

# African/Africana/Black Studies

## The Africans: A Triple Heritage

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Ali Al'Amin Mazrui is the author of the book and narrator of the accompanying documentary series (docuseries) *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. He was born in a prominent family in Mombasa, Kenya in 1933. He graduated in 1960 from the University of Manchester in England and received a Master's degree from Columbia University in New York in 1961. He received a Philosophy Doctorate degree in Political Science from the University of Oxford in 1966 (Genatossio, 2016).

In addition to the book reviewed here, Mazrui authored and contributed to more than 50 books and published hundreds of scholarly articles and essays (Goodreads' Website, 2021). Some of his noticeable books include *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition* (1967); *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis* (1980); *The Political Sociology of The English Language: An African Perspective* (1975); *The Power of Babel: Language & Governance in the African Experience* (1998); *The African Predicament and the American Experience: A Tale of Two Edens* (2004); and *African Institutions: Challenges to Political, Social, and Economic Foundations of Africa's Development* (2015). He was also the recipient of numerous awards, including the Du Bois-Garvey Award for Pan-African Unity from Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland, United States (Genatossio, 2016).

In *Black Orientalism? Further Reflections on "Wonders of the African World,"* Mazrui coins the terms "black orientalism" and develops new concepts such as "racial sovereignty" and "continental jurisdiction" (Mazrui, 1967). He raises attention to the neglect by scholars on the significance of Islam's influence upon Africa and, to a lesser extent, the African Diaspora. He criticizes the bias existing in some Black intellectual circles portrayed toward Islam's influence upon people of African descendants in comparison with more favorable sentiments given to narratives depicting Christianity's influence (Asante, 1987).

Mazrui taught at Uganda's Makerere University. He rejected Ugandan leaders' offers to serve in government. He lost \$500,000 in funding because of controversial viewpoints evidenced in his integrity as an intellectual thinker whose motives for development were not ethically or morally corrupted. He served as Director of the Center for Afro-American and African Studies (CAAS) at the University of Michigan from 1978 to 1981. He died in 2014 in New York City and was buried in his hometown Mombasa. His life was dedicated to knowledge production and was regarded as "One of the Top 100 Intellectuals in the World" (Genatossio, 2016).

In harmony with his Pan-African tutelage, influenced and facilitated by his close relationship with Kwame Nkrumah, one of Mazrui's inherent goals was to develop and construct a guiding framework by which Africans and African Americans intentionally and continuously identify, reconnect and reconcile their African heritage and culture. Due to the fact that they represent a sizeable presence in the world's most powerful nation, Mazrui believed that engaging and

reconnecting African Americans to their African heritage is an essential and strategic aspect that will have a significant impact on United States foreign policy regarding Africa (Mazrui, 1986).

### **Book Review**

Both the book and docuseries are targeted at readers and viewers who have little or no knowledge about Africa's inhabitants, geographical location, geopolitical significance, indigenous culture and traditions. Mazrui's masterpiece is made up a short introduction, 15 substantive chapters, appendix, notes, selected bibliography, index, and picture credits. The book and its related nine-part television docuseries were both inspired by a combination of Mazrui's desire to unite indigenous political, economic and cultural systems coupled with broader Pan-Africanism. He explains that the following three heritages significantly influence continental inhabitants of Africa and its current conditions: (1) traditional African indigenous customs, (2) Islamic expansion, and (3) Western colonization. In the Introduction, he lays out the main framework and theme for the remainder of the book. Mazrui states: "What Africa knows about itself and what different parts of Africa know about each other have been profoundly influenced by the West" (Mazrui, 1986, p. 13).

In his effort to convey African rebellion, adaptation and resistance to Western domination, Mazrui sets the tone by asking in the introduction: Is Africa "A Celebration of Decay?" He expresses that European colonial rule in Africa was more effective in destroying indigenous African political and economic structures than in destroying African culture. Mazrui concludes that as Western legacies, institutions and influences are being negated or halted in Africa, the glamor of emulating and patterning African societies like Western civilization begins to diminish. This transformation process results in new areas of poverty and deprivation. He states: "Turning artificial territories into living nations is a slow and agonizing process, an evolution which in Europe took hundreds of years. Postcolonial Africa has only had a quarter of a century of trial and error" (YouTube, 2017). The act of thinking rationally and, subsequently, adopting logic requires acquiring specific knowledge related to the undertaking, challenge, issue, and task associated with a particular matter.

The first chapter asks: "Where is Africa?" The geography of Africa is extremely significant to understanding European and Asian powers' efforts to subjugate the African continent, its inhabitants and descendants. This significance is displayed by European mapmakers' ethnocentrism and geographical prejudices focusing on carving Semitic lands out of Africa and including them in the political geographical boundaries of Asia. Mazrui makes a case that Arabs are more culturally aligned and similar with Africans than they are connected to Asia. Nonetheless, Arabs prefer to be more identified with Asia (Mazrui, 1986).

