Africanity, African Intellectuals and the Study of Ethiopia: Thoughts on the Relevance of Mazruiana

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The noted African comparativist Ali A. Mazrui has made some profound and intriguing observations about Ethiopia in his extensive writings on Africa and beyond on issues including what he called Ethiopia’s cultural achievements and its racial self-denial. In this essay, I assess Mazrui’s contributions to our understanding of these and related issues and examine the broader relevance of his methodologies and approaches to Ethiopian studies.

I. Introduction

A trend is emerging in Ethiopian studies which is one of analyzing the works of Ethiopian intellectuals with respect to the general contributions, philosophies and methodologies of their works. This essay is inspired by the same spirit. It is also to suggest the critical need for broadening the research program to include not only Ethiopians but also non-Ethiopians who have directly or indirectly contributed to the deepening of our knowledge about the country.

Africanity, as used in this essay, refers simply to Africanness. The issue of Ethiopia’s Africanity is bound up with the extent to which Ethiopia regards itself (and is regarded by others) as part of Africa. The questions would also include whether Ethiopia’s Africanness is geographic and/or cultural and, even more fundamentally, what Ethiopia is and what it is not in the same context.

The African Intellectuals in the title of the essay, also calls for some clarification. No African intellectual outside Ethiopia, with the exception of one or two, has conducted much of a systematic study about the country. That is to say that there are not many African-Ethiopianists, outside Ethiopia, as there are, for instance, Japanese, American, Italian, Norwegian and British Ethiopianists. In fact, earlier generation of Africans had probably done a better job in this regard. But this is ironic as much as it is obvious. The irony is that Ethiopia has long been regarded as a symbol of African unity and even Black freedom. The sub-wording of the title, African Intellectuals, is therefore intended also to challenge our African brothers and sisters to engage in Ethiopian studies. But, I should add, a scholarly work need not necessarily be about Ethiopia in order to be useful for Ethiopian studies, as this short essay seeks to suggest in the following pages, by drawing upon a tiny segment of Mazruiana, as the immense and magnificent intellectual output of Ali A. Mazrui has come to be known.

Ali Mazrui has also written on Ethiopia, about his thoughts, observations and reflections regarding the country, which are, in many ways, worth recording. The reasons for this include not only that he is arguably one of the most original, versatile and productive African thinkers but also he has, on occasions, made intriguing and

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profound observations about Ethiopia. He has sometimes told us inconvenient truth about ourselves. In other words, although Mazrui has not written extensively about Ethiopia, in the same way as other Ethiopianists had done over the decades, he also has contributed significantly to deeper understanding of the country. Even more crucially, his works have powerfully projected a generally positive image of Ethiopia globally, with his unique style of discourse greatly adding to their effectiveness and greater impact.

Few African and non-African academics are widely known in Ethiopia, and Ali A. Mazrui is no exception. On the other hand, Mazrui’s own encounter with the Ethiopian intelligentsia is longstanding; what is more, the encounter came about at a crucial juncture in the political history of Ethiopia. In his book *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*, Mazrui records this encounter with Ethiopian students as follows: “…I was in Ethiopia in December 1973, a few months before the creeping coup started. I was invited to address the student body. An American colleague came to fetch me from my hotel. We arrived at the University. The students turned up not just in their hundreds but in their thousands. The mass of humanity that was there was surprising for a professorial lecture. When I looked behind me my American colleague had disappeared. The students were singing political songs and he had apparently decided discretion was the better part of valour. I ploughed through this mass of humanity, arrived at the front platform. It was one of the loneliest arrivals of my career because there was nobody there to meet me. I was bewildered, wondering what to do next, and then saw somebody else struggling to come across, accompanied by some other. It turned out he was my host—the professor of political science there. When he stood up on the platform to introduce me he was immediately shouted down. The students were insisting that the meeting had to be under their sponsorship, or it could not take place at all. My colleague asked me, ‘What do you think?’. I said, ‘If I were you I would let them preside’. He was worried, presumably about the impact of surrender on university opinion of him, but he did capitulate to the situation. What emerged in the course of that address, after students have taken over the chair and given their speeches, was that these were the most radical African students I had ever addressed. They gave me a fair hearing, listening to me to the end, and after that asked questions deliberately intended to embroil me in their own profound and understandable dissatisfaction with the Ethiopian imperial system as they knew it…This was the most direct and most blunt critique of an African government I had ever heard from students anywhere…”2

