



## كتاب المستخلصات



مؤتمر الإصلاح والتجديد على ضوء ميراث علي مزروعى ومستقبل الإصلاح  
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## Ali Mazrui: On Knowledge, Globalization, and Civilization

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Being one of the most important African scholars, Ali Mazrui's ideas always carry considerable intellectual weight. Of his important ideas are those on the relationship between knowledge, globalization, and civilization. Africa and the Muslim world are faced with challenges of a rapidly changing globalized era. What sort of knowledge that would be appropriate to ensure their position in a multi-polar, globalized set of civilizations, which are now molding before our eyes. The article probes and discusses Mazrui's ideas on these issues based on his confirmed belief that both Africa and Islam have jointly an enormous heritage and historical experience in knowledge and civilization that would equip them to address any future challenges of the new world order to come, and become one of the players that will shape it.

Ali Mazrui is not only a giant African scholar, but he is also one of the top 100 intellectuals in the world. His ideas on knowledge, globalization, and civilization are rooted in the Muslim family and Kenyan African milieu of his upbringing. While living and being educated in the best learning institutions in the West from the early years of his youth, equipped him with the necessary scholastic tools, which enabled him to understand it and challenge it from within. His life's crossroads do indeed emulate the Triple Heritage (Islam, Africa's indigenous heritage and Western Christianity) he used to describe and analyze Africa. His passion for knowledge took him to vast fields and topics across many disciplines-history, political science, literature, and philosophy; for example. In addition, he had wide practical experience as academician, administrator, consultant on boards of renowned international universities, UN and

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OAU and AU bodies, scientific and leaned organizations, and many other associations. All these former capacities , coupled with his personal talent and discipline qualified Mazrui to engage in continuous debates with academics, politicians and professionals whether in Africa or the West. His role, as he sees it, is to provoke debate<sup>(1)</sup>. The debates he was engaged in were not for the sake of debating, but to throw light and deepen our understanding of the issues under discussion in order to pursue possible alternative solutions.

This article does not intend to cover all the issues discussed by Mazrui. His main concern, I argue, was Africa's condition in the past, at present, and in the future, with particular emphasis on the forces- whether internal or external- that have shaped it so far and those which will do so in the future. In most of his writings, Mazrui, like some other scholars, stresses the significance of knowledge, religion, values, science, globalization, and civilization to fathom the intricacies of the current world situation. Culture and identity are inherently and inseparably associated with the formerly mentioned elements.

Methodologically, Mazrui elucidates the nature of those forces in their own right in Africa or elsewhere- mainly the West- before examining the manner of their interrelationships and the interplay among themselves and with other forces. Notwithstanding, this is done both dynamically and comparatively in a historical way. Employing such methodology, as would be expected, implies dealing with a complex set of elements and processes. Mazrui, yet, always succeeds in presenting his analysis in rather simple terms.

The West has dominated the rest of the world over the last four centuries by different means; mainly military (science and technology) and economic. Cultural and political domination followed in their footsteps. Until recently, and after WW2, the West has been led by USA , which to a large extent has become the singular world power after the

breakup of USSR. With the rise of some countries like China, Turkey, India and Malaysia and re-emergence of RUSSA as a super power, the leadership position of USA (as well as Europe) is now seriously challenged. To better understand and analyze Africa's conditions , this must take three historical stages: past (colonial) ; present (domination of the West); and future (emergence of a multi-power world system). This is precisely what Mazrui tried to do in all of his works.

The response of Africa to the historical powers which it came in contact with is very different from the response by other continents that were subjected to the same experiences. Africa occupies a unique geographical position, being situated between North America, South America, Europe and Asia and surrounded by the Atlantic and Indian oceans and the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Hence, it was wide-open to explorations(Arabs and Europeans), military invasions (Greeks, and Romans) religions (Christianity and Islam), cultural and social (American and European) influences brought about by foreigners in successive waves. Traditional religions and indigenous cultures were – and are - diversified among the different ethnic and tribal groups, which inhabit the continent, constitute a social and moral hard core- though not politically or economically, due to internal and external factors . However, because of the historical circumstances we just mentioned, Islam and Christianity as world religions, with their cultural and behavioral attributes, on the one hand, and the presence of the settler Arabs, Indians and other Asians, and Europeans , on the other, have both left undeniable heavy impact of various influences. Arabs/Islam differ from the West in that the former's presence in Africa is partially indigenous to it, whereas the latter is alien to it. Islam has not entered Africa as a colonial power; though it is true that in some cases military force was used. But because there is no Vatican or central religious authority- like in Christianity- Islam once adopted, it becomes indigenous and locally rooted. Moreover, Islam does not have one hegemonic economic or political systems or authorities like the West's capitalism and national state. Moreover, the idea of claiming

an Arab descent is usually associated with being a Muslim. This is further strengthened by the fact that Muslim traders- or otherwise- usually get married to local women and become part of the local kinship system and social fabric. When their offspring gain power, Arab/Muslim Africans' political authority would consequently be ascertained. Hence, I think Mazrui's characterization of Arab/Muslims presence and intertwined relationships as different from those of the West is correct.

