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# Ali A. Mazrui, the Postcolonial Theorist

Seifudein Adem

**Abstract:** The primary goal of this article is to examine why Ali A. Mazrui is a relatively obscure figure in postcolonial theory despite the outstanding contributions he has made to it. It argues that the explanation can be found in the nature of postcolonial theory itself, and in Mazrui's perceived ideology and cultural identity. The article, then, introduces Mazrui's theory of the "triple heritage," his most innovative and, possibly, most enduring contribution to scholarship. It also explains the specificity of Mazrui's brand of postcolonial theory as well as the complexity and breadth of his thinking about Africa in general.

**Résumé:** L'objectif principal de cet article est d'examiner pourquoi Ali Mazrui est une autorité relativement obscure dans la théorie postcoloniale, malgré les contributions exceptionnelles qu'il y a apportées. Cet article soutient que l'explication peut se trouver dans la nature même de la théorie postcoloniale, ainsi que dans l'idéologie et l'identité culturelle perçues de Mazrui. Par la suite, cet article introduit la théorie de Mazrui du "triple héritage," probablement sa contribution théorique la plus innovante et la plus durable. Il explique aussi la spécificité de la marque de Mazrui sur la théorie postcoloniale ainsi que la complexité et l'ampleur de sa réflexion sur l'Afrique en général.

**Key Words:** Ali A. Mazrui; African studies; postcolonial theory; triple heritage; identity politics

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## Introduction

Ali Mazrui says relatively little about metatheory. The very notion of an all-encompassing theory is anathema to him. It is all too easy, therefore, to dismiss him sometimes as theoretically incoherent and mistake the contradictions he highlights in social reality for theoretical contradictions in his scholarship. Surely, the relative peculiarity of Mazrui's scholarship as well as its volume and breadth make the task of theoretically interpreting his intellectual output a daunting one. But it is a task that is well worth doing.

Mazrui is a postcolonial theorist in the sense that he is a theorist who emerged from independent Africa after the colonial period. Mazrui is also a postcolonial theorist in the more technical sense of that term, as an expositor of the ideology of the Third World, which will be the major focus of this article.<sup>1</sup> Postcolonial theory articulates the dissatisfaction of the Third World with its condition of existence; it is the challenge and rejection of Eurocentric narratives and exposure of what they misrepresent or erase; it is also the formulation of alternative historical interpretations. Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (2002:26) thus tell us that "postcolonialism opens up possibilities for resisting dominant discourse of representation and power by framing its own 'counternarratives.'" J. Marshall Beier (2002:87) defines postcolonialism as "an approach that . . . explicitly seeks to deprivilege hegemonic narrative and to hear voices marginalized in the colonial encounter, taking heed of the subjugated knowledge they bear." For Kamran Matin (2011:359) the common themes of postcolonialism include "the analysis of the dynamics and impacts of colonial oppression, the political strategies of anti-colonial movements and the nature of the post-colonial state." Rita-Kiki Edozie and Peyi Soyinka-Airewele (2010:376) see postcolonialism as "the refashioning of ["Third Worldism"] in the post-Cold War period and in the no less ambiguous era of globalization." Julian Go (2013:29) says postcolonial theory is "a loosely coherent body of writing and thought that critiques and aims to transcend the structures supportive of Western colonialism and its legacies." Philip Darby (1997:14) outlines the major endeavors of postcolonial theory as the "emphasis . . . on subjectivity, the critique of modernity, the challenge to positivism and the rejection of European universalism, the prising open of the nation-state, and the commitment to the marginal." To me, the above definitions of postcolonial theory, extracted deliberately from wide-ranging sources, affirm one thing. It is next to impossible to point to a single work in Ali Mazrui's scholarship spanning more than half a century in which he was not engaged in some aspect of these postcolonial undertakings. If so, why is he invisible in postcolonial theory? That is, of course, the central question of this article. But let us first put his scholarship in a broader context.

Ali Mazrui arrived on the international scene just when postcolonial Africa was coming into being in the 1960s. He first made a name for himself by publishing "On the Concept of 'We are All Africans'" in the *American Political Science Review* (1963a). As it turned out, the article was to be a

significant landmark on many levels in the evolution and development of Ali Mazrui as a postcolonial theorist. The article was one of the first major writings in that journal about postcolonial Africa written by a postcolonial African theorist. As the American political scientist Herbert J. Spiro noted later, “Mazrui’s article identified him as a perceptive and original student of African political thought” (1967:91). Mazrui thus announced that he was ready to engage one of the most vibrant communities of scholars in his field. It was also significant that the article was published in an influential journal of political science based in a rising superpower—the United States.