In general, Ali Mazrui’s works could be related to and utilized in the study of contemporary Ethiopia at least in four ways. One is to focus just on what he said and wrote about Ethiopia and dissect and analyze them. Secondly, we can apply his general and comparative observations about other places in Africa and beyond as well as his framework of analysis and adapt them for explaining cultural and socio-political forces in Ethiopia. Thirdly, we can employ his dialectical approach, with its emphasis on paradoxes and unity of opposites, to deconstruct master-narratives which are so common in Ethiopian historiography. In some ways substantial part of Mazruianata can be understood as a search for paradoxes in socio-political realities, for the unity of opposites, and the unmasking of the dialectical relationships between the phenomena of interest. And this is uncommon approach because much of academic discourses seem to

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turn a blind eye on paradoxes so as not to undermine coherence of narratives. Finally, we can use any combination of the above approaches simultaneously.

The next section briefly identifies the common themes in Mazrui’s discourses about Ethiopia. Section III attempts to apply, in a suggestive way, Mazruiana concepts to the analysis of the relationship between religion and politics in Ethiopia. Section IV introduces Ali Mazrui’s controversial and provocative views about Ethiopia’s pan-Africanism. Section V asks whether Mazrui is Ethiophobe or Ethiophile. A conclusion would then follow.

II. Ethiopia as a Pioneer

Ali Mazrui finds great fascination in Ethiopia’s pioneering role in a number of areas. Ethiopia is where the human species originated; Ethiopia is where the institution of human family began. His fascination with Ethiopia continues. Ethiopia is the only country in Africa which survived the European scramble for Africa; Ethiopia is also the first non-European country to defeat a European power at the Battle of Adwa in 1896; Ethiopia is the only delegate from Africa at the League of Nations; Ethiopia is one of the founding members of the United Nations and was Africa’s leading voice there.

The Revolution in Ethiopia in 1974 also exerted a fascination of its own, as it represented something unique in Africa—the only revolution in the continent which closely approximated the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Mazrui put it thus: “Although the differences from what happened in Russia were immense, the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 was closer to the Russian Revolution of 1917 than anything else that had happened in Africa. Both revolutions overthrew ancient monarchical institutions; both revolutions confronted the opposition of a hostile external world; both of them had to confront hostile Orthodox Christian churches (The Ethiopia and the Russian national churches are both in the Orthodox tradition); both revolutions were followed by immense internal civil conflict; both revolutions were captured by extremely brutal dictators (Stalin and Mengistu Haile Maryam); and both revolutions finally ended with ethnic fragmentation in the body politic.”

Ali Mazrui saw Ethiopia under EPRDF with a kind of bewilderment, but still as a trailblazer. Current rulers of Ethiopia broke two taboos in the 1990s, Mazrui observed: “[One] is the taboo of secession from an existing African state in the post-Colonial era—the independence of Eritrea with the full cooperation, if not enthusiastic blessing, of Ethiopia, of which it was once a crucial constituent province. The Eritrea flag was raised in May 1993 at a ceremony at which the President of Ethiopia was among the distinguished guests. This is the taboo of officially sanctioned ‘secession’. [The other] violated taboo is ethnic decentralization by a state which was previously unitary. Having lost Eritrea, the rest of Ethiopia is groping for a federal or confederal constitutional order within which “tribes” would have the kind of ethnic autonomy that African systems of government in the postcolonial era have persistently sought to deny them. This is the taboo of retribalization.”