Following the above line of argumentation, Mazrui goes on to explain that though there are differences between Islam and Africa on the one hand and the West on the other, they also share some commonalities. The slave trade and the colonial experience have many negative sides but they have positive effects as well; as Africa has, as a result, enjoyed the fruits of modernity (education, health, and infrastructure; for example) whereas Europe and America are liberated from their racial prejudices and forced to deal with some of Africa's pertinent matters. The outcome of such complex interrelationships leaves the door open for Africa to assert its identity and play a more dynamic role using the huge natural and human resources it has, together with its Islamic and indigenous values and morals and strong social systems (e.g. its family system), which the West lacks. If this exchange of positive things happens, a new era of cooperation and mutual benefits will be ushered. The question is whether the West is ready to forgo its current dominance voluntarily and accept being a partner of equal status, or it does have to wait to be eliminated by its own internal decay, or by some rising global entities. International relations do not exist and operate in a vacuum. As such, the future of both Africa and the West will not be determined solely by the two of them, but rather by the other forces in the international arena. In this case, Africa should be able to decide its own destiny by depending on its own resources and chart the suitable route to achieve the goals it has set for itself.

For Mazrui, Africa should strive to be one of the major world forces that would mold the condition of humankind of the coming civilization. In order to realize this, Africa has to properly handle the challenges it is facing now; namely, domination, globalization, and civilization. To Mazrui, the analysis of this situation in Africa requires dealing with, domination, globalization, and civilization as theoretical categories in conjunction with their concomitant concepts of knowledge and ethics, religion, culture, identity, science, and technology. Whereas domination pertains to the historical periods of pre- and post-colonialism, globalization refers to the changing world conditions at present, civilization denotes past world imperial situation and the future settings of world order after the workout of the current globalization processes.

With the rise of Europe after the industrial revolution, and employing its mighty military power, it colonized or controlled most of the world-including Africa. Domination meant not only military and political suppression but also administrative and cultural hegemony as well. Africa's human and natural resources were manipulated for the benefit of Europe. Through its educational system and missionary activities, Europe constrained the Africans' souls and minds. Despite the existence of large kingdoms in Africa prior to its colonization (like Mali and Songhai) , these were internally divided on the basis of languages and social units; hence, it was easy for the West to penetrate African societies intellectually and spiritually with no much resistance except for some Islamic parts.

It is true that colonialism brought modern education, health institutions, railways, technological devices ...etc. but it also introduced Western styles of living, cultural modes of behavior, foreign languages... etc.; conforming with the positions the new local elites occupy in the institutions of colonial governments. The educated had thus become a social stratum nearer to the colonizers than their own people. In this way, their thinking and the manner they do things had estranged them from their indigenous roots.

Western knowledge differed greatly from local African knowledge with regards to its origin, content, development, and orientation. It was rooted in the age of renaissance transformation and scientific revolution and matured with the industrial revolution and after, within the context of the capitalist system and nurtured by European nation-states. Its philosophical underpinnings rested on the works of Descartes, Voltaire, Kant, Hume, Hegel...etc. who emphasized reason, rationality, and centrality of human action upon the material and natural world. Knowledge became closely tied with science, which in turn was inseparable from technology. Religion did not disappear completely in Europe, but took the backseat in public life; and so did religiously-based ethics and morals, especially in scientific practice.

The source of traditional knowledge in Africa was two-pronged: the oral, indigenous belief system and practices ; and leaned, Islamic religious knowledge among Muslim communities. Both forms of knowledge were incompatible with modern Western knowledge system and institutions. The colonial administration sidelined traditional knowledge carriers and practitioners by relegating them to a lower level of formal statuses. Religious knowledge and ethics were left to handle personal matters of the 'natives'. Science and technology in traditional knowledge arose out of direct life experience and not based on formal scientific theories or methodology. With the decline of Islamic civilization in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims everywhere lost valuable sources in all fields of knowledge. Socially, indigenous knowledge had been inherently embedded in the ethnic and tribal communal formations. Indigenous knowledge , as such, besides containing the cultural heritage , economic, and technical practices, embodies the identity of the communal group and how it survives and preserve its social and natural environments. In other words it represents the totality of their livelihood and existence. The success of the colonial scheme is dependent on its destruction and replacing it with the Western alternative.

When independence arrived most of the African countries had inherited dual systems of education, health, and administration, with the Western- educated elite in control of the newly-independent state's politics, economy, army and police, and-as elites- occupied the top layer of the stratification ladder with a lot of material and immaterial benefits that set them apart from their people. The local elites and structures that had been left behind by the colonial powers in Africa were so deep-rooted in the society that they still have a strong impact on post-independence policies and plans. This situation has induced the whole range of what is now known as post-colonial studies, which seek to tackle the question of why the development of independent African states is still machinated by former colonizing countries, and what will be the way out of this trap in the age of globalization.