Further significance of the article had less to do with where it was published than with what it was about: culture and identity formation in the postcolonial African setting.<sup>2</sup> Theorizing about culture and identity was less fashionable in mainstream American political science in the 1960s (and the field grew even less tolerant of these issues in subsequent decades). With the collapse of communism, culture “returned” to the mainstream discipline in North America (Lapid 1996) but without referencing Mazrui, who never lost that emphasis. That was an anomaly. What was equally anomalous, if not more so, is Mazrui’s relative invisibility in postcolonial theory, a branch of knowledge and mode of inquiry that came into being to challenge and disrupt the hegemony of Western categories.

### **Mazrui’s Marginality in Postcolonial Theory**

Former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan once described Ali Mazrui as “Africa’s gift to the world” (Q-News 2000:25). Even Daniel Pipes (2010), one of Mazrui’s most ardent critics in North America, called him “the most celebrated intellectual of African origins in the United States.” And many others have saluted Mazrui for pushing Africa’s agenda on the world stage. The same cannot be said about postcolonial scholars. The few notable exceptions include Philip Darby (1997, 2008), Albert Paoloni (1999), and Mark Salter (2002). Darby, for example, lauds Mazrui as a “resistance theorist” who stands “on the side of rights and justice rather than order and stability” (1997:18). But Mazrui is largely invisible to many postcolonial authors despite the relevance of his scholarship to their favorite themes such as “imperial encounters,” “Eurocentrism,” “representational practices,” “construction of identities,” “Third World and international relations” and “Africa and international relations.”<sup>3</sup> This omission is all the more puzzling because a no less respectable voice than Edward Said, widely regarded as one of the founding figures of postcolonial studies and its fountainhead (see Varadarajan 2009:293; Guhin & Wyrzten 2013:231) has asserted that “it is no longer possible to ignore the work of . . . Ali Mazrui in even a cursory survey of African history, politics and philosophy” (1994:239). Said was saying, in effect, that there is no legitimate intellectual reason for postcolonialism not to engage with Mazrui’s scholarship either by confirming or disconfirming its claims, given the thematic and substantive overlap between the areas of concern for Mazrui and postcolonial theory.

If elements in Mazrui's discourse do not mesh with specific claims or particular readings of postcolonialism, one would assume that this makes engagement with him all the more intellectually profitable. It is one thing to disagree with Mazrui but quite another not to engage with his thought-provoking "postcolonial" scholarship altogether. Mazrui's obscurity is ironic, given also that some of the same scholars who have ignored him have occasionally expressed concerns that the mainstream discipline of international relations does not engage them.

In interrogating Eurocentrism, Mazrui has often used subjectivity as a point of entry. We are what we are because of what we (are made to) think we are. Mazrui (2001b) has assaulted Western universalism from the perspectives of what he called cultural relativism, historical relativism, and comparative empirical performance. He has reminded us time and again about the importance of power in universalizing the culture of the powerful. He has taught us how "the sins of the powerful acquire the prestige of power." And Mazrui did all of this without falling into the trap of "Occidentalism," the tendency to blame every economic and sociopolitical ill in the postcolony on the West. Mazrui has passionately explained or evaluated what the international relations scholar Donald Puchala had described as "the significance of the embittered tone, the complex motivations, the mythological underpinnings, [and] the historical dynamics of North-South relations" (1998:150). By taking on normative issues directly and challenging positivism at its core, Mazrui (1968, 1987) has also shown that his scholarship is free from the pretense of objectivity.

There is an additional reason why Mazrui's invisibility in postcolonial theory is perplexing. Consider, for instance, his television series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (BBC/PBS, 1986a). After it was aired in the United States, the series came under attack on the pages of *The New York Times* and in other places. It was in this context that Edward Said critically intervened to explain why Mazrui's *The Africans* elicited intensely negative reactions in the West. Said wrote, "Here at last was [Ali Mazrui], an African on prime-time television, in the West, daring to accuse the West of what it had done, thus reopening a file considered closed" (1994:39). Said was not merely throwing his support behind Mazrui's television series; he seemed to be suggesting that Mazrui had done for Africa what Said himself had done for the "Orient"—by "reopening a file considered closed." Edward Said, of course, accomplished that task in his most influential book, *Orientalism* (1979). It was clear that Mazrui himself was nevertheless more modest about what he sought to achieve in the television series.<sup>4</sup>