Whether as “the oldest Christian state in Africa,” or as “a savior of nascent Islam,” Ethiopia has been—and continues to be—a source of fascination for Ali Mazrui. But the paradox Ethiopia poses also does not escape his sharp mind. Some of Ethiopia’s

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4 Ibid.
paradoxes in the eyes of Ali Mazrui include the political marginalization of Muslims in the country and the issue of so-called Ethiopia’s cultural achievement and its racial self-denial. We look at each of these paradoxes below.

III. Religion and Politics

In the public and academic discourse issues about the relationships between religion and politics are rarely brought up for discussions in Ethiopia. Considering realities of Ethiopia, both historical and contemporary, the dearth of discourse about the subject is unfortunate but less astounding. Dominant narratives perpetuate themselves in part by blocking counter-narratives, specially those narratives which question directly or indirectly the privileges status of dominant groups. Not only the political marginalization of Muslims in Ethiopia but also the marginalization of the issue itself should therefore make an intellectually fascinating theme of investigation. Ethiopian historiography says little about the country’s Islamic history even when great historians such as Ibn Khaldun find it appropriate to make reference to it.

Emperor Haile Selassie was not only the Head of State of Ethiopia but he was also regarded as the “Defender of the Orthodox faith.” In fact, the Ethiopian Constitution of 1955, the latest of the two constitutions of the Imperial regime, clearly stipulated that Ethiopia was a Christian state, forever to be ruled forever by members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Haile Selassie had also said: “We shall not place a Muslim on the throne of a Christian king.” It is clear that for Emperor Haile Selassie, religion was more important than ethnicity since the constitution does not say explicitly that Ethiopia would be ruled forever by members of a single ethnic group. The reason for not saying so explicitly may also have to do with the general conception, particularly among the elite, that for all practical purposes, ethnicity is not a salient factor in contemporary Ethiopian politics.

Although even conservative estimates put the proportion of the followers of Islam in Ethiopia as roughly half of the total population, no Muslim had been given or attained a preeminent position in modern-day Ethiopia. John Markakis, the scholar and long-time observer of Ethiopian society, was exaggerating a little, but he was basically right when he observed: “In imperial Ethiopia it was easier for a non-Christian, who also did not speak Amharic, to pass through the eye of a needle than to enter the charmed circle of power and privilege.”

It is significant that even Ethiopia’s rulers had not denied that Muslims are politically marginalized. What they take issues with is why this was so. Responding to a question in the UN General Assembly as to why Ethiopian Muslims who were sizable in number were not proportionally represented in the government, the Ethiopian head of delegation had said as early as about thirty years ago: “…if more Ethiopian Muslims did not take part in the administration of their country, it was because they preferred to devote themselves to commerce.”

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7 Ibid., p. 24.
In one of his earlier works, Ali A. Mazrui had this to say about the relationship between Islam and commerce: “Trade and Islam have been companions throughout, with the crescent following the commercial caravan, the mueezin calling believers to prayers from the marketplace.” The historical evidence about Ethiopian Muslims does indeed supports Ali Mazrui’s observation. J. S. Trimingham also observed: “The spread of Islam [in Ethiopia] as elsewhere in Africa was facilitated above all by commerce. The Abyssinian [read: Amhara] is a warrior or a peasant and despises trade, consequently Muslims controlled all trade from the markets of the great towns to the smallest way side market, whilst all imperial trade connexions were with Muslim countries through the Muslim trading settlements along the coast.”

But there is nothing in the above characterization which suggests that Muslims were inherently averse to politics and public administration. The marginalization of Muslims in the political affairs of the country is instead a result of a well-thought, systematically-pursued policy of the Christian rulers of Ethiopia, a policy that has a clear historical link to the past. As Trimingham recorded about the situation in the 19th century Ethiopia: “Muslims, while they could develop commercial activities, were excluded from public and magisterial posts and from any part in the political life of the country, and clearly divided from the ruling caste.”

Historian Hagai Erlich has also the governments’ policy towards Muslims in Ethiopia as “a mixture of suspicion, exploitation and patronizing tolerance.”

