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**PROF ALI A. MAZRUI:
THE RE-INCARNATION OF
SH. ALI B. ABDALLA NAF'I
MAZRUI**

*Re-incarnation in the Mazrui Family:
A Comparative Study*

Prepared for the Seminar
In Honor of Prof Ali A. Mazrui,
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By

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AFRICA EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT TRUST

We are here to celebrate the life of Prof Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, who was born on 24th February 1933 in Mombasa, Kenya, and passed away on 12th October 2014 in Binghamton, NY, USA.

It was at the Technical University of Mombasa (TUM) that Mazrui started his Academic Journey. It was then called **The Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education (MIOME)** - a school of technology for Muslim students from Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Uganda, British Somaliland and Kenya. Mazrui then served as a Boarding Supervisor, 1952–1955.

In this paper, I propose to present a case study of *The Mazrui Family Re-incarnation*. The question that I would like to pose: **WAS PROF ALI AL'AMIN MAZRUI THE RE-INCARNATION OF SH. ALI B. ABDALLA NAF'I MAZRUI?** Mwalimu Mazrui was named after his grandfather, Sh. Ali b. Abdalla, The Pioneering Role Model of The East African Muslim Reformers. Did he inherit the reformist credentials of his grandfather? Or is he the re-incarnation of the grandfather?

Re-incarnation in the Family

Prof. Ali Al'Amin Mazrui comes from a generation of eminent Scholars. His father, Sh. Al-Amin b. Ali Mazrui was the 25th scholar in the Mazrui family tree following in the footsteps of his father and forefathers. Sheikh Al-Amin Mazrui was one of the great men of letters in East African History. He was a writer, an editor, a critic of Swahili and Arabic poetry, a theologian, a newspaperman, and a social reformer.

Prof F. H. Elmasri in his paper, *Sheikh al-Amin bin Ali Al-Mazrui and the Islamic Intellectual Tradition in East Africa* says “Prior to the advent of the reformist activities of Sheikh al-Amin bin Ali Abdallah bin Nafi al-Mazrui (1891-1947), no East African Muslim intellectual had attracted so much academic interest. There had been *ulama* of considerable learning and moral rectitude....BUT No Muslim scholar was as socially and politically conscious as Sh. Al-Amin bin Ali Mazrui”.

Is Prof Mazrui then the re-incarnation of his father?

- Sh. Al-Amin Mazrui named his son after his own father, **Sh. Ali b. Abdalla Nafi Mazrui**, hoping that his son would become a scholar like his grandfather. Sh. Ali b. Abdalla was amongst the pioneers of pre-colonial scholars in East Africa. He was a central figure in the history of Islam in the East African Coast.
- In 1837 **at the age of 12**, Sh. Ali b. Abdalla and his father, Sh. Abdalla b. Nafi, left Mombasa for studies in Mecca. In a letter dated 8th August 1979, Prof Mazrui wrote to his elder brother, Harith Al'Amin in response to a debate they have had for quite a while. I quote,
“For a while I did seem to be developing into an Islamist – a person devoted to the study of Islam. In fact, when I was about twelve I asked father to send me to Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Father was quite clearly moved by my apparent enthusiasm to study Islam. He looked at me for a while. He then praised me for my interest, but he thought I should first finish secondary school in Mombasa.”
- **At the age of 22**, while Sh. Ali b. Abdalla was travelling back to Mombasa from studies in Mecca, Prof Mazrui at the age of 22 was leaving Mombasa for Huddersfield Technical College, Huddersfield, UK (1955–1957). He had won an unusual award from the Colonial Government to pursue Higher School Certificate (Advanced Level) and two subjects at

School Certificate (Ordinary Level) in spite of a mediocre performance in the Cambridge School Certificate (ordinary level).