If Ali Mazrui is a postcolonial scholar par excellence, why was his scholarship overlooked in postcolonial theory? Why was Mazrui's role in challenging Eurocentrism barely recognized in postcolonial writings, including in those produced by Africanists and scholars of color? The reasons for this are many and varied, but this article will seek to identify them by casting the net as widely as possible. Although we can take for granted from the outset that there is no postcolonial conspiracy to ignore

Mazrui, there is no denying also that the answers to the above questions are intertwined with the nature of postcolonial theory and the proclivities of some of its practitioners. This complexity is further compounded by the fact that often the intellectually less respectable reasons for marginalizing Mazrui's "postcolonial" scholarship are hard to substantiate, for, as Dunstan Wai noted in his *Mazruiophobia and Mazruiophilia* (1998:53), they are rarely expressed in print. For our present purpose, at least, three interrelated possibilities can be explored, pertaining to the nature of postcolonial theory itself, Mazrui's relationship with the African left, and the politics of identity.

### *Nature of Postcolonial Theory*

Steeped as he is in the classical tradition, Ali Mazrui is not keen on using excessive abstraction in his writings or, he does not, to borrow a phrase from Jones (2006:230), "venture deeper into the realm of theory and text." By the classical tradition I mean that which anchors itself in the historical method, eschews fetishism in numbers, and accepts permissiveness of normative bias in social inquiry. Mazrui views the jargon so common in much of postcolonial writing today as less stimulating, and even cumbersome. He is also not particularly conversant with it. But why should we accept the notion that a discourse is not relevant to postcolonial theory unless it is expressed in the postcolonial jargon?

That postcolonial theory is abstract or is often written in inaccessible language is not surprising since it is heavily influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism, paradigms that draw heavily upon abstract philosophical concepts (see Darby 1997:14). But if it had not been for the lucidity of his prose, Mazrui would probably not have also reached a wider audience, becoming "one of the top 100 public intellectuals in the world" (*Foreign Policy* 2005). Even the inclusion (partly for the same reason) of Mazrui in David Horowitz's *The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (2006) ought to be seen as recognition of Mazrui's wide influence, even if it was the kind of influence Horowitz does not approve of. Difference in style of presentation should therefore feature as a factor that hindered mutual dialogue between Mazrui and postcolonialism. Since excessive abstraction is now beginning to be recognized as less than useful by some postcolonial theorists, however, one would hope this factor hindering the dialogue will become increasingly less important.

If much of postcolonial writing is not sometimes easily decipherable for Mazrui, his vast scholarship is not easily penetrable for many postcolonial writers. He also has not produced a master text in which one can find the Rosetta stone of his theory. The problem of quickly distilling his thoughts is further complicated by the fact he is a most prolific writer. This means that one has to read Mazrui very carefully and thoroughly, and read him over an extended period of time, before drawing a valid generalization about the underlying principles of his scholarship.

The perception that Mazrui is basically an essayist and that he writes in installments has also led some scholars to question the depth of his analysis. It is indeed true that Mazrui can be described as an essayist. It is nevertheless invalid to suggest that depth of analysis always goes hand in hand with length of manuscript. If it is the modest length of many of Mazrui's issue-centered writings that annoys some theorists, others are irritated by his readiness to move swiftly from one issue to another, quickly changing his themes, if not his tunes. Again, Mazrui does feel comfortable changing the direction of his intellectual gaze as circumstances dictate. As a matter of principle, Mazrui says, he seeks to identify a public issue that is capable of generating debate and relate that issue to his own convictions (personal communication, Jan. 29, 2010). However that may be, it is fair to say that Mazrui's alleged impatience to pause and reflect on a particular subject, too, has played a role in his marginalization in postcolonial theory.