What was the state of relationship between religion and politics in the post-Imperial Ethiopia? Marx saw all religions as opium of the masses. But Ethiopia’s revolutionary leaders had a different idea although initially they had given the impression that they were going to treat all religions equally. One official document put it at the time: “Islam is more anti-revolutionary than the Christian church.” Muslims were generally unable to make it to the highest rank of government under the Dergue regime as well.

Political marginalization of Muslims also persists under the EPRDF government which took the reins of power in 1991. It is debatable, however, whether a conscious government policy is playing a part at the present time. But it does not matter in any case since the structure which perpetuates such inequality has already naturalized.

It is one of the distinctive characteristics of Ali Mazrui’s scholarship on Ethiopia that he does not show avid interest in the issue of political marginalization of Ethiopian Muslims. Neither does he dwell on the subject, also in keeping with his approach as a macro-historian and his conviction as a true pan-Africanist.

Mazrui writes and speaks about the Christian heritage of Ethiopia as its Islamic heritage with great pride. Even when he suggests some radical measures in relations to the religious dimension of Ethiopian politics, his intention was the betterment of and peace in the Horn of Africa. He argued recently: “On the politicization of religion, the Horn of Africa has its contradictions. Ethiopia had a theocratic tradition for more than a thousand years—with the Orthodox Church as an established Church, and the Emperor as both allied to the Church and revered as the anointed of God. Yet today the Ethiopian authorities do not want the Somali people to experiment with a theocratic

13 Ibid., p. 136
14 Erlich, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia, p. 25.
solution to their problem of anarchy even for a single decade, let alone for a thousand years. Ethiopian troops intervened in Mogadishu to shut out the stabilizing experiment of the Union of Islamic Courts.”

One of the points Ali Mazrui stresses in his well-known TV documentary, *The Africans*, is that “Ethiopia was introduced to Christianity in the fourth century of the Christian era—that is to say, before England was Christianized.” This may be an obvious fact, even though it is sometimes ignored. But one does not expect such evocative reference to Christianity if Mazrui’s analysis was biased in favor of his own Islamic faith. It is a common strategy in political and academic discourse that one omits/erases a historical fact, if not doing so appears to undermine one’s politics or analysis.

Mazrui’s well-informed and balanced approach to the two religions appears more clearly in one of his recent writings: “Ethiopia was the first point of arrival for Christianity in Black Africa. The Christian Gospel arrived in Abyssinia in the fourth century of the Christian era. Ethiopia was also the first point of arrival for Islam anywhere on the African continent. This occurred while the Prophet Muhammad was still alive and before his migration to Medina (the Hijra) in the year 622 [C.E.]. It might therefore be said that Africa’s two parents of wisdom first communicated with each other on Ethiopian soil. Muslim refugees were given asylum by an African king. The Muslims at that time were being religiously persecuted in Mecca by pre-Islamic Arabs. The Muslims crossed the Red Sea into the welcoming embrace of Black Ethiopia.”

Mazrui’s works give us food for thought about how to approach the complex relationship between religion and politics in Ethiopia. His comparative studies of the subject in relations to Nigeria, the Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Senegal are particularly instructive for framing discussions on this subject. So also are his concepts of religious state (theocracy), religious nation, secular state and ecumenical state as well as the notions of religious alternation and the sacred calculus.

**IV. Ethiopia and Pan-Africanism**

Ali Mazrui recognizes Ethiopia’s role as a “Pan-Africanist icon” and as a “stimulator of Pan-African imagination.” Mazrui spelled out in detail Ethiopia’s role as stimulator of Pan-Africanism in 2004 in a lecture he gave at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa: “Ethiopia was the longest surviving Black sovereign state, causing many colonized Black people to look to Ethiopia for inspiration…”

However, Mazrui also underlines that Ethiopia was not a natural-born pan-Africanist. In 2005, he again succinctly put what he meant in this way: “It is one of the ironies of history that this reluctant stimulant of Pan-Africanism in others should subsequently invite others to build Pan-Africanism on its soil. It was not a case of Ethiopia choosing