In the second chapter, "Anatomy of a Continent," Mazrui reminds us that Africa is home to the first human ancestor. As a result, Africa is the home to the first civilization. Nevertheless, abundant and prosperous life has been shortened by early death on the continent. Its geography, climate, and location are intertwined with humans, God, and nature. According to Mazrui, these characteristics mentioned in the first two chapters are motivating factors utilized to exploit, enrich, and serve the interests of conquering powers (Mazrui, 1986).

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, Mazrui expresses the basis of the triple heritage influences most significant to Africa: (1) indigenous tradition, (2) Semitism—predominantly with the growth of Islam on the continent, and (3) Western influence predicated with the expansion of capitalism and Christianity. The third chapter titled "Africa's Identity: The Indigenous Personality" entails

the evolutionary development of African culture and identity. Mazrui highlights the variation in the development of African culture. This variation ranges from sophisticated technologically developed communities with structures and infrastructure to simple and underdeveloped communities and groups (Mazrui, 1986).

In the fourth chapter, “Africa’s Identity: The Semitic Impact,” Mazrui expresses that Africa is impacted differently by Semitism in comparison to Western nations. Islam is comparable in influence to Christianity, and Arabs are more impactful than Jews. Mazrui also contends that the Semitic influence of both Arabs and Jews contributes to Africa’s problem of identity and Africa’s political and cultural history (Mazrui, 1986).

The fifth chapter, “Africa’s Identity: The Western Aftermath,” concludes the discourse in the three chapters by dealing with contemporary Africa’s identity. This chapter focuses on the impact the West has on de-Africanizing the continent and the identity of African ethnic culture and heritage as they interplay with Western-style capitalism, Christianity, and technology. Mazrui ponders the following question in this chapter: “Can Pan-Africanism in the Diaspora aid the re-Africanization of the continent?” His answer is yes (Mazrui, 1986).

In the sixth chapter, Mazrui describes the impact the triple heritage has on sports in the continent. He contends that Africans have embraced culture-neutral games such as athletics and soccer, rather than culture-intensive Western games such as golf and tennis. In the seventh chapter, he addresses the fusion of indigenous beliefs and faith on the continent with the institutionalization of Islam and Christianity and the quest of the three faiths to recruit and obtain new believers and converts. In the eighth chapter, he shares three interrelated theses concerning technology and the triple heritage. The first thesis is that in the past 300 years, largely as a direct product of subjugation in the forms of colonialism and Trans-Atlantic slavery, Africa has been extremely important in building the West’s industrial capacity. The second thesis is that the West has had a reverse impact on hindering Africa’s industrialization and development. The third thesis is that Western subjugation led to a technological gap between the West and Africa, which helps to explain the triumph of Western power over the forces of both Islam and indigenous culture in Africa (Mazrui, 1986).

The ninth chapter focuses on the political struggles of the young African nations and their quests for stability as they seek to develop functioning governing institutions, systems and structures. In the tenth chapter, Mazrui contends that Africa is undergoing a transformational phase whereby it is rebelling against neo-colonialization and Westernization that masquerade behind a manipulative façade of modernity, civilization and development. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter points to Africa’s underdeveloped capitalism and describes it in terms of a “winter season” whereby the continent fails to produce what it needs. In the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter, Mazrui describes African’s amenable character that has adopted a mixture of names from its triple heritage. He uses the title and the name “Reverend Muhammed” as an example. This fusion extends into consumption patterns of food, music, culture, and consumerism in all aspects of Africa’s societies (Mazrui, 1986).

The 13<sup>th</sup> chapter provides suggestions about how African nations must transform and transition into a world order dictated by two major forces of the past two centuries: the first being the sovereign state and capitalism, and the second being notions of the precolonial statehood to postcolonial statehood. The 14<sup>th</sup> chapter entails how African nations still grope with legacies of continuing tensions birthed by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which drew up the current borders of African nations without regard to ethnic tensions and rivalries. The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter is a summation of the challenges and issues facing the continent. Mazrui then concludes

that Black Americans are Africa's most important external human resource due to the fact that they constitute a large concentration of the descendants of African ancestors residing in the most powerful nation in the world. Keeping with the spirit of Pan-Africanism, Mazrui surmises that the re-Africanization of Black Americans of their African ancestral past could influence American foreign policy positively towards Africa (Mazrui, 1986),

The strength of the book is that it serves as a foundational text narrated from an African perspective, describing many of Africa's historical events and how these events impact the continent's present conditions, circumstances, and reality. The book and accompany docuseries were written and immediately produced after the era when most African nations were first emerging from struggles rooted in their colonial past and Africans Americans struggle with Civil Rights.