Mazrui's "transactional" methodology, most notably the semi-autobiographical nature of his writings, is another relevant element contributing to the lack of seriousness with which some postcolonial scholars view his work. Mazrui is fond of writing and talking about himself in the context of the issue under discussion (see, for instance, Mazrui 1971, 1986b). But a semi-autobiographical style of writing does not just sneak itself into his scholarship casually. "Because political consciousness is so intricately bound up with growth of a person's general awareness," Mazrui has argued, "political scientists should perhaps devote more time to using their own lives as data for the study of the growth of political consciousness" (1973:101). Semi-autobiography is thus an important facet of Mazrui's scholarship which reflects his methodological orientation. Because of his long professional journey, Mazrui also always has something relevant to say about himself. The added advantage of a semi-autobiographical approach is that it has enhanced the effectiveness of his writings. As Omari Kokole notes, "Mazrui's tendency to tell his readers about himself and his varied experiences adds something gripping to his discourse" (1998:6). That Mazrui embeds himself in debates is a fact, in short, but it is also a fact that this embeddedness is grounded in a methodological orientation that he has espoused and followed for decades.<sup>5</sup>

But why should a semi-autobiography and postcolonialism be natural enemies? Is it not the case that a semi-autobiographical approach to theory-building is itself a methodological challenge to positivism? Again, it is certainly true that Mazrui never misses the opportunity for self-promotion; he also exhibits a high degree of self-flattery, although often not without justification. But even if his fusion of style, tone, and method were driven by egotism, why should that human limitation prevent us from judging his insights and contributions separately? This is a legitimate question.

Another issue that has inhibited Mazrui's relationship with postcolonial theory is his proximity to Africa's leaders and other persons of power. Critics of Mazrui say that he is very close to those people and that he fraternizes with them. Mazrui had indeed cultivated close relationships with African

leaders ranging from Nyerere, Kaunda, Obote, and Mandela to Idi Amin, Mugabe, and Ghadafi. However, it is wrong to suggest that his relationships with these leaders have always been cordial. Mazrui himself said many years ago that “Obote was sometimes tempted to detain me or expel me; Idi Amin eventually wished he had eliminated me; and Julius Nyerere was in recurrent debates with me. Moi does not know what to do with me” (Adem et al. 2013:209).

Mazrui also says that the maximum access he enjoys to the corridors of power in Africa and beyond is desirable from the point of view of his transactional methodology of teaching and research, as one incident in Florida illustrates. Suspecting that he had met a controversial Muslim leader in Trinidad and Tobago, the FBI briefly detained Mazrui in Miami upon his return from that nation in September 2003. Asked at the airport if he had indeed met the radical Islamist leader in the Central American nation, Mazrui told his interrogators, according to *The Washington Post*, “I did not, but I did try to meet him. . . . It is my business to know about Muslims because I teach that” (Murphy 2003).

### *The Ideological “Other”*

Ideologically, the roots of Ali Mazrui’s invisibility in contemporary postcolonial theory may be partly traceable to his break with Africa’s left. Ever since Mazrui published “Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar” (1966), arguing that Nkrumah exhibited both “monarchist” and “socialist” styles of leadership, the African left, some of whom had viewed Nkrumah as their icon, were displeased with Mazrui. In the wake of the publication of that article, some in the leftist ideological camp described Mazrui as a “neocolonial scholar” (Mazrui & Mutunga 2003:54–59). And yet Nkrumah himself seemed reluctant to label Mazrui in this way; Nkrumah only saw admirable “literary effort” in Mazrui’s sharp critique of his policies (Mazrui & Mutunga 2003:38). Because of Mazrui’s impeccable pan-Africanist credentials, the “neocolonial” epithet to describe him is both meaningless and out of date today, even though he is still regarded by some as “ideologically unbound” (Ombong & Rutten 2010:108).

But it is clear that no single piece of writing maligned Mazrui more as an alleged “right-winger” than his evaluation of Nkrumah in that article. It turned him into a kind of ideological “Other” in the eyes of the African left. Although Nkrumah was revered much more as a prophet of pan-Africanism than as a socialist thinker, he was highly ranked among the heroes in the struggle against imperialism. By appearing to make fun of Nkrumah as the “Leninist Czar,” Mazrui alienated himself from the African left.

To some extent that leftist judgment on Mazrui may have been unfair. At the time the “Leninist Czar” was published Mazrui had already written such articles as “African Attitudes toward the European Economic Community” (1963b) in which he joins forces with Nkrumah in denouncing the European Economic Community as a threat to the newly won African independence. When Mazrui’s first book, *Towards a Pax Africana* (1967),

was published, it was also viewed as a sympathetic scholarly interpretation of the political thought of Kwame Nkrumah.

