

A PANEGYRIC ON ALI MUZRUI- REVISITING GENERAL HISTORY OF AFRICA SINCE 1935

Written by Atul Alexander

Junior Research Fellow, The Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University

*Volume. 8 on the General history of Africa since 1935*¹ edited by Ali A.Muzrui² is one of its kind dealing with African history post Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia,³ the author hailing from Mombasa, Kenya with European education has played a massive role in the field of non-doctrinal research. The volume published courtesy the International scientific committee of United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (hereinafter referred to as 'UNESCO')⁴ took four decades to be completed. The preface by director-General of UNESCO Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow⁵ is a startling revelation on the underlying myth and prejudice surrounding African history. The earlier works on African societies done by the likes of Leo Forbenius,⁶ Maurice Delafosse⁷ lacked scientific study of the society at large. The volume underscores the rich and diverse African oral tradition trumping the European yardstick of

¹ ALI A. MAZRUI was born in Mombasa, Kenya, on February 24, 1933. He is now Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, State University of New York. He is also Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large at the University of Jos in Nigeria. He is Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies at Cornell University. Dr. Mazrui has also been appointed Chancellor of the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology in Kenya – an appointment made by Kenya's Head of State. Mazrui was Ibn Khaldun Professor-at-Large, Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences, Leesburg, Virginia (1997-2000).

² Italo-Ethiopian War, (1935–36), an armed conflict that resulted in Ethiopia's subjection to Italian rule. Often seen as one of the episodes that prepared the way for World War II, the war demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations when League decisions were not supported by the great powers.

³<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route/the-international-scientific-committee/>.

⁴http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5356&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

⁵ Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, a man who was to become the sixth director general of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), had humble beginnings. Born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1921, M'Bow grew up in a small town where he learned traditional farming and animal tending skills. M'Bow was the first Black African to head a United Nations support organization. He won unanimous reelection to a second term of seven years in September of 1980.

⁶ Leo Viktor Frobenius was a German ethnologist his main idea was that cultures grow and decline, much as all organic life does, noting three phases in the life of a culture. He also recognized that African culture was as significant in human history as that of other continents, a view not commonly held in his time.

⁷ Delafosse is known for his contributions to West African history and African languages. He began his study of Arabic in 1890 at the École des langues orientales with the renowned orientalist, Octave Houdas.

mode of production, social relation and political institution. The Sahara was often presented as an impenetrable space preventing any intermingling of ethnic groups and peoples or any exchange of goods, beliefs, customs and ideas between the societies that had grown up on either side of the desert. Another roadblock that laid in the study of African history is the deep-rooted phenomenon of slave trade, colonization, racial stereotype, economic and psychological enslavement, which highlighted the marred history in the real sense. The first stage, from 1965 to 1969, was devoted to gathering documentation and planning the work. The collection of unpublished manuscripts in Arabic and Ajami. The second stage, which lasted from 1969 to 1971, was devoted to shaping the History and linking its different parts. The third stage has involved actual drafting and publication. This began with the appointment of the 39-member International Scientific Committee, two-thirds African and one-third non-African, which assumes intellectual responsibility for the History.

The method of study adopted by the author is inter-disciplinary understanding, the first among the study include archeology, history and cultural identity.⁸ The volume according to the Editor Ali Muzrui⁹ is split into cultural, economic and political domain. The economic side is more concerned with the nation-building process in search of new international economic order. The volume is titled Africa since 1935 because 1935 triggered was the exact point of time where Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. The politics of liberation is inextricably connected with the politics of Africa. Even Ngugi wa Thiong'o's populist play *Ngahiika Ndenda*¹⁰ ('I will marry when I want to') was arguably a play of liberation rather than development –In literature the preoccupation with Shakespeare was evident. Neyere's translation of merchant of Venice is a case in point. The assassination and the following coup were quite palpable in the African context. Fifty percent regicide rate six out three head of the states were assassinated. President (King) Mutesa¹¹ in 1966. Binaisa's¹² succession to Lule¹³ in 1979 is another Ugandan coup with

⁸ Vol.8 General History of Africa since 1935, Pg 1, Para 1, as opined by Ali Muzrui.

⁹ Supra, footnote no. 1.

¹⁰ The Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Nigerian-Biafran War, was a three-year, bloody conflict with a death toll numbering more than one million people. Having commenced seven years after Nigeria gained independence from Britain, the war began with the secession of the southeastern region of the nation on May 30, 1967, when it declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra. The ensuing battles and well-publicized human suffering prompted international outrage and intervention.

¹¹ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/african-history-biographies/king-buganda-mutesa-i>.

¹² Ibid footnote no.11.

¹³ Ibid footnote no.11.

a civilian succeeding a civilian. In 1985 Sudan repeated this style of democratic uprising - bringing down Nimeiri's regime¹⁴ and compelling the military to promise a restoration of democracy within a year. The promise was kept, though civilian rule did not last. In Nigeria Jerry Rawlings¹⁵ brief transfer of power to civilians in Ghana was quite a drastic leap in terms of democracy. In Ghana the charismatic charm of the young leader was evident in the streets of Accra. The real question that glowed in the midst of the tumultuous conscience of the people was the identity syndrome amongst the people as to who were Africans? It was the poet-diplomat of Sierra Leone, Davidson Abioseh Nicol,¹⁶ who once wrote: You are not a country, Africa, You are a concept, Fashioned in our minds, each to each to hide our separate fears, to dream our separate dreams. More than fifty territorial entities with artificial boundaries created by Europe have in the period covered in this volume called themselves 'nations'. Africa is a concept, pregnant with the dreams of millions of people. The two important contributions of the Europeans in the context of African history could be summarized as in naming the continents and lakes across the borders of Africa thus scientific and intellectual fostering and secondly shaping the process of racism in Africa. Particularly relevant for both the re-humanization of Europe and the re-Africanization of Africa were two global cataclysms. The volume pictures the impact of the Great Depression¹⁷ on the front of liberation process, Was the depression a catastrophe for Western capitalism but a future blessing for the colonies? If so, what was the precise nature of that equation? In what ways was Europe subsequently made more humane? Under what circumstances did Africa become more pan-African? Some of these issues will be made clearer in the relevant chapters. The volume covers the much debated Suez Crisis,¹⁸ was it a global crisis or African conflict globalised. Moreover the volume also hinges on the Biafra war¹⁹ which according to the author is world war in microcosm.

¹⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaafar-Mohamed-el-Nimeiri>.

¹⁵ Jerry J. Rawlings was born on June 22, 1947, in Accra, Ghana. In 1979, he led coups to overthrow the military government. He became chairman of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council that year, and executed heads of state to eradicate corruption. After 112 days of rule, Rawlings handed power to Limann. Rawlings became Ghanaian president in 1982, and was twice re-elected. He has since been an envoy to Somalia.

¹⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/28/obituaries/davidson-nicol-is-dead-at-70-was-doctor-and-un-official.html>.

¹⁷ <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/crisis-capitalism-south-africa-grade-11>.

¹⁸ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez>.

¹⁹ Supra, footnote no.10.