Also, the book is invaluable and its contribution to both the understanding of Africa and Pan-Africanism cannot be understated. It is similar to a comprehensive encyclopedia. The book provides interested researchers, policy makers, and scholars in the fields of African Geopolitics, Geography, Political Science, Anthropology, Political Economy, and Sociology important background knowledge of Africa. This is because the book is written in a way to get the reader's attention, introduce each topic covered, explain the topic's relevance to the reader, state the purpose of the topic, and outline the main points.

### **Book's Greatness**

The book is of such great importance to African/Africana/Black Studies that the primary weakness is that it was unfortunate Mazrui did not produce a follow-up publication and documentary updating his original publication in comparison to challenges Africans in the continent and those in the Diaspora face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We are left to ponder and speculate how Mazrui would have examined China's growing influence on the continent.

A main forte of Mazrui's *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* is that it is completely relevant to understanding the underlying root influences that currently shape the makeup of the continent. The book and docuseries are two of the earliest and most comprehensive multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary publications on Africa and its Diaspora compiled and narrated from a Pan-Africanist viewpoint. In addition, the book offers forgotten, little-known, and/or scarcely-shared knowledge and insights about Africa's heritage and culture before invading forces and conquering entities imposed their dominance and influences at the expense of indigenous African traditions and culture.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The significance of examining African/Africana/Black Studies is the process of continuous knowledge production for African policy makers, scholars, researchers, and other stakeholders. As such, there are many reasons why the current review's importance cannot be understated. First, it demonstrates that African scholars are continuously evolving and advancing in their understanding in a field that seeks to increase its global footprint. Second, it enables Afrocentric scholars to develop content and context on their own terms, define their viewpoints, and dictate their narratives' context in the global construct while breaking down the biased global construct that is hostile to their equitable viewpoints. Third, it helps to negate the lack of African-centered researchers' perspectives in the development African/Africana/Black Studies scholarship.

Fourth, the review reveals the need for self-determination by the inhabitants on the African continent and those in the African Diaspora. Fifth, it contributes to African/Africana/Black Studies' epistemology by recognizing all of the African descendants' contributions to the academic field, while simultaneously reinforcing African/Africana/Black Studies' legitimacy and validity from interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary social science perspectives.

Afrikans were the first to design and establish many of the political, governance, religious, arts, and culture institutions of civilized society. Afrikans created institutional and infrastructure blueprints now enjoyed by contemporary civilized societies all over the world. Each of these great authors has consciously taken the stance, and it is their conviction that long before colonialization and slavery, Afrikan nation-states and descendants of Afrika were connected to ancestral traditions that greatly contributed to civilization as we know it today. Furthermore, their descendants continue to develop and contribute to great legacies of highly functional communities and societies, thereby adding to various civilizations in the forms of structural political institutions, governance, economic systems, and culture. Indigenous Afrikan communities developed, promoted stability, and maintained highly functional civilizations prior to Western, Arab and Asian political, economic, and religious infiltration and conquests. Social order, stability, and a sense of community were outcomes of the practices of Afrikans prior to the aforementioned external influences.

It is therefore important to keep in mind that Mazrui was a political scientist by training. He was wise not to narrow his *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* book and docuseries to the field of Political Science only. Indeed, his desire was to plant and spread seeds for wider Afrocentric multi-disciplinary perspectives utilizing tools in the fields of Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, Geopolitics, Linguistics, Political Science, etc. Chances are that he thought about it; but, I think that his objective was to reach as wide an audience of African descendants as possible by using "Heritage." One of his goals was to advance the vision of his Pan-African mentor predecessors (W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, Cheikh Anta Diop, etc.) and leave Afrika's ancestral descendants with the widest array of conceptual topics on which to continue uniting the nations and people of the continent and throughout Afrika's Diaspora as he could possibly reach given his limited resources. With that objective, it is likely that Mazrui was more focused on the past 500 years of colonial/postcolonial, slavery/post-slavery, Civil Rights/post-Civil Rights, and etc., trying to undo the negative effects on the Africa and its descendants. Thus, Mazrui gave considerable mention to the great dynasties and empires of Afrika.

African descendants, both in the continent and throughout the Diaspora, must continue producing African-centered knowledge perspectives, and also continuously educate and inform themselves and others if they are to liberate themselves and others from the residual effects of the yokes of colonialism and slavery. Examining the conditions of contemporary continental Africa and the Diaspora through Afrocentric lenses, the book reviewed here has done excellent scholarly undertakings getting readers to know that African/Africana/Black Studies as a discipline is not bound to Western dominance and monopolized means of producing and advancing knowledge. The effort serves to dispel the notion that Eurocentric paradigms, viewpoints, and frameworks are the only tools with which to view the anthropological evolution of the descendants of Africa.

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