There are many definitions of globalization, one definition given by Mazrui is: "Globalization is much more than the Information Superhighway and the new expansion of international markets. Globalization consists of all the forces which are pushing the world towards becoming a global village. Globalization is the villagization of the globe."<sup>(2)</sup>

The above definition of globalization comprises its main aspects : compression of time and space, interconnectedness and inter dependentness between vast areas , diminishing sovereignty of states, and opening up of borders' restrictions. This supposedly ensures free movement of capital, ideas, commodities and services, labor and people between the different parts of the world<sup>(3)</sup>. In actuality, no exchanges on equal footing between the developed and the developing countries with regards to economic, political, or cultural matters. The West, China, Russia, and Japan still own and control the power of wealth, science, technology , and advanced knowledge and information technology. The lack, or weak possession, of the former is further negatively impacted on Third World countries by the contradictory processes emanating from the



rivalry of the big powers in pursuit of their own interests. Africa will be on the losers' side for consuming more than it produces , and for being unable to utilize its human power, intellectual and natural resources, and inability to cope with the rapidly changing world of knowledge around it.

Though Mazrui agrees that the term globalization is new, he contends that its processes have started centuries ago and developed over time in different stages. Those earlier processes were- and may be until now are-generated by religion, economy , technology, empire building. The last one- empire building- I prefer to see it as expansion of influence- like in the case of China and Russia on bases other than empire building. Again, for me, we cannot equate the dimensions, in-depth, and impact of current processes of globalization with those of earlier stages. Also, there are now global issues which did not exist before such global warm-up , global crime and large scale migration and its attributes and consequences. In addition, new developments as the merge of economy, information and communication technology , and bursting, accumulative qualitative data have produced new phenomena - most important of which is knowledge economy. While military might, big economies, political and ideological means are still significant , the knowledge factor that permeates all of them will be decisive in determining who will be more influential among the competing countries or regions in the coming era of civilization. But the question remains what sort of civilization(s) will emerge and what role Africa would play and what would be its contribution given its knowledge, social, and moral heritage.

However, it may be important to view Mazrui's suggestions of how Africa could free itself of the bondage of globalization. In his view the essential thing for Africa to start the process of its emancipation is to reassert its identity by reclaiming its religious and moral/value systems and indigenous knowledge and preserve its human and natural resources. He proposes for this five strategies: The strategies include, indigenization, domestication, diversification, horizontal interpenetration

and vertical counter-penetration. Indeginization entails adapting traditional skills and knowledge – traditional medical knowledge- to modern uses. Diversification refers to accessing and making use of all available non-Western centers of knowledge and technology in the world. Horizontal interpenetration alludes to contacting and exchanging similar experiences with equivalent institutions of knowledge and technology inside or outside Africa. Counter – penetration means reversing the one way traffic of knowledge from the West to Africa by sending it Africa to the West. This strategy could be viewed as one of de-colonization or de-Westernization of modernization.<sup>(4)</sup>

There are many perspectives and approaches to fathom the concept of civilization and its varied dimensions. Mazrui does not directly go deep into describing or analyzing civilization as a historical or theoretical concept. His treatment of it arises out of his main concern with it regarding Africa's condition in connection with the West, having in mind Africa's triple heritage. Moving from his belief that civilizations have good sides and bad sides at the same time , he shows the West's civilization despite its successes in material terms and advancement in science and technology and health and education , it suffers from lack of moral values that could prevent from the follies and mistakes against humanity. He reiterates its part in the slave trade, genocides against indigenous peoples and the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki , let alone its terrible acts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, for example. He attributes this to advances in knowledge without ethics while upholding principles of self- centism and racial prejudices . Islamic civilization, on the other hand , was open to diversity and did not condone racism or commit genocides against local populations. Its moral and ethics prevented it from extremis and violence against religious or social practices which differed from its own. On the other hand it was also quite open to cultural exchanges with other civilization and allowed knowledge to pass freely between peoples of different religious and racial backgrounds to fully participate in its flourishing. This openness of exchange of various

knowledge's and incorporating them within its own Mazrui calls it the "creative synthesis". Africa's , Mazrui argues, traditional social heritage which emphasizes unity of the family, communal collaboration and group values can be a positive contribution to the West's civilization or any other immerging civilization(s). Africa in Mazrui's opinion ought utilize its huge resources to modernize its educational and research institutions without Westernization- learning in this respect from the Japanese and Chinese experiences.



## References:

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4. See “5 strategies for de-Westernising globalisation, by Ali Mazrui” in <https://thisisafrica.me/author/bwesigyebwamwesigire/>