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19 For the later application of these concepts see Mazrui, “The Cumulative Exceptionalism of the Horn of Africa,” p. 13.
21 Ali A. Mazrui, “Pan-Africanism between Globalization and the American Empire,” Address to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia, delivered at the Institute in Addis Ababa on July 25, 2004, chaired by Dr. Elizabeth Wolde Giorgis, the Institute’s Director.
pan-Africanism. It was a case of Pan-Africanism choosing Ethiopia. Such was Ethiopia’s inevitable destiny.”

But Mazrui’s controversial position about Ethiopia’s Pan-Africanism is not new at all. As early as twenty or so years ago he had observed: “…it was the emperor himself who initiated the policy of re-Africanizing Ethiopia as the rest of Africa approached independence, fearing to be outflanked by the radicalism of Nasser of Egypt and Nkrumah of Ghana… Emperor Haile Selassie initiated the re-Africanization of Ethiopia.”

Ali Mazrui revisited the issue in 2007 at some length in a keynote address he gave at a Cornell University symposium on Ethiopia. In the audience were also some of the leading Ethiopianists, both Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians. Not surprisingly, the post-speech Q & A turned out to be lively and heated. To say that some were infuriated by Mazrui’s observation would not also be an overstatement. The line in Mazrui’s speech which didn’t particularly go down well with some, it seems, was this: “Objectively, Ethiopians were a Black people, but subjectively they were in denial about their Blackness until Emperor Haile Silassie redefined their identity in the twentieth century.”

In my judgment, Mazrui’s critical remark was rather mild; there was no doubt that if he had wanted to be harsher, he could have easily found more scathing words, and evidence too, to substantiate his observations. But on the same occasion, Mazrui said: “Ethiopians were a Black people who could successfully refute Western allegations that Black Africans were incapable of making history, of writing poetry, of philosophizing, or of pursuing the scientific method.”

One could grasp and more fully appreciate Mazruiana if we try to relate its unique approach to the analysis of history. Using Mazrui’s aforementioned remark at Cornell University, let me further elucidate what I mean. Ali Mazrui seems averse to binary analysis—his categories often come in doubles and triples, but they come in the form of “both-and” and rarely in “either-or” form. In contemporary intellectual climate where binary division and excessive concern with political correctness is regarded as important sign of rigorous analysis, it is no easy task to bring contradictions out to the open. Mazrui does not believe in slogans such as, to borrow one from President George W. Bush, “you’re with us, or you’re against us.” Mazrui deeply distrusts easy political and intellectual dichotomies. Mazrui seems to be ready to say, in response, for instance, to the infamous phrase, that: “you can be with us, and you can be against us—at the same time.”

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22 Mazrui, “Pan-Africanism,” p. 5.
26 Ibid. This argument of Mazrui, specially the part dealing with history, was earlier articulated in a slightly different context at least as early as 1977 in relation to the old European attempt to portray Africa as a place devoid of history before the coming of Europe. This line of reasoning which Mazrui was trying to challenge is captured in Hugh Trevor-Roper’s assertion, quoted by Mazrui, that: “Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history…But at present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness…and darkness is not a subject of history.” See, Ali A. Mazrui, “The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa: Introduction,” Journal of Asian and African Studies, XIII-1-4, 1975, p. vi.
In the above keynote address, Mazrui first affirmed Ethiopia’s cultural achievement. And that elated some Ethiopianist historians in the audience. But Mazrui also articulated his notion of Ethiopia’s racial self-denial, which infuriated the same Ethiopianists. Mazrui’s keynote was thus followed with a series of attempts from Ethiopianists to challenge—and even discredit—Mazrui’s thesis on Ethiopia’s racial self-denial. In retrospect, it seemed, the critics were quite well-prepared for their multi-pronged assault particularly since Mazrui’s paper was distributed well in advance. That this was the case becomes clear from the nature and type of questions raised and from those minute factual details only mentioned in the paper. Various techniques were used to challenge Mazrui’s facts and interpretation from every conceivable angle.

