

The Club of Scholars

Macharia Munene

United States International University-Africa

Email:machariamunene15@gmail.com

In congratulating PhD graduates, Ohio University President Charles Ping used to say, “Welcome to the Club of Scholars”. It is an exclusive club for interacting with intellectual ‘elders’ in various club houses called universities. Not all those admitted, however, remain active members.

Club houses and ‘elders’ in Kenya in the 1980s were limited. ‘Elders’ at the Department of History in the Nairobi University included Gideon Were, Godfrey Muriuki, Idha Salim, Karim Jan Mohamed, Yusuf Nzibo, Vincent Simiyu, and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo. These, and other, ‘elders’ tended to think of new and youngish lecturers as what Atieno Odhiambo called academic ‘house boys’. Atieno had big curiosity, wondered what I was intellectually up to, shared thoughts and writings, and gave good advice on handling Africanists.

Africanists are non-African experts on Africa mostly in the Conceptual West. Basil Davidson and Roland Oliver pioneered studying Africa after World War II. In a 1985 conference in Harare on the Transfer of Power in Africa, Davidson was the main attraction. I asked him why he got involved in Africa. He was disillusioned with Labour Party’s double speak on imperialism, he replied, and so he decided to expose imperial inconsistencies through research on Africa. While Davidson was a British journalist and anti-imperialistic activist; Oliver was an academic who the University of London hired in 1948 to teach ‘tribal history of Africa’.

Oliver trained history elders Bethwell Ogot, Muriuki, and Suzanne Miers in London and Miers taught me at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio. Oliver used to visit Athens to see his former student, Miers, before she graduated into being ‘Oliver’. She had grits, travelling from Cape to Cairo, and then lecturing on ‘how not to cross the Sahara’. Tom Wolf, Kenya’s political poll-star, was one of her protégés. Besides giving advice on the reason for writing provocative conference abstracts,

she had a story on a conference confrontation between Walter Rodney and Philip Curtin, the author of *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* which claimed that slave dealers transported less than 10 million slaves to the Western Hemisphere from Africa.

Rodney was rather smallish in body but very big and fast in mind and could ground giants. In the confrontation with 'retooled' Curtin, Rodney asserted that Curtin's census on slave trade was racist scholarship. Curtin's figures, he told graduate students at Ohio, were wrong but even if they were correct, their effect was intellectual lessening of the crime of slave trade which amounted to racism. He wrote *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, he explained, because he was tired of pointing to students at Dar es Salaam that passages in various textbooks on Africa were 'not so' and so he wrote a book that was 'so'. He previously had intellectually felled Ali Mazrui in a debate at Makerere University that student Anyang Nyong'o had arranged.

The debate in which Rodney felled Mazrui took place in May 1970 and it became legendary because of the stature that Mazrui had built for himself as the intellectual defender of Western interests in Africa. He believed that intellectuals were people excited by ideas and loved using English as weapon of intellectual warfare. He measured himself with such intellectual giants of the 1960s as Isaiah Berlin at Oxford. He in the process acquired what Tanzania's Julius Nyerere, when they first met, told him was "Sifa tu". Rodney was his counterpart at Dar es Salaam, then emerging as the intellectual hub of socialistic ideology in Africa. When Mazrui repeated the Oxford claim that colonialism had two hands, positive and negative, and that on balance the positive prevailed, Rodney countered that colonialism had only one hand and it was all destructive and negative to Africa. It was intellectually devastating to Mazrui, being portrayed as a neo-colonial lackey of the West.

Before losing to Rodney, Mazrui had mischievously tried to provoke intellectual reactions from the political giants of the day, with mixed successes. When Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown in 1966, Mazrui called deposed Nkrumah a 'Leninist Czar', neither of them being complimentary in the Conceptual West. He then tried to get Nkrumah to react but Nkrumah fumed quietly about

Mazrui's "nonsense" and refused to take the bait. He, however, dismissed Mazrui as "one of those black neocolonialist intellectuals." Mazrui, however, had better success in eliciting reaction when he called 'Mwalimu' Nyerere an 'intellectual cannibal'. Nyerere respected Mazrui and was provoked enough to write and deny that he was an intellectual cannibal.

Mazrui acquired fame for generating ideas or explaining complex issues. Non-alignment, he argued, started with Jawaharlal Nehru's diplomacy which invented the doctrine of non-alignment and influenced Egypt, Ghana, and the Afro-Asian Movement. India accused the big powers of exercising "nuclear apartheid", double standards, and hypocrisy. India was one of the Third World countries with "a project and strategy" for asserting itself. Like India, Mazrui was skeptical of big country monopoly of nuclear power and suggested that the Third World should have its own capacity.

Mazrui could also be emotional especially when attacked. He singled out two Nigerians, Wole Soyinka and Bioden Jayefo who, along with Kenya's William Ochieng, as belonging to what he termed "an exclusive club of three racial purists among African intellectuals." He ended up challenging Ochieng to a public debate but Ochieng, scared of Mazrui's verbal combat skills declined a public encounter because Ochieng' feared Mazrui's English prowess. In contrast, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, another user of English in verbal warfare, gladly engaged Mazrui in vicious intellectual blood-letting.

They quarreled over Mazrui's PBS television series labeled "The Africans: A Triple Heritage" which disappointed sponsors because he hit the European slave dealers and appeared soft on the Arab slave dealers. He appeared to have shifted intellectual camp to that of Eric Williams and Walter Rodney that slave trade and slavery under developed Africa. Slavery and slave trade, he asserted in one episode, industrialized Europe while the Africans received guns. The reason for Mazrui's soft peddling Arab slave trade and atrocities on Africa, claimed Soyinka, was probably because Mazrui was of Arabic

descent. Thereafter, Mazrui wrote, he and Soyinka “brutalized each other in the pages of the newly revived *Transition* magazine.” The Mazrui series and the subsequent Mazrui-Soyinka self-brutalization became the global talk that transformed Mazrui’s image from a neocolonial intellectual proxy to a “radical”. It did not look good for the two African intellectual “elders” who, on realizing that they were misbehaving in front of their ‘juniors’, stopped their unbecoming feud.

‘Elder’ Mazrui also behaved like Nkrumah, in the 1960s, avoiding direct engagement with a critic. I had interacted with him a few times and had invited him to USIU where he gave a good Mazrui lecture. He and I were seemingly on opposite sides in the 2007 presidential election. I campaigned for Mwai Kibaki’s winning side whose narrow victory aroused deep hostility in the Conceptual West which called for ‘power sharing’ in Kenya. When Mazrui suggested that Kenya be kicked out of the Commonwealth, I wrote the ‘Tragedy of Ali Mazrui’ questioning his stand and recalling what Nkrumah had said about him. Like Nkrumah before, Mazrui fumed silently, and wrote to his friend, former Tourism PS Bill Mayaka, wondering what I was doing in an American university in the middle of Africa. He then mused, “Munene’s article about me has generated a lot of debate on the internet. In that debate so far I have more fans than does Professor Munene!!” A solid member of the ‘Club of Scholars’, Mazrui kept records of his activities and was conscious of his intellectual place close to Ibn Khaldun. Although I claim membership in the Club of Scholars, I am nowhere near either Khaldun or Mazrui as far as ‘fans’ are concerned. Mazrui still has more ‘fans’ than I can ever do.

