

The Pan-African & aesthetics in the twenty-first century

ALI MAZRUI was in Ghana in the first week of November 1996 to deliver the First Pan-African Writers Association (PAWA) Annual Lectures. Originally recorded for the Ghana Television programme, *African Heritage Series*, directed by Doris Kuwornu, this interview with Mazrui by Kofi Anyidoho dwells on the **substance** of the well extended PAWA lectures spanning many days. Mazrui is currently **Albert Schwitzer Professor** in the Humanities at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton and director of its Institute of Global Cultural Studies. He is also **Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large**, University of Jos, Nigeria?

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Interview by
Kofi Anyidoho

GR: We have followed your lectures over the past couple of days. Most of our viewers may not have been there. Could you, perhaps, begin by offering some of the essential arguments presented in your two-part lectures?

AM: Well, there is a side of Kwame Nkrumah that's probably being underplayed, and that is Kwame Nkrumah as a cultural theoretician. So some work needs to be done more extensively on that. But as my own personal guru, his most important influence arose out of his

concept of philosophical consciencism about the convergence of three civilizations on our continent; the convergence of our own indigenous civilization, the coming of Islam, and the impact of the West. And his notion that it is possible in fact to synthesize, that this may not just be an accidental convergence, that it could be, as a matter of policy, regarded as an inheritance worthy of synthesis. And out of that idea I developed my own concept of Africa's triple heritage which is really just a reformulation of his philosophical consciencism. And I took it into the television waves, if

you like, with my television series 'The Africans: A Triple Heritage' and I published a book under the same title to push the issues further. So this particular set of lectures, partly to mark the period 1966 to 1996 (sort of the African condition since Nkrumah's fall) partly addressed themselves to that particular dimension of Nkrumah - Nkrumah as a cultural theoretician, as someone who influenced my own perspectives on the African condition.

GR: Well, that is interesting. Perhaps those who are familiar with your work might be surprised that you have chosen to celebrate Nkrumah in these lectures. In particular, we could recall your denunciation of Nkrumah in a very famous article published in February 1996, in *Transition*, under the title 'Nkrumah, the Leninist Czar.' Now, how do you explain this new perspective on Nkrumah's life and career?

AM: Yes, in my second lecture here, in fact, I returned to a central theme of my earlier article which was that Nkrumah was a great Afri-

can but not a great Ghanaian. And in my second lecture for the Pan-African Writers' Association I did remind the audience that I thought Nkrumah was a great African because he reminded us about what Africa needed to do to recover its dignity and its independence; he reminded us about the interdependence of African freedom and the extent to which our prosperity required joint efforts. He postulated institutions of Pan-Africanism, some of which we probably have to return to time and time again until they are realised. So he created a paradigm of Africa as one, which is probably enduring and very important and that's why he's so admired. So that's Nkrumah the Pan-African and, in general, that's Nkrumah the great African. Why is he not a great Ghanaian? Because I believe he left Ghana poorer than he found it. At the time of independence, Ghana was a relatively rich country as compared with other African countries, her per capita income was favourably comparable to what today are 'tigers' in Asia, like South Korea. And by the time he left he started the rot of economic decomposition in Ghana. Secondly, Nkrumah started the process also of major flaws; this is a country which could set the model for the rest of Africa because it was the first Black African country to win independence. So what does it do? - it begins to detain political opponents without trial, it sets up a one-party state and provides justification for that.

Widely imitated right, left and centre including in, of course, my own country Kenya which had a one-party state under Kenyatta de facto and Moi it became by law. So Nkrumah set the grand precedent for one-party states and the idea of the judiciary as just an extension of the executive, Nkrumah set the precedent with the dismissal of the Chief Justice because he disagreed with the ruling of the judiciary. So, you know, the eyes of the world were upon him, he was governing Ghana, which was regarded as the first post-colonial state (south of the Sahara, at any rate). His ideas about the continent were superb and very often prophetic, his primary constituency was this country called Ghana and in his primary constituency, he was not a great Ghanaian.

GR: Well, I'm sure that there will be disagreement on that but essentially then, you celebrate Nkrumah as a cultural hero, more or less, but maintain your reservations about him as a statesman. But the problem is the complex context of what you yourself have called 'the African condition.' Can we really draw a line between the statesman and the cultural hero?