As a seasoned debater, Mazrui also refused to budge even a little under the constant fire of his critics. With “empirical facts” and relevant historical details, Mazrui, indeed, began to fire back more forcefully. It was actually as if he had anticipated such a challenge and kept some of his most powerful arguments for the right moment. Realizing, apparently, that they began a battle which they could not possibly win, the critics had to shift their focus. They claimed because Mazrui was not proficient in Ethiopian languages, he could not speak authoritatively about such a contested issue as Ethiopia’s racial self-denial. Other critics pointed out that Mazrui’s observations were expressed in poetic phrases as if eloquence and profundity are natural enemies. The critics, apparently, have not realized that it was a long while ago that Mazrui became famous for being “incapable of writing a dull paragraph.”

As much as Mazrui would not seek to expunge inconvenient truth about Ethiopia’s pan-Africanist history, he does not also dwell on the problematic aspect of Ethiopia’s link to Africa. Not only does Mazrui portray Ethiopia’s contemporary Pan-Africanism in positive light, he even thinks it should play a greater regional role in Africa. He discusses this theme, among other works, in his The Bondage of Boundaries, in which he foresees a scenario of: “Ethiopia as an administering power on behalf of the United Nations, to help nurture the sovereignties of its small neighbors, Somalia and Djibouti being the most likely to need that kind of help in the decades to come.” Mazrui went on to say: “Ethiopia was once a Black imperialist power, annexing neighboring communities.” And then he concluded by asking two rhetorical questions: “Does the future hold a more benign, and even more humane, imperial role for Ethiopia? Will Ethiopia continue its destiny as Africa’s pioneering laboratory?”

What is remarkable here is that Mazrui carves a greater role for Ethiopia in East and North East Africa than for its giant neighbor, the Sudan, or even his own country of birth, Kenya. Had it not been for the favorable attitude with which he views Ethiopia, Mazrui would have simply dismissed the country as unstable and economically weak. But he was optimistic that Ethiopia could eventually overcome challenges of instability and underdevelopment.

Causing uproar in some circles, Mazrui went as far as arguing that Ethiopia, as one of the pivotal states of Africa, ought to re-colonize and pacify its more unstable neighbors. When Ethiopian forces made an incursion into Somalia in December 2006, some saw this as the benign re-colonization Mazrui had advocated. But it was clear that Mazrui had also explicitly warned Ethiopia, in November 2001 in an interview he gave to Ethiopian Reporter, against playing Pakistan in the Horn of Africa—a situation

28 Ibid.
which, according to other observers, was represented by Ethiopia’s intervention in Somalia.

V. Ali A. Mazrui as Ethiophile

We have touched upon above few controversial issues Ali Mazrui has raised over the years about Ethiopia. But does Mazrui harbor anti-Ethiopian sentiment? To put it slightly differently, is he an Ethiophobe, or is he an Ethiophile? The answer to this depends in part on how one defines Ethiopia. One careful definition separates biblical Ethiopia from historical Ethiopia, the homogenous Ethiopia from the heterogeneous Ethiopia which came into being a little more than a hundred years ago. Admittedly Ali Mazrui does not make the distinction between biblical/historical Ethiopia and “modern’ Ethiopia and he rarely highlights the contested dimension of the concept of Ethiopia—and this may have to do both with the demands of his historical approach as well as his pan-Africanist ideology.

Another definition of Ethiopia disaggregates the peoples of Ethiopia from its governments. One can loathe the government but show affection for its peoples, its cultures and its histories.

