of anniversaries, my most memorable one in 1984 was the Silver Jubilee of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences in Accra. I was invited to give the Anniversary Address on "The Social Responsibility of Scholarship". I was also elected Honorary Fellow (meaning non-Ghanaian Fellow)--a great honour. Kwame Nkrumah and the Duke of Edinburgh were--by a curious alliance--the founding dignitaries of the Academy way back in the early years of Ghana's independence. As Honorary Fellow I was joining the ranks of Prince Philip! By another curious coincidence, the Duke and I met at the University of Manchester in England precisely in the year when the Ghana Academy of Sciences was born (1959). Why was I being introduced to His Royal Highness so long ago? Simply because I was President of the African Students' Association of the city of Manchester at the time. But neither the Duke nor I knew at the time that the Ghana Academy's honorary fellowships would one day be one of the accidental bonds between us!! He was the first Honorary Fellow ever elected!

I believe 1984 was also the twenty-first anniversary of my own first visit to Ghana. If my memory serves me right, it was in 1963 that I arrived in Accra as one of the young scholars invited to Ghana by Kwame Nkrumah, W.E.B. DuBois and Willie Abraham to discuss the proposed project of launching an Encyclopaedia Africana. It was a vision of Pan-Africanism at the academic and intellectual level. Nkrumah did not last long enough in power to see the project through, but a real start has now at last been made towards that old visionary goal of twenty years ago. The Organization of African Unity has also given its blessing to the project, I understand. The baby is in the process of being born, but more help is needed.

No, I did not celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of my own birth in 1984. That was last year in 1983--but I did not share my birthday experiences with you in my last newsletter. As you know, I am a product of Africa's triple heritage--indigenous, Islamic and Western cultures. My 50th birthday was celebrated in different forms in Nigeria, Egypt and the Western world--a triple heritage! My friends at the University of Jos in Nigeria and friends at Radio Plateau made fuss with coverage and merry-making. Nuruddin, Magdalen, and the Elaigwus had a lot to do with marking the event. But the actual birthday itself fell when I was in Cairo. Colleagues at the University of Cairo, the American University in Cairo and the Kenyan Embassy in Cairo all organized festivities in my honour. It was a deeply moving experience--in the shadow of the pyramids, sometimes literally! My friends in Britain and the United States were also considerate on my first half-century! God bless you all!

Sam Sebina has continued to be a tower of strength in Jos--becoming a more experienced assistant in a variety of roles. He has added driving to his many skills. He is now a chauffeur--as well as researcher, office assistant, chef, butler, valet and secretary! Amazing man!

In Jos we have a small East African community. We meet in each other's homes and entertain each other. The countries represented in the East African group have included Zaire, Rwanda, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and (largest group of all) Ugandans. Of course we also invite Nigerians to our little parties. We now have a baby member (a boy) of the East African group--Eve Munene has born John a handsome young Muganda! Heartiest congratulations! Terrific!

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, I also belong to an emigré dining club! We also take our turns in entertaining each other in each other's homes. The nationalities represented in the Ann Arbor group include Ghana, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Uganda, Ireland, Kenya, Central African Republic, West Germany, Egypt, as well as the United States.

In September I resumed my teaching functions at Michigan for a semester. Omari Kokole has once again been a tremendous help. He was appointed for me by the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies as an aide of all trades and master of them all!! I could not have coped with the multiple pressures on me (teaching, television, publishing, public lectures, etc.) without Omari's broad shoulders to lean on! From a selfish point of view, I am glad he did not leave for a job in New York City, as he originally planned. But I assure you--my Juju had nothing to do with Mrs. Kay Kokole's broken leg--the main reason why the couple cancelled their New York plans! On the contrary, my Juju probably helped Kay's leg heal faster! At least I hope so!

Michael Tidy and I were delighted to see the publication in 1984 of our joint book, Nationalism and New States in Africa (London: Heinemann Educational). The launching of the book in London was memorable because there were so many old friends--including old Makerereans at the reception. The book is more political history than political science--covering precisely the period (1935 to the present) which my Volume 8 of the UNESCO General History of Africa is intended to cover. (I have started editing this UNESCO volume.)

My head of department at the University of Jos, Jonah Isawa Elaigwu, visited us at Michigan in October. He made a stimulating presentation in Michigan on "African Soldiers as Social Reformers and Economic Managers: The Case of Nigeria". He and I have had our differences on the role of soldiers in Africa, but our differences are in the best academic tradition, and are of course between good friends. What was harder to forgive Isawa for was the fact that he had not arrived with Margaret, his wife! Anyhow, I caught up with them both in Jos when I got there the following month!

Dunstan Wai got me involved in a special seminar in Italy to help advise two new Vice Presidents of the World Bank about Africa's problems. It was a stimulating experience. It was also great meeting Abdulrahman Babu of Zanzibar again after an interval of fifteen years.

Both the University of Jos and the University of Michigan have been very generous about my BBC/WETA television series. I have been allowed a lot of time to go filming all over Africa. But whenever I have touched base at Jos or Michigan I have joined the academic fray with a seminar or public lecture.

Sometimes there have been fireworks in response. My last public lecture in Jos was on the subject "Is Africa Decaying? Is Modernization Reversible?" The lecture caused an uproar--especially from the Left.


In Michigan one of my recent public lectures was on "The Racial Factor in American Foreign Policy: The Case of the Middle East". This also caused an uproar--but from the Right and from Israeli supporters! Both the Jos and the Michigan lectures were covered by the media--with more fireworks to follow! But I hope once again these debates are in the best academic tradition of give and take, of challenge and response.

I could tell you a lot more about my 1984--ranging from perspectives on Jerry Rawlings and Mobutu Sese Seko at close quarters to my lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London on the subject "Liberal Democracy in Black Africa: Has It a Future?" But I may save some of these reflections for a future Newsletter.

I do appreciate your resilience if you have persevered to this paragraph.

Once again, best wishes to you and your loved ones for 1985 from Brenda, Jamal, Al'Amin, Kim and me. God bless you!

Yours warmly,



Ali A. Mazrui

Greeting!