AM: I think your formulation that I celebrate him as a cultural theoretician is probably incorrect as a rendering of where I stand, because his role about Africa definitely includes statesman so he was a great statesman, and he was the first major African figure to claim the right to

have a say in disputes (that were not?) not directly connected with Africa. All the time the rest of the world claims the right to have a say in our disputes but we seldom demand to have a say when other people are quarrelling. But Nkrumah...China and India are quarrelling and Nkrumah tells off Harold Macmillan for sending arms to one of them, you see? So he claims the right to have a say in quarrels elsewhere and of course that commitment to try and have a say over the American war in Vietnam which took him to China and then to his overthrow. So I admire that...that part of the statesman I admire. It's Nkrumah's rule over Ghana that I don't admire. So Nkrumah as international statesman, I have no problem with that. And then Nkrumah as cultural hero, as a cultural theoretician, had a more direct impact on me, on my thinking and how I view Africa; my paradigm of the African condition has felt the impact of some of his ideas.

GR: I'm sure that you may be right in a certain sense by claiming that he left Ghana poorer, that is if you define the question of the nation's wealth in terms of per capita income and some of the other indices that are often used by social scientists. But the real fact of the matter is that I as a person sitting before you now can understand why Ghana became poorer. My parents had no money to send me to school and some of the wealth disappeared into providing people like me, and many

others across this country, free education. And the fact also remains that it has taken us a long time to revive some of the infrastructure which was put in place so maybe we need to put some of these in perspective.

AM: Yes, and of course I just said he started the rot but obviously the rot did not get worse under his watch; it got much worse afterwards so I said he was cast by history to have approximately a decade in power. It is a critical decade. It's arguable that it could have been a decade in the direction of changes which could have led to prosperity for Ghana. But he didn't grasp that decade creatively is my point.

GR: In delivering the 1996 Nkrumah-DuBois-Padmore Lectures very recently here in Ghana, Ayi Kwei Armah argued that only a comprehensive cultural movement can rescue global Africa from its current condition of fragmentation and oppression. In some ways, at least by implication, your own presentations seem to be pointing somewhat in the same direction. Except that we have this problem that if there is any one area which contemporary African society is least willing to make any major investment in, it is the area of culture. How do we make a start?

AM: Yes, that really calls for lamentation. It is true that there is a tendency to grossly underestimate the relevance of culture for our development and for our move



'A shape of Things to Come' George Rodger, Kordofan, Southern Sudan

forward. And in some respects I'm a bit of a linguistic determinant (in that) I think there are areas of performance which will elude us if we don't pay some attention to the problem of indigenous

languages and making them capable of developmental, technological, scientific and artistic leaps. And I remain very convinced that no country ever becomes a first-rate technological power if its lan-

guage of science and technology is totally derivative, if it does its science entirely in a foreign language, that you really have to move in the direction of 'scientificating' the language of the people to

some extent, before you can become sufficiently empowered to make the grand leaps of invention and performance and social creativity. And none of our governments are especially interested in language reform, language writing, except rhetorically. So if you start from a quasi-linguistic determinist position that cultural revolution must begin with considerable attention to the problem of language, and then move towards how to make those languages receptive in the schools, in the media, and how that can be used to great advantage in promoting art, culture, science and technology, then you might have a major transformation in science as well as in the arts. But I agree with you entirely that there is no sign at the moment of much of a commitment in that direction and not much of an interest in it. And the other thing is, where there is an interest in culture, it's interest in the foreign culture. I am a product of that, as you know; I grew up in a colonial setting so I entered adulthood while Kenya was still under colonial rule and I went to a school which was still patterned after colonial education systems and then I went to England.... Well, you see, it is unfortunately one of the facts of life that we take interest in cultures, disproportionately in a foreign culture, in the culture of our former imperial powers. So it isn't that there is a total cultural void, it's just that there's a kind of cultural displacement and it started, to some extent, with my generation and the gen-

eration immediately before me, because we were steeped in colonial institutions and we became, to some extent, cultural imitators of the West. And those of us who, in addition, were educated in the West became almost the worst cases of that cultural displacement, because there is a process of substantial Africanization which takes place. So the question is, can we engage in cultural re-Africanization of our educational institutions, of our methods of formulating the aspirations of our young people, and of how we use our media. Is there an agenda of Africanization that is achievable at the cultural level and I would like to believe there is and we could attempt to do it.