Ali Mazrui takes pride in Ethiopia’s symbolism as the origin of human species, its glorious past and its Pan-Africanist role. But he is also not uncritical admirer of Ethiopia, both modern and historical. As indicated above, one could love a country and respect its institutions, but sometimes the two are not inseparable, as pointed out above. On occasions, a situation could arise in which only a single choice had to be made. This seems to be exactly what happened to Ali Mazrui on the eve of the Ethiopian Revolution. The long quote below captures such a dilemma in his own words, and how he resolved it: “The last time I saw Emperor Haile Selassie was in Africa House in Addis Ababa. The meeting was that of the International Congress of Africanists (later renamed the International Congress of African Studies). The Congress had asked me to propose the vote of thanks to His Imperial majesty after his speech opening the Congress. Ethiopia in 1973 had a severe famine which was under publicized, seemingly because a famine of such magnitude was considered by the Royal Household to be an embarrassment to the empire. And yet, there we were in Addis Ababa from different countries of the world about to begin a congress on issues of development in Africa. Could we hold such a congress in a country with large-scale starvation without referring at all to those who were starving? Were we obliged to spare the dynastic empire embarrassment, in spite of the fact that Ethiopia as a nation-state had responsibilities to alleviate the suffering of the masses? Could we expect our Ethiopian colleagues to discuss the famine in the face of the apparent ban on publicity of the famine at the behest of the Ethiopian palace?

In that assignment to propose a vote of thanks to His Imperial majesty I felt an obligation to try to solve the conflict between courtesies of a dynastic empire on the one hand, and the obligations of a modern nation-state on the other. In my vote of thanks I therefore mentioned the unmentionable—the famine. I championed what was not to be championed—an open discussion of the famine at the congress as part of our deliberations. I argued the ultimate sin of all—that the congress itself should establish its own internal fund to raise at least a symbolic contribution from its own participants towards the alleviation of the suffering of the Ethiopian people.”

30 Mazrui, The Africans, pp. 269-270.
As a true friend, Mazrui was deeply involved in raising funds for the victims of Ethiopian famine of 1986. At about the same time he was also encountering problems of movement and censorship in Ethiopia during the filming of his most famous TV documentary, *The Africans*. Ethiopia’s military regime had wanted to make sure that scenes which would put it in a negative light wouldn’t be filmed.

The documentary devotes significant portion of different episodes to Ethiopia, and presents Africa—and Ethiopia—in a positive light, but without being one-sided or distorting. Mazrui’s artistic and intellectual intervention in the form of *The Africans* was particularly significant due to the fact that one did not come across such erudite African voices saying positive things about Africa—and primarily to a Western audience. The documentary was seen as disruptive of the prevailing dominant discourse about Africa in general so much so that some powerful individuals and organizations in the West tried to block its airing or limit its reach. However, Mazrui himself believed his documentary would help the West understand Africa more fully. In his own words: “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.”

The role of *The Africans* was significant in relations between Ali Mazrui and Ethiopia mainly because of what he says in it about Ethiopia. Around the beginning of episode 3, for example, Mazrui declares the following: “Ethiopian scholars were reading and writing before English was taught the Latin alphabet by the Romans.” In another episode, he tells his viewers: “It is one of the ironies of nature that Ethiopia, which is so prone to drought, should, at the same time, be the birthplace of one of the great rivers of the world...Ethiopia has contributed to Egypt’s survival through the waters of the Nile.” And then he relates, “It is said that the genius of Black civilization does not consist building high, it consists of building deep...in this part of Ethiopia [referring to Lalibela’s sunken churches in Northern Ethiopia], nature has built high, man has dug deep...these excavations, these constructions are a miracle in their own right, a grand design of both African values and universal significance.”

Again, the super impact of the documentary itself can be meaningfully appreciated only if one considers the incredible attention it attracted both from the electronic and print media in the United States and around the world.