In spite of Mazrui's troubles with the African left in 1960s, his most serious writings of that period are solidly in the tradition of anti-imperialism. Indeed, he coined the term *neo-dependency* in his Oxford thesis, and used the concept in his first book (Mazrui 1967), long before dependency theories became popular within the African left.

How, then, could such a major anti-imperialist thinker have been condemned by younger leftists as "reactionary"? Was Mazrui misunderstood by the left in his early years? Mazrui was sometimes deliberately mischievous in taunting the left. He once co-wrote an article entitled "The Left and the Super-Left" (Tordoff & Mazrui 1972), seemingly making fun of some of the Marxist aspects of Africa's leftist thought.

Again, if Mazrui was as patriotic and anti-imperialist as his writings of the 1960s imply, what was the cause of his alienation from the left? The answer also lies in Mazrui's mode of thinking, which centers on paradox. While Mazrui in his early writings was strongly anti-imperialist and anticolonialist, he was only mildly anticapitalist, portraying capitalism as the mother of imperialism (of which he disapproved) but also as the foundation of liberal democracy, in the sense of pluralism, the open society, and civil liberties. Mazrui had mixed feelings about liberal democracy. Also, Mazrui saw Marxism in Africa as a threat to Africa's intellectual authenticity. Since historical materialism is a whole system of thought rather than simply a guide to social policies, Marxism itself, in Mazrui's view, was a form of intellectual dependency among Westernized Africans (Mazrui 1974; also see Mazrui 2001c). To the outrage of Africa's left, Mazrui argued that African Marxism represented "dual westernization" and that it was a sociolinguistic impossibility for an African to be a sophisticated Marxist without being at the same time very highly Westernized. For Mazrui, an African Marxist is not a rebel against Western intellectual hegemony, but rather a victim of that hegemony, and he criticized those who "equate a love for Africa with an obsession with [Marxism]" (1974:70).

But what does the African left have to do with postcolonial theory? The short answer is that while not all postcolonial theorists are leftists, postcolonial theory has historically showed a great deal of ideological sympathy for the left. It is thus logical to conclude that Mazrui's ideological orientation, or how it was perceived, was not totally irrelevant to his marginality in postcolonial theory. And just as "Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar" was a catalyst for Mazrui's metamorphosis into the ideological "Other" in the eyes of the African left, Mazrui's 1986 television series, *The Africans*, which is discussed next, may have played a similar role in transforming Mazrui into the cultural "Other."

### *Politics of Identity*

In his 1963 article "On the Concept of 'We are All Africans,'" Ali Mazrui portrays himself as an African, first and foremost. Decades later, however,

the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (1991, 2000) seemed to have a different opinion after the release of Mazrui's television series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* (1986) triggered an acrimonious debate between the two. By the "triple heritage" Mazrui meant Africa's indigenous values, Islam, and Western culture. Soyinka virtually dismissed the usefulness of Mazrui's concept, mockingly calling it Mazrui's "triple tropes of trickery" (1991). In Soyinka's view, the television series denigrated Africa's indigenous traditions while exaggerating the positive role of Islam and Christianity. Soyinka also said, "*The Africans* was not a series made by a black African . . ." (1991:180).

Mazrui (1991) responded to what he called Soyinka's "parable of deceptions." He conceded that "the television series does indeed discuss Africa's faults," but he also added that it did so "sometimes to the indignation of extreme black nationalists" (1991:54). His later (2000) response to Soyinka's allegation about his identity was more passionate: "My African identity is not for you to bestow or withhold—dear Mr. Soyinka. . . . If I was somebody constantly looking for approval from people who were 'blacker' than me, I would have kept a low profile instead of becoming a controversial African political analyst" (Adem et al. 2013:202,208). Mazrui (1991:181) also objected to Soyinka's earlier reference to him as "an acculturated Arab."<sup>6</sup>

For about a decade a truce prevailed between Africa's two intellectual giants until the tension between them exploded on the Internet and degenerated into personal insults in the closing years of the 1990s. This was when Mazrui described Soyinka's problem as "Nobel Schizophrenia" (Adem et al. 2013:199–214). Soyinka in turn claimed that Mazrui's pattern of behavior had become one of an "ageing minotaur afflicted by muscular dystrophy" (Adem et al. 2013:189). Mazrui seemed, at times, more exasperated, as when he told Soyinka, "You used to combine rudeness with art. Now there is only rudeness" (Adem et al. 2013:213).