GR: Now, your first point anticipates my next question, that is the question of language and of course, rightly so, you do hold our governments responsible for lack of initiative on this. But it is important for us to keep in mind that our writers who use language as their primary tool, many of them seem to be quite unconvinced about this. You recall our roundtable when at least two or three of our major writers expressed very deep reservations about the need for African languages as a vehicle of expression. So if the people who are to lead this cultural revolution themselves, so far, remain so unconvinced, can we legitimately keep blaming our governments for lack of action in this direction?

AM: That's a point well-

taken because many of us are supposed to be cultural vanguards and some of us, because of the cultural displacement I mentioned, have invested a lot in the imperial languages - you and I have spent a lot of time using the English language for our work, etc. Some of us, in spite of investing such a lot of time in the imperial languages, can still step back and say, 'OK, maybe I personally am a lost cause but I would like the Africa of tomorrow to have a chance of, at least, partial re-Africanization' and that the linguistic roots towards re-Africanization is indispensable. So I count myself out although I am myself part of that cultural displacement. On the other hand, there are many other writers who can't take a step back, having invested years into perfecting their command of the imperial language. That's a major leap into the unknown, a kind of sacrifice, for all that they have done, and they have become very possessive of the imperial instrument that they have acquired, the linguistic instruments. So it's true, there's a lot of work to be done to convince not just our governments, but our writers that we're not saying that people should no longer write in English and French and Portuguese, we're simply saying that, in addition, we should promote indigenous languages much more than has been the case before.

GR: OK, thank you for that. If we can change the direction a little bit... You have

a well-earned reputation for provoking controversy and I am aware that one of the current positions that you take on the fragmented political situation of Africa is perhaps a call for what some might describe as an internal colonialisation programme, a programme in which larger African countries could swallow up the smaller ones and make them much more viable entities. Could you please speak briefly on this for us?

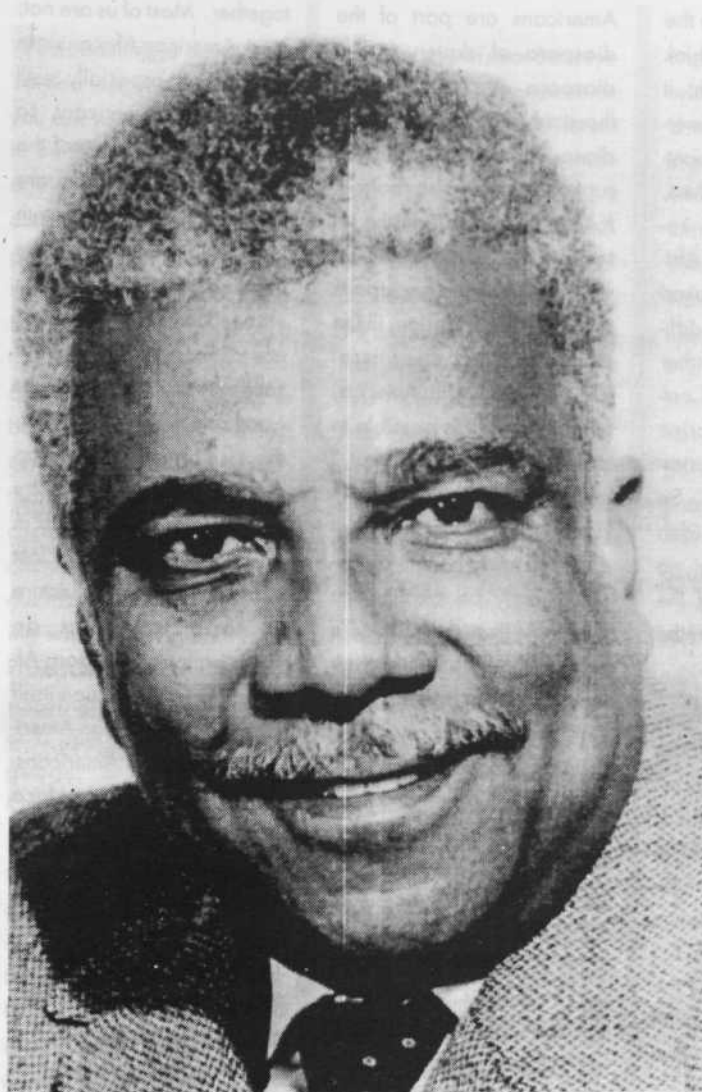
AM: Yes. Well, the central idea really is not just to swallow up any smaller country but a country that is really collapsing so it's really a measure to be evoked in cases of desperation. So that when the state system is breaking down in Liberia or Burundi or Rwanda or Somalia, etc., we should work out a kind of Pan-African trusteeship system which will enable stronger countries to be entrusted with weaker ones and restore them to their feet. But we should have a system of accountability to Africa for that role. So it will be comparable to the old system of trusteeship of the United Nations which put, let's say, Great Britain in charge of, let's say, Tanganyika but it still had to be accountable to the United Nations as a trusteeship power over Tanganyika. But in this case, what I was recommending is that they should be accountable to a more strengthened Organisation of African Unity and submit reports under that trusteeship system. And secondly, the idea is we can't just keep on waiting for the French to do it,