- **At about the age of 32**, Sh. Ali b. Abdalla rose to become a scholar after another stint of studies in Mecca (1854-1856).
 - Prof Mazrui in 1965 at the age of 32 rose to the rank of a full professor. What is interesting is that his own son, Prof Kim-Forde Mazrui at the same age of 32 rose to become a full professor of Law in Virginia, USA.
- Sh. Ali b. Abdalla was **a widely travelled Scholar, a sort of visiting professor**. He was virtually like a Mobile University along the East African Coast. He travelled from one town to another, setting up classes (satellite campuses) everywhere he went.
 - Prof Mazrui **travelled widely and extensively. He was a visiting professor** to a number of universities around the world.
- Sh. Ali b. Abdalla and Sh. Al-Amin Mazrui, the grandfather and father of Prof Mazrui were reformers who left a large legacy. They have become subjects of studies by researchers - that is what Legends are made of.
 - In 2007, Prof Mazrui was awarded the **Living Legend Award** by the African Community Agency, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Abuja, Nigeria.
 - Prof Mazrui like his father and grandfather has left behind a large legacy. Will he be a subject of study by researchers in later years?
- By the out-pouring of tributes in his honor, this may come to pass:
 - Funeral prayers were held for him at Binghamton, USA; Istanbul airport in Turkey and Mombasa in Kenya; including Makerere in Uganda.
 - A Friday Prayer's Sermon dedicated to him was delivered at The Claremont Main Road Mosque, South Africa on 17 OCT 2014.
 - Tributes by several members of USA Africa Dialogue.
 - Tributes by a multitude of Organizations, Universities and Magazines in all corners of the globe
 - On 6 DEC, Binghamton University held a Memorial Service in *Celebration of the life of Mwalimu Ali A. Mazrui*.
 - Today we are gathered here for a Seminar in honor of Ali Mazrui, courtesy of **The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)**, hosted by Technical University of Mombasa (TUM).
- Sh. Ali b. Abdalla and Sh. Al-Amin Mazrui loved poetry. This is what Prof Mazrui said about his father in the Preface of my book on the biography of Sh. Al-Amin Mazrui:

"He appreciated classical Swahili poems like Al-Inkishafi and Utenzi wa Mwana Kupona, and explored Arabic poetry all the way back to Antar Ibn Shaddad of al-Muallaqat (a collection of poems from the 8th to the 12th Century of the Christian era). As a child I sometimes used to listen to my Dad reciting and discussing poetry. The Muse and the Mythology intertwined."
- Prof. Ahmed Idha Salim in a paper titled **Sheikh Al-Amin bin Ali Al-Mazrui: His Career and Impact on East African Islam**, said, "Undoubtedly, Sheikh Al-Amin was the most outstanding Muslim scholar and reformer to appear in Kenya. His contribution to Islam and Muslim scholarship has been the most enduring. His regular seminars produced many scholars who helped spread Islam further, not only in Kenya but in East Africa as a whole. He himself travelled, preached, encouraged and supported

efforts to build madrasas and mosques. He wrote, published and distributed the first religious textbooks in Ki-Swahili on different aspects of Islam and Islamic history.”

Is Prof Ali Al’Amin Mazrui the re-incarnation of Sh. Al-Amin b. Mazrui or Sh. Ali b. Abdalla Nafi Mazrui?

Is he a re-incarnation of his father or his grandfather? OR is this a case of re-incarnation in the Family?

Now there is **Little Ali** Al’Amin Mazrui, the grandson of Prof Mazrui, is he the re-incarnation of Mwalimu Ali Mazrui?

- ✚ Is it a wonder then, that Prof Mazrui earnestly wanted to be buried next to his ancestors?
- ✚ He not only documented it in his will, but during the last week before his death, he pulled out the support pipes and declared that he was ready to join his ancestors.
- ✚ Two years before his death, he confided in the one person he believed would ensure that his remains would be interred next to his ancestors.
- ✚ **Alhamdu Lillah!** Allah be praised! Dr. Alamin Mazrui of Rutgers University did carry out Mwalimu’s wishes and we were all able to participate in burying Mazrui, the Legend, at the 900 year-old Family Cemetery in Mombasa.

“The ancestors of all three persuasions are claiming victory!” A loud voice uttered! The voice was reverberating in every corner of ‘After-Africa.’ “Victory?! Victory?! Victory for what?!” Christopher Okigbo asked, astonishingly! The ancestors responded, “Victory for having convinced our son, Prof. Ali Al-Amin Mazrui, who is known as The Walking Triple Heritage in the ‘Here-before’, to finally re-unite with us.”

- That was a quote from my young brother’s tribute to his uncle. Muhammad bin Yusuf lives in Toronto. Him and Dr. Alamin, are the two closest nephews of Prof Mazrui who alternately shuttled between Toronto and Rutgers respectively during the last eleven months of Mazrui’s life.

I conclude my presentation by quoting Ms Ravenna Narizzano-Bronson, Prof Mazrui’s Administrative Assistant at Binghamton University, SUNY:

I sat and clenched my fists,
Fought back tears — my eyes burned red,
Until I heard a voice within,
And this is what she said,
She said,
“Ali Al’Amin Mazrui is a peaceful warrior,
Not by fist or sword,
But Mwalimu Mazrui is a peaceful warrior,
And this cannot be ignored.”

My boss — Dr. Ali Al’Amin Mazrui was a peaceful warrior,
Not by fist or sword (or gun, or bomb, or drone or lethal injection)
Professor Mwalimu Mazrui was a peaceful warrior (like Gandhi)
And this cannot be ignored.

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