Convergence and Glocalization – Not Counter-Penetration and Domestication: A Response to Prof. Ali Mazrui

Jacob Aliet*

Abstract

In this essay, we critically examine the strategies proposed by Prof. Ali Mazrui, which are aimed at providing Africans with intellectual and cultural independence through decolonization of the African universities. We unpackage these strategies in an African environment and assess their validity and practicality.

Several difficulties emerge when the strategies are tested in an African country and Kenya is used as an example in this paper. Where the strategies are found wanting alternative suggestions that factor in global trends, like convergence and collaboration, are presented.

Introduction

Prof. Ali Mazrui, the eminent cultural anthropologist and historian, recalls the vibrant intellectual environment that was present in East Africa in the early sixties in an article titled, *Towards Re-Africanizing African Universities: Who Killed Intellectualism in Post Colonial Era?* This era was characterized with lively intellectual debates and the publication of regional intellectual magazines like the *Transition* magazine which was based in Kampala and the *East Africa Journal* which was based in Nairobi. Gradually, this "African Revolution" died and the intellectual voices went to exile or fell silent.

Mazrui identifies "rising authoritarianism in government and declining academic freedom on campuses" as the twin problems that killed intellectualism in Kenya. In Tanzania, he identifies excessive enthusiasm for socialism as an intimidating force against the opponents of socialism and in Uganda, the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin.

In seeking ways of reviving intellectualism in Africa, Mazrui begins by identifying the relationships universities should have with the wider community. He states that universities should be "first; politically distant from the state, second; culturally close to society and third; intellectually linked to the wider scholarly world of learning."

Because African universities are modeled on western paradigms, they suffer cultural and linguistic dependency. The result of this is that whereas the universities have been able to reach the wider scholarly world, they have ended up culturally alienating themselves from the African society. Hence a contradiction arises between these two requirements. Cultural proximity to global scholarship conflicts with cultural proximity to African society. Because of this intellectual dependency, Mazrui argues, we have had African graduates "despising their own ancestry" and being "intellectual imitators and disciples of the West".

He argues that the elimination of this paradigmatic dependency and cultural alienation of African Universities is made difficult by the fact that they have adopted European languages. Africa's intellectual and scientific dependency on the west, he maintains, is inseparable from linguistic dependency.

After outlining the means by which African universities ended up being "the highest transmitters" of western imperial culture, Mazrui sets down to re-examining the agenda for re-Africanization and he offers mechanisms by which the African university can be culturally decolonized.

He offers three strategies that can enable African universities to "promote development in a post-colonial state without consolidating the structures of dependency inherited from its imperial past", namely: domestication of modernity, the wider diversification of the cultural content of modernity and counter-penetration of western civilization itself.

This paper is a critical examination of these strategies, their applicability in the current globalized environment and the possible consequences of their implementation.

The Domestication Strategy

Under the imperative of domestication, Mazrui suggests means through which the African university can Africanize itself and access and interact with the African society. These strategies include making a pass in an African language a mandatory requirement for admission to the university, making social and cultural anthropology an integral part of secondary school education, effective utilization of oral literature and introducing a specialization on oral traditions, hiring specialists in indigenous herbs in faculties of medicine and studying sorcery and witchcraft in rural Africa.

He also suggests the adoption of different criteria for faculty recruitment to enable absorption of "experts" on various spheres of African culture into universities without a mandatory requirement of "a degree from western or western-type educational institutions".

Domestication Strategy: The Difficulties

What is African culture? Culture is the "peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of a group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in uses of objects and material life" (Hall and Jefferson, 1976, p.10-11).

For more than a century, the African has been a hybrid of western culture, courtesy of a colonial heritage, and traditional African culture. The modern African wears Hugo Boss cologne, a Van Heusen shirt, uses a Motorolla phone and a Dell computer. He only confronts a bit of his African side when she visits rural Africa, where Toyota Ford cars are used for transport and the folks are mostly Christian, Christianity being a western religion.

For all intents and purposes, African traditional culture only finds expression in some African communities during rites of passage and some residual traces are still latent in taboo systems, which are not visible. The underpinning culture in the African society is western. To make the university a center for the perpetuation of African culture in such a Western environment, where success is judged by western standards, and where ninety-nine percent of books in University libraries are "western" would be incongruous and misdirected.

Experts also indicate that it is counterproductive to introduce a culture into an institution of learning, treating it like an abstract academic concept. The American sociologist Talcott Persons observed that "a cultural system does not institutionalize itself; it must be integrated with a social environment that can fulfill the functional requirements for a viable society" (Talcott Parsons, 1977, p.115).

Culture is rooted in the community and within the people. Its seedbed and habitat is in the lives and minds of the people. To have it canned in a textbook and then presented in a classroom for consumption, uprooted and unplugged from the society will abstract it and alienate it from the society rather than integrate it within the society.

Mazrui's suggestion of introducing African culture into African universities runs into further problems because it treats the "African culture" as a homogeneous, concrete collective. This is not the case. In Kenya alone, there are over thirty tribes, each with its own set of cultural beliefs and practices. In fact, the only unifying element across them is western religion: Christianity, or Islam.

The strategy also implies that African culture and beliefs are readily substitutable to western culture and beliefs. This is not entirely incorrect. There are several important needs that western culture satisfies in the African societies that have no viable alternatives in African culture. For example, "western" medicine for curing Tuberculosis, Typhoid and Meningitis have no traditional African medicinal cures. Western means of transport also have no viable alternatives. In the area of beliefs, one only needs to consider asking an African of the Christian persuasion to try entertaining the gods of his or her ancestors. It demonstrates how far Africans have wandered from the paths that their ancestors once treaded.