which is happening right now, the French are taking the initiative and trying to bully their Western compatriots to do something in Zaire and we can't wait to see what the President of the United States will do, which has tended to be our mentality: 'Who's going to save us?' and looking to Paris or to Washington or less frequently to London (the British are less likely to come to the rescue, but the French and the Americans might do so, the British may contribute money to such an effort). So all I'm saying is that we must get out of this colossal dependency, especially in situations of extreme political collapse. Devise institutions of Pan-African trusteeship system — which I call 'self-colonialisation' — and do it properly. And I have distinctions within it: there's benevolent inter-African colonialisation, when it is done purely to help the weaker country and it is possible to find precedent. I think, for example, Tanzania's invasion of Uganda in 1979 and the ousting of Idi Amin can be regarded as benevolent intervention, and the temporary establishment of a military occupation in Uganda, benevolent intervention, primarily helped Uganda rather than Tanzania. Then there's Tanzania's absorption of Zanzibar to form the United Republic of Tanzania. Nobody consulted the people of Zanzibar, there was no plebiscite, or referendum or elections to find out whether they wanted to lose their sovereignty and their seats in the United Na-

tions or their flag...this was a decision made between the dictator and Julius Nyerere. So there's clearly a case of inter-African colonialisation but I would regard it as benign. Benign is different from benevolent; benevolent is when the weaker country is absolutely the net beneficiary, benign is when the balance is more or less even between the two and in this case the balance was even because although Zanzibar was forcibly married to Tanzania, the terms of the marriage were very generous and so that worked out well. And the third one is malignant colonialisation and this would be Emperor Haile Selassie absorbing Eritrea at the beginning of the 1960's. That was definitely malignant and it's arguable that any attempt by Morocco to swallow up Western Sahara without having a referendum or an election will be malignant. So I'm only adding, in addition, an issue of accountability between a Pan-African body in order to have it more beneficial.

GR: It seems to me though that that could become very complicated in the case of bigger states: Let's assume that Nigeria was collapsing. Who can absorb Nigeria?

AM: That's very true. Or even more immediate is Zaire because Zaire may be collapsing. Who can do that? There may be occasions when it can't be done on an inter-African basis, but it has to be done at the United Nations level. So I haven't ruled out



Ali A. Mazrui

the United Nations, I just regard it as excessively controlled by the United States, a country which pays dues to the world body but claims disproportionate power in running the organisation. So I think one day the United Nations will become a more even-handed body than it is now but I think it is worth preserving for weaker countries in the world. And there will be occasions as I said, like the present one in Zaire, everyone is afraid the present situation could lead

to the disintegration of Zaire, so if it does, who is to stop it? So it's unlikely to be other African countries; it has to be what was attempted in 1960-61 when the Congo was on the verge of disintegration and that took United Nations action.

GR: Maybe in this connection, it is interesting to note that you have, in your lectures, repeated Nkrumah's call for an African high-command. As he described it, you describe it as a multi-national African

military force. Could we say then that the need for such a force is even more urgent now than it was when Nkrumah first proposed it? Then how do we go about setting it up? Could ECOMOG perhaps be a starting point?