The context of Soyinka–Mazrui debate in the late 1990s was a newly produced television documentary by the African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. titled *Wonders of the African World* (1999). (Gates would later achieve national notoriety because of the 2009 "beer summit" that would take place between him and President Barack Obama after an incident in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in which Gates was allegedly subjected to racial profiling by the police.) Mazrui (1999a) found some aspects of the documentary disagreeable and accused its creator of "Black Orientalism." Mazrui also commented, as if in anticipation of the growth of Gates's public profile, "if Skip does become a major historical figure, I hope his impact will be much healthier than that of *Wonders of the African World*" (Adem et al. 2013:212).

Some saw Mazrui's reaction to Gates's television series as an unfair and unwarranted judgment of a colleague, based as it was on the presumed flaws of just one documentary. In the course of exchanges between Mazrui and Gates, Wole Soyinka again came forward in strong defense of Gates,

whom Soyinka had known at least since their days in Cambridge University in England. Soyinka called Mazrui's critique of Gates a "crusade or jihad" that was intended "to bring down a colleague and render him a racial pariah in his intellectual community" (Adem et al. 2013:186–87). Heated Internet exchanges ensued between Soyinka and Mazrui in relation to the fact that Mazrui descends from slave owners on one side of his family.

Soyinka, Gates, and their followers and supporters in American academia could be counted among the most distinguished scholars of Africa and African descent working in the field of postcolonial studies. Would it not be reasonable, therefore, to ask if Mazrui's standing in postcolonial theory was also hurt by the challenges he presented (or received from) these individuals? The "ethnic card" that was played in the debates only widened or reinforced the fissure by adding a cultural dimension to it. By virtue of the issues he had raised and assertions he had made about Ali Mazrui as well as because of his stature and influence, it was probably Wole Soyinka who had successfully projected the image of Mazrui as the cultural "Other." For Soyinka, Mazrui is "less African." After those exchanges with Soyinka, Mazrui himself seemed more concerned about the possibility that his image as "an insecure guilt-ridden Arab opportunist" would stick (Adem et al. 2013:210).

Did Soyinka's perspective about Mazrui's identity encourage some postcolonial theorists to "know" Mazrui and "act" upon that knowledge, even if subconsciously, either by ignoring or excluding his scholarship, however relevant it was to their project? I think this is a legitimate area of inquiry. The Soyinka–Mazrui debates are also significant because of Edward Said's intervention. Just as Said defended Mazrui when *The Africans* came under attack from prominent Western critics such as Lynne Cheney and Charles Krauthammer, Said firmly stood on the side of Mazrui when Soyinka questioned the usefulness of the TV series on the grounds that its creator and narrator was not "a black African." Said thus lamented, "In 1999... [Soyinka] writes a tremendous attack on the African political scientist Ali Mazrui, who is a Muslim from Kenya. The essence of the attack on Ali Mazrui is that he is not a pure African. He is an Islamicized and Arabized African. So [Wole Soyinka,] the integrative liberationist African . . . in Nigeria has become a nativist, attacking a man for not being black enough!" (Viswanathan 2001:221).

Mazrui and Soyinka have long buried the hatchet. But did Soyinka's discourse irredeemably stereotype Mazrui as an impostor, with all the consequences? Is it already too late to rescue and recover Mazrui, the student of identity politics, from becoming one of its ultimate victims? It is hard to say, partly because effects of the vulnerability of an intellectual to the politics of identity are never clear-cut. They involve a slow process of attrition.

Despite the scars he sustained after he launched his "triple heritage" concept, Mazrui continued to champion the idea for nearly thirty years, greatly refining it along the way. If postcolonial theory is to engage Mazrui more systematically, the "triple heritage" could, therefore, be one entry point.

## Mazrui's "Triple Heritage"

The concept of Africa's "triple heritage" was first articulated by Blyden (1967), and then by Nkrumah (1970). It was further expounded, refined, and propagated with great eloquence, passion, and persistence as a worldview and approach by Ali Mazrui himself, with almost all of his writings about Africa informed by it. Mazrui's "triple heritage" denotes the cultural forces that have given postcolonial Africa its present characteristics, forces comprising indigenous values, Islam, and Western culture. Whereas Africa's "triple heritage" is primarily cultural, it has engendered wide-ranging consequences in the social, economic, and political spheres of contemporary African societies. But the extent and nature of the influence have varied depending on the time, place, and issue area. As a worldview, the "triple heritage" weaves together Africa's material and spiritual expressions, gives a place for the castle-builder and the cattle-herder, acknowledges the virtues of both digging deep and building high. It also summons the ancestors and interrogates modernity. Mazrui was reflecting in this vein on the legacy of the "triple heritage" in the domain of technology when he wrote, "today different historical stages of technology co-exist at the same time within Africa—the 'tribal' spear co-exists with the modern missile, the ironsmith with the steel mill, the talking drum with satellite broadcasting, witchcraft with nuclear physics, herbal medicine with advanced surgery" (2004:15-29).