*The Africans* set off sharp reactions from different political circles. A chorus of disapproval came from such people as Mrs. Lynne Cheney, the wife of the current Vice President of the US, Dick Cheney, but at the time Chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Among others, strong support for the documentary came from Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts who summed up his view about *The Africans* as follows: “It is a series that has sparked a great deal of discussion and controversy. While I cannot endorse all of the conclusions...its showing has provided the American people with an all-too-rare look at Africa from an African perspective.” Senator Kerry was, of course, a US presidential candidate in 2004 who narrowly lost to George W. Bush. Distinguished academics such as Edward Said also came out in support of *The Africans*. In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said devotes a
long passage to Ali Mazrui, whom Said respectfully refers to as “a first-rank academic authority.”

Edward Said’s laudatory paragraph about Ali Mazrui in part reads: “...for the first time in a history dominated by Western representations of Africa, an African was representing himself and Africa before a Western audience, precisely that audience whose society for several hundred years had pillaged, colonized, enslaved Africa...”

Nearly twenty years after *The Africans*, another documentary appeared in the United States, with the title of *Wonders of the African World*. It was created and narrated by the African-American Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. After the documentary was aired, a debate ensued. And Ali Mazrui was at the center of it again. One of the issues of disagreement between Mazrui and Gates related to how Ethiopia was portrayed in the *Wonders of the African World*. Mazrui expressed his displeasure: “I was so afraid that Gates’s fourth program would be insulting to Ethiopia that I was relieved that it was merely disrespectful. I wished he was more politely dressed when he was granted an audience to a major religious leader. I wished he kept his sarcasm about the authenticity of the Covenant in check. I wished he did not make as many snide remarks which trivialized other people’s values. I wished viewers were not kept informed on camera as to how many car breakdowns he had had.”

The exchanges about *Wonders of the African World* also involved renowned personalities including the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and other academics from the United States even though their debates were not about Ethiopia. The point here is not who had a point and who didn’t have, but it is that the sensitivity Mazrui shows to Ethiopia’s portrayal is unmistakable and this in itself is a reflection of his deeper respect for the country.

It was only fitting and significant that Ethiopia’s pioneering institution of higher education and my own Alma Mater, Addis Ababa University (formerly known as Haile Selassie I University) should bestow upon Ali Mazrui a Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa in 2004, in the presence of the Ethiopian Head of State, President Girma Wolde Giorgis, for his “seminal contributions to the study of Africa and [his] valiant struggles as citizen to promote Pan-African ideals.”

But the bestowal of such an honor could have also been easily justified in consideration of Ali Mazrui’s contribution to Ethiopian studies. For sure Mazrui’s contribution to African studies dwarfs the attention he was able to give to Ethiopia. And yet the attention he gave to Ethiopia dwarfs that of other African intellectuals. He can also easily compete with many Ethiopianists if not by volume of his writings on

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Ethiopia but definitely by level of impact he has had in projecting positive image of Ethiopia world-wide. In any case it is perhaps time for Ethiopia to create a class of national awards for eminent foreign personalities who have shown friendship and solidarity with Ethiopia and/or contributed to Ethiopian studies. This was the kind of honor, for instance, which was bestowed upon Ali Mazrui by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa in April 2007. The South Africans call it the Grand Companion of Oliver Tambo Award. Of course, Ethiopia is not South Africa. But given that there are many foreign nationals who, for various reasons, have chosen to devote their time and resources to the study of Ethiopia, the creation of such an award would be only appropriate.

VI. Conclusion

There is a growing interest, it seems, among scholars of Ethiopian studies not only to study Ethiopia from a variety of perspectives but also to study how others studied the country. The trend needs to continue and broaden further. One of the merits of such approach is that it enables the granting of due recognition to outstanding contributions to Ethiopian studies. It also could entice and stimulate others to engage in more active research about Ethiopia.

Only a small portion of Ali Mazrui’s corpus deals with Ethiopia. And yet he is arguably the only African intellectual outside Ethiopia to seriously engage the country in the last quarter of the 20th century. The level of impact his scholarly works about Ethiopia have had and continue to have on a wide range of audience and readership greatly offsets the limited attention he had to give to Ethiopia. There are also numerous concepts in the extensive works of Ali Mazrui which have greater utility for a better understanding of politics and cultural forces in Ethiopia.