AM: Yes...I think, first of all, it's important to say that Nkrumah's idea was very good except the purposes he had in mind are very different perhaps from the issues at stake today, because he still regarded the ultimate enemy as an enemy from without. So he was still influenced by preserving Africa's independence.

Whereas now really we're saving each other from each other. So we need a Pan-African emergency force in situations of political collapse within Africa, not against Portuguese colonialism or apartheid or the return of the colonial rulers but Hutu, Tutsi or whatever is the situation at stake. So the purpose of the force has qualitatively changed from what Nkrumah had in mind. Secondly, it's a force that the United States now recommends that Africa should create, but the United States wants to put it under UN control and the UN is

itself in turn controlled by the United States. Well, I think that's not good enough; it should be a Pan-African emergency force that is accountable to Africans themselves, preferably through a reformed Organisation of African Unity and should be used in situations of extreme difficulty and desperation, either where there is political collapse or there is a major crisis of saving refugees from starvation and disease, etc. So the germ of the Nkrumah idea is there and we should go with it but the target of the problem has changed in the last thirty years.

GR: So far we have been concentrating on Africa, that is continental Africa, but thinking about global Africa, what would you say are some of the prospects for a new agenda for Pan-Africanism in the twenty-first century? I'm thinking, for instance, of the role of people like yourself who are now part of what you yourself have described as the diaspora of colonialism. And then of course there is the older diaspora out of slavery. How do we make that ultimate reconnection?

AM: Yes, the diaspora of colonialism is an important part of the chain connecting Africa with the diaspora of slavery, which is the older one and for viewers who are not familiar with what I'm referring to, the diaspora of slavery or enslavement is familiar enough - (it's) those of African ancestry who are in the diaspora because of the slave trade. So most African-

Americans are part of the diaspora of slavery. The diaspora of colonialism - those of us who are in the diaspora because of the disruptions and the disturbances following colonialism, the aftermath of colonialism. And we're distributed in many parts of the world, in Europe, in the Americas and elsewhere. Now within North America, for example, it is possible to distinguish between what I call American-Africans and African-Americans. The American-Africans who will be approximately people like me who now live there, they're basically Africans but their location has changed. They still have a language other than US English, they have relatives at home and continue to communicate with them, so they are more African than they are American. So the term 'American' is the adjective but the noun is 'African.' And then you have African-Americans and here, of course, the noun is American and that's the substance. They are much more Americanised and most of them are of the diaspora of enslavement. And in general, the American-Africans, that is people like me, do become the connecting chain in the diaspora, because we are still very much part of Africa, we still speak the language, relate to the continent, have relatives in the continent and can therefore provide the basis. Are we doing the job, though? Are we serving as the connection with the diaspora of enslavement? That's a different question al-

together. Most of us are not; most American-Africans are not relating especially well with African-Americans so most people who are of the diaspora of colonialism are not interacting enough with people who are part of the diaspora of enslavement. So we need to work on that if we are to complete the chain of solidarity so that it makes good sense. At the moment, there isn't enough interaction even in the Americas. I try my best to be involved but I'm part of a minority. (So) last month I was giving a lecture to raise funds for an organisation called Trans-Africa. That organisation itself is primarily of African-Americans but also of Americans-African interested in Africa and wanting to lobby US policy in favour of Africa. So they had a luncheon to raise funds and they asked me to be the keynote speaker for that occasion which I gladly did. And I've participated in their activities before and so they've called on me whenever they have wanted to. And there are a few of us like that but most members of the diaspora of colonialism interact with each other, with fellow Africans, but not with African-Americans to any great extent and I think that's not good enough.

GR: Well, thank you very much for that observation. I'm afraid we will have to be winding this down but not until we return to the writers. Yesterday was the Fourth International African Writer's Day declared by the OAU and we would wonder now

what you can envisage as a new role for the writer in the twenty-first century. I have at the back of my mind your early work, 'The Trial of Christopher Okigbo,' in which you put an African poet on trial for daring to get himself involved in military combat, the Civil War of Nigeria, and dying as a result of that. And the question was did the artist, as an artist, have the right to squander his gifts on the battlefield of tribal warfare, as you describe(d) it. Could there be new roles that you envisage for the writer in the twenty-first century, the African writer specifically?