Mazrui does not give a comprehensive, explicit, and one-installment definition of the "triple heritage" approach. Perhaps this is partly so because he is always reluctant to engage meta-theoretical issues of this nature. What we must do, therefore, is deduce the meaning of the "triple heritage" approach from Mazrui's intellectual outputs via interpretation. Thus conceptualized, this approach combines clarity of ideas with depth of analysis, broad perspective with sharp insight; it merges the ideational with the material, the empirical with the normative, the personalized narrative with dispassionate observation, and the local with the universal. It also pursues disciplined inquiry but eschews disciplinary restrictions; it expresses unity of opposites but without a hint of analytical contradictions.

The "triple heritage" approach to African studies enables praise for some aspects African societies, and not others. For instance, in one segment of *The Africans*, Mazrui (1986) expresses his high regard for the fact that Ethiopians were literate before Europeans were; in another segment of the same documentary, he laments the miserable lives Ethiopians had to endure through drought and famine; in one episode he describes with fascination the wonderful Castle of Gondar in Northern Ethiopia; in another, he tells us that one does not have to build a castle to be civilized.

Positivism is by definition less accommodative of oppositions in social reality and is less flexible in dealing with divergent issues and conflicting claims. The "triple heritage" approach overcomes these limitations. In *The African State as a Political Refugee*, for instance, Mazrui (1995:25) sheds light

on the African state not just as “quasi-state” or “neo-patrimonial state” but as a very complex entity that embodies many of the contradictions of a political refugee. The entirety of Mazrui’s Reith Lectures, later published as *The African Condition* (1980), was also structured around what he called the six paradoxes of the African condition. Because of too much emphasis on or even bias in favor of coherence, deviations are often systematically weeded out and paradoxes are concealed in the dominant discourses about Africa.

But how does the narrative of the “triple heritage” successfully relate contradictions in social reality without introducing incoherence in the process? In other words, how does “triple heritage” simultaneously celebrate achievements of African societies and chastise postcolonial governments for their failure, while portraying Africa as victor (triumphant in its historic achievements), as victim (humiliated by enslavement and colonialism) and as villain (home of postcolonial corruption, greed, and military coups)? The approach accomplishes this complex task through several interrelated (and overlapping) strategies, including classification, eclecticism, macro-historical analysis, and qualitative data analysis.

A heavy reliance on classification as a heuristic device makes it unnecessary to screen out deviant cases, also opening the door wide open for seemingly conflicting observations to get accommodation. Classification as a tool is employed for understanding and as a means for reflecting on the contradictions that make up social reality. Mazrui has a special liking and gift for classifying different concepts, events, and processes in original ways. This approach has occasionally brought him into collision with some of his colleagues who were less impressed by his typology, however colorful it was, of such phenomena as slavery, racism, miscegenation, terrorism, and sexism. Some of these men (and women) saw (and rejected) implicit (and sometimes not so implicit) hierarchy in his classifications. But for the indefatigable Ali Mazrui nothing is unclassifiable, and almost everything must be classified.

Another intellectual orientation that makes the “triple heritage” approach permissive of diversity and accommodation of contradictions is its eclecticism. It is widely recognized that Mazrui is eclectic in his disciplinary orientation and in the role he plays (Sawere 1998), which also enables him to approach social reality from a variety of angles and to have room in his scholarship for a great degree of pluralism. The cultural pluralism that constitutes the “triple heritage” is also married to and informed by such eclecticism. The “triple heritage” approach is further buttressed by its macro-historical orientation, which is more sensitive to contrasts in social reality than is a micro-historical perspective, as it presupposes wider knowledge and does not easily let its practitioner fall prey to absolute positions or universalist claims and aspirations.

