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# A life of “Long Debate”: A Tribute to Ali A. Mazrui (1933-2014)

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Thus he once told his interlocutor in an interview, as reported in *the New York Times*, “My life is a long debate”. As a spirited Africanist, a conscientious public intellectual, a prolific writer, a passionate teacher, and as an admirable personality with high self-confidence, Professor Ali A. Mazrui left behind him, when he passed away on 13 October 2014, voluminous and highly influential publications-including more than thirty books and hundreds of articles- thousands of students, and a strong legacy of “debate” against global injustices. His life-long struggle was more specifically directed against abuses of power and violation of human rights, whether by great powers of the world, like the United States or by leaders of unprivileged countries, such as Idi Amin of Uganda.

What made him a distinguished public intellectual were, most probably, his capacity, originality, and willingness to articulate ideas completely alien to the mainstream conventional wisdom in the West. The mainstream intellectual community was shocked, for example, when during the BBC’s prestigious Reith Lectures he defended the idea that

the only realistic way yielding to the elimination of nuclear threat was actual nuclear proliferation all over the world. Only then, maintained Mazrui, could the disproportional power of the West have been balanced and the injustices towards the poor Third World countries have been prevented.

Another surprising, as well as ambitious, solution he offered for the prevailing injustices in the world today was a world-federation of cultures, which he believed to be more applicable and desirable than an order based purely on the distribution of power and security concerns. In his highly influential work, *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective*, Mazrui argued that a federation of pluralistic yet complementary cultures could mitigate both domestic and international conflicts, through a parallel process of, what he called, “cultural convergence.” This cultural federation is based on three principles: “first, an acceptance of cultural interdependence among the constituent parts; second, an acceptance of the principle of parity of esteem among the constituent cultural units...; and third, a promotion at a federal level of ‘cultural fusion’ which is the equivalent

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of sharing the central powers of sovereign in a political federation.” Mazrui’s appreciation of the role and significance of culture in world politics, long before Samuel Huntington, should also be seen as an indication of the originality of his thought and perceptiveness of his mind.

His ethical position and logic of criticism was reasonably balanced and unprejudiced, as well as robust and smart. As one might have predicted, for example, Salman Rushdie’s highly controversial 1988 novel could not escape his sharp criticism. Yet, at the same time, as an adamant advocate of the freedom of expression, his strong opposition to the death sentence passed on Rushdie by the Ayatollah Khomeini was similarly unequivocal.

Professor Mazrui’s personal self-esteem and intellectual courage and willingness to wrestle with these sorts of controversial issues may partly be attributed to his family background as well as personal traits. Born in Mombasa, Kenya, Professor Mazrui came from a politically and intellectually powerful family. His father, Sheikh Al-Amin Ali Mazrui, was an eminent Islamic scholar of the region and the clan that the family belonged to had ruled Mombasa for over a century until 1837. Father Mazrui, who died when Professor Mazrui was fourteen, had wanted his son to follow his own path and, to this end, to attend the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. However, having been awarded a scholarship to travel to

Britain, Professor Mazrui preferred to study political science at Manchester University. Having graduated from Manchester University with Distinction, Mazrui continued his post-graduate studies at Columbia University and obtained a Ph.D. degree from Oxford University. Professor Mazrui’s remarkable education background helped him to secure a respected--though not always liked--position within the mainstream intellectual community and increased the degree of the impact of his criticisms of the systemic powers and applications. Professor Mazrui served in political science departments and centers of African studies at several universities, including Makerere University in Uganda, Cornell University in New York, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Professor Mazrui was the Albert Schweitzer Professor at Binghamton University in New York when he died at the age of 81.

Apart from Africa, of which Professor Mazrui was one of the best-known specialists all over the world, his books and scholarly articles explored topics like international politics, political Islam, and globalization. In 2005, the American journal, *Foreign Policy*, nominated Ali A. Mazrui among the top 100 public intellectuals alive in the world as a whole.

Thus, Ali A. Mazrui had a life of long debate, which was probably an inevitable burden of his triple heritage: indigenous Africa, Islam, and the West.