AM: Yes, it's true that I did pose the problem that all life is sacred but some lives are more sacred than others. If you have particularly gifted people like Christopher Okigbo, did he have the right to risk the extinction of his genius in pursuit of a political goal? So that's one of the dilemmas I posed in the novel. So his life was more sacred than average and maybe he didn't have the right to go fighting for Biafra and getting killed. How dare he get himself killed? But in fact I will return also to this theme of language and writers, because while I do not anticipate any major shift in the early part of the century, away from the high visibility of people using European languages, I do expect greater emergence of people writing in indigenous languages. And, as you know, I have lamented that the Nobel Prize for Literature had (had) to be given to a person writing in

English, Wole Soyinka. I don't begrudge him getting it but it's so rare in any other part of the world for anybody to get a Nobel Prize for writing in a language other than their own.

Yes, we have to return, even when we're discussing writers, to the original issue we discussed earlier about language because in the twenty-first century one of the issues that are bound to arise is whether the bulk of the literature will continue to be in European languages produced south of the Sahara. I suspect there will be greater emphasis in the decades to come on literary figures actually writing in indigenous languages and, perhaps, greater recognition of that particular type of genius in the years ahead. But as of now, one of the points of lamentation about the Nobel Prize for Literature which went to Wole Soyinka was that it was given to someone, an African, who was, of necessity, writing in a European language. So his output, his creativity was in the language originally of his oppression. Now normally, Nobel Laureates in literature win the prize in the language of their culture, where they come from. So when Tagore won it in 1913 in British India, he won it for literature written mainly in Bengali and even in the three prizes we have won in Africa since 1986, Naguib Mahfouz won it in literature written in Arabic, Nadine Gordimer won it in literature written in her native language, in English, and then you have

Wole, nothing to do with the Yoruba language. And then you ask yourself, is this going to be the case time and time again, that whenever we are considered at all, as Black people, for the Nobel Prize in literature, it will be for literature written in a language other than that emanating from African culture? Now I'd like to believe that this is the last century when that is inevitable, that maybe in the twenty-first century, we'll begin to have a chance where those people out there in Sweden discussing who is to win the Nobel Prize one day will look at somebody writing in Hausa, or a poet in the Somali language, or a novelist in Kiswahili and say, 'Hey (Eh), this one has really captured the human condition properly' and then award it the way others have been awarded the Nobel Prize, even if *their* language is relatively limited in distribution in the world. At the moment it's not happened yet, and it's not likely to happen for another decade, but I think it will happen one day in the twenty-first century.

GR: I'm tempted to extend the call for this linguistic independence for our cultural production, I'm tempted to project it into the domain of politics, economics and other things. So when are we going to come up with political systems, economic systems that have their roots in our own soil?

AM: I don't disagree with that extension of the call really, that the indigenization

of political and economic systems and the domestication (which is a slightly different concept), that even if the institution is foreign, making it more relevant to African culture and African historical continuities. So sometimes we actually get an African indigenous institution itself - that's indigenization - and sometimes we domesticate what was originally not African, like making a university more relevant to African needs, (as) African universities (are) alien to African cultures but they can be made to serve African needs if they're properly domesticated. So those twin strategies of indigenization and domestication will be needed.

GR: Well, I don't know if this is a point of correction or just a note: The University as an institution of learning may, in fact, not be so foreign to African society; people remind us of the existence of what you might call ancient institutions, almost like Universities, perhaps long before these came up in Europe.

AM: The principle is not, but there's no doubt that the Universities, as they exist today, did not grow out of ancient models, out of academies in Timbuctoo, they really grew out of colonial institutions that were organised on the basis of experience in Europe, you see, and then were bequeathed to us complete, very often, with affiliation to European Universities; as you know, Legon and

Makerere were all linked up with universities in London for a while before they became separate Universities. So while the tradition of academies is not alien to Africa, these particular Universities we have did not grow out of that tradition, they grew out of a separate European tradition and not all Universities have tried to even find out about the older African tradition to see what we could learn from that one, we just continue to be heavily dependent on the European one.

GR