With its emphasis on qualitative and historical method and with no a priori commitment to quantitative measurement and operationalization, the “triple heritage” is less constrained also about the range of concepts it can use or the domain of data it can target. The approach is not only

accommodative of concepts that may not be operationalizable, but it also rejects the notion that the data that are useful and reliable should come solely from empirical observation. The methodology that is centered on overcoming rationalist limitations by allowing usage of data obtained through means other than observation and document analysis has other decisive advantages such as its openness to what preliterate societies have to offer through nonwritten data. Mazrui (2001c:99) has explicitly rejected the assumption, as he put it, that “thought is not thought unless it is also written.”

## Conclusion

Because Ali A. Mazrui has had a long and colorful career, it is not too early to start pondering the inevitable question about his legacy, a tough question without a doubt, given, first, that Mazrui’s life has also been full of glaring contradictions. Second, Mazrui’s critics are numerous even if they often criticized him for the wrong reasons. In any event, when future researchers assess Mazrui’s academic journey, I think three works will stand out, not because they are necessarily his most ambitious or most controversial, but because they are the most consequential. These are “On the Concept of ‘We are All Africans’” (1963), “Nkrumah: The Leninist Czar” (1966), and the 1986 television series *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*.

Corresponding to the above works are also three men who, iconic in their own right and in their own ways, played crucial roles in the emergence, development, or transformation of Mazrui as an intellectual figure: Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president; Wole Soyinka, sub-Saharan Africa’s first Nobel Laureate; and the critical theorist Edward Said. The African American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. may also fit the bill, if only in regard to the controversy over his *Wonders of the African World* (1999a). The competing images of Mazrui were mediated by the dynamic interactions and exchanges that took place about the aforementioned texts or with these individuals.

Mazrui is an intellectual giant and his legacy is formidable. And yet the nature of discourse, the politics of identity, Mazrui’s own intellectual style, his ideological predisposition, and his personal relationship with some of the scholars of and about the Third World have all conspired to reduce the size of Mazrui’s fan club in postcolonial theory.<sup>7</sup> Mazrui’s relative marginalization in postcolonial theory has also removed the minimum incentive necessary for the engagement of mainstream scholars with him even in the limited context of the Third World and international relations.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the rationale for Ali Mazrui’s marginalization in postcolonial theory, it is clear that embracing him would add an articulate and powerful voice to it, and that engagement and intellectual dialogue with this “first-class academic authority,” as Edward Said called him (1994:38), would sharpen our insights about postcolonialism. By embracing him, we would also extend to a wider audience the pleasure and stimulation of Mazrui’s intellectual company. When we were celebrating Ali’s eightieth birthday in April 2013, an old acquaintance of him told me about what he thought was a remarkable

but less remarked upon quality of the professor: his ability to persuade. He said: “You see, Professor Mazrui could tell you to go to hell so persuasively that you actually would look forward to the trip.” I could not agree more.

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## Notes

1. Other observations about Ali Mazrui's scholarship are available in Adem (2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b).
2. The rise and fall of Ali Mazrui in the Western academy and related issues are examined in some detail in Adem (2011a).
3. See, e.g., Doty (1996); Neuman (1998); Chowdhry and Nair (2002); Govogui (2002); Soyinka-Airewele and Edozie (2010); LaMonica (2010).
4. As he told a reporter from the *Christian Science Monitor*, "People should have a context when they hear about riots in South Africa or a military coup in Nigeria or drought in Ethiopia. The series is partly an effort to provide a human context for the things Americans hear about on television news every night." See *Christian Science Monitor* (1986).
5. Today there is also growing awareness in postcolonialism that storytelling is an acceptable mode of inquiry. See, e.g., Picq (2013).
6. However, Mazrui did recognize that African scholarship and the black African experience are intertwined to some extent: "Partly because African history and the Black experience were profoundly affected by racism and imperialism, African perspectives on the world system are influenced by a fear of imperialism and a profound suspicion of racism" (1997b:14).
7. See, e.g., Magubane (2003).
8. Otherwise, how could one explain why Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (along with a group of about half a dozen other "Third World authors" that does not, conspicuously, include Mazrui) is considered by Donald Puchala, the noted scholar of international relations, as particularly relevant for understanding "third world thinking about international relations" (1998:136)? Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is a great Kenyan novelist and a brilliant interpreter of an African culture but he is no expert in international relations. I would even go further and opine that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o would himself reject such a label. As for Mazrui, he had already reminded us, "I experienced international relations as a person before I studied it professionally" (1989:469).