In areas where women have been unable to access "western" sanitary pads, like the pastoralist societies, the girls miss school during their menses and resort to unhygienic measures to deal with the flow. What this means, ironically, is that anyone would be hard pressed to find a crack in the face of the modern "African" society through which one can squeeze in traditional African culture. Modern Africans are heavily westernized, more so in the urban parts.

The content of western education systems are the culmination of several intellectual revolutions over centuries, from the Copernican revolution that saw heliocentricity replace geocentricity, to the scientific revolution that saw the scientific method replace fideism and

western mysticism as a means of acquisition of knowledge. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, captures the significant paradigm shifts between various scientific epochs.

African traditional beliefs on the other hand, flourished for centuries in the absence of any sound methodology for falsification and verification of their propositions. They have retained all the markings of profound ignorance about the way nature works. Western science, which has taken man to the moon and enabled us to undertake heart transplants, is immeasurably superior to African witchcraft which relies on mysticism and dangerous trial-and-error techniques to seek remedy for illnesses.

We are at the cusp of the twenty-first century, with a rigorous scientific method in place. It would be a sheer waste to dedicate resources studying the "medical implications of sorcery and witchcraft" as Prof. Mazrui suggests. These are beliefs and practices that have been tried and tested. And they have been found to be lacking potency and solely sustained by ignorance. To study these would be like studying the cosmological implications of a flat earth theory. Even in the west, there are ideas that are bunk. But we do not see western countries squandering resources trying to determine the implications of, say, psychic experience. The same applies to African witchcraft: it has no place in the classroom.

The Relativistic Approach to Culture

Being a seasoned anthropologist, Prof Mazrui must be aware that good anthropologists avoid being ethnocentric by observing cultural relativity. "Relativism asserts that all people, all cultures are equally good...it asserts that each culture must be valued on its own terms" (Hammond, 1964, p.482). Cultural relativity keeps the anthropologist from intruding upon his work by making subjective moral judgments on the culture being studied. Thus what matters is whether the culture satisfies the people themselves. Because in the judgment of good versus bad, the good is defined in terms of conditioning that each of us has had, in terms of our own cultural values.

Because Prof. Mazrui is seeking ways of diluting the influence of western culture in the African continent, the presumption is that western culture is undesirable and African culture is good. Thus, he is arguing from an ethnocentric position.

Ethnocentrism, in the form of Eurocentrism, is the genesis of the pervasive cultural influence the Professor is trying to counter. Questions abound about whether Mazrui's

ethnocentrism is acceptable because he has suffered colonialism and imperialism. Mazrui omitted to provide an explanation about why African culture is better. It appears that he is relying on the appeal of tribal allegiance, rather than cogent reasons, to persuade Africans to adopt the strategies he has proposed.

Putting Ethnocentrism on the Stand

Is African culture good for Africans? How will our familiarity with oral traditions and African sorcery make us better people? Presumably, Africans would be interested in them because of their own heritage. But I am as interested in western tradition as much as I am interested in African tradition. There is no African that chose to be an African. Cultures must stand or fall based on their ability to better the lives of people that adopt them, not based on the ethnicity of the people adopting them.

The presumption that African culture is good for Africans is a myth. Ownership must not be confused with suitability. Roland Barthes explains in *Mythologies* that myths are stories that societies live by. They provide ways of conceptualizing and understanding the world and are crucial to society's efforts to construct and maintain a sense of self-identity in the face of dominant groups. The ideological power of myth derives from its capacity to transform history into nature. Barthes notes that "myth has an imperative, buttonholing character: stemming from an historical concept, directly springing from contingency." Thus a cogent case for the value of African culture to Africans is required and we have to be vigilant because the myth that African culture is good for Africans summons us to receive its expansive ambiguity.

While I am aware that anthropologists like Justin Lee have argued, with good reason, that Universal declaration of human rights "is not universal at all but rather should be called western human rights" (Justin Lee, 1997), such arguments do not detract the fact that western culture entails recognition of human rights, a component that is given little consideration in African traditions and culture. Presently, several campaigns are ongoing in Kenya to save young girls from early marriages and from the practice of female genital mutilation. Some African communities believe that violation of taboos causes illness and death. This has perpetuated the spread of AIDS. These are just some examples that indicate the inherent weaknesses of mystical African culture and traditions.

It is unclear exactly what Mazrui believes a "specialization on oral traditions" can achieve. But suffice it to say that oral traditions were used by primitive tribes that had not yet mastered the art of writing. Specializing in them and teaching people to master them is like specializing and teaching people in the use of Stone Age tools in an information age.

Kenyan secondary school curricula are overloaded as it is. In fact, to ease this overload, students are allowed to drop one science subject or one humanity subject. This does not mean that social and cultural anthropology cannot be made an integral part of the curriculum. It means that it must be done carefully; whilst aware that it could probably make the spine of our curriculum snap under the extra weight.

Glocalize and Converge Instead

Instead of the domestication strategy, which seeks to perpetuate African traditions without clear reasons; Africans instead ought to consider the glocalization strategy instead. In *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman argues that in order to cope in our globalized world, nations must sacrifice a degree of economic sovereignty to global institutions in order to achieve western-style economic success. But at the same time, a country must preserve its local traditions while it globalizes. Friedman describes this process as "glocalization".

The difference between glocalizing and domesticating is that glocalizing leaves the arena for the preservation of local traditions out of the educational institutions. We know the problems with domestication and I demonstrate further below that we live in an increasingly western world each passing day. Evolutionary science informs us that when the fitness landscape is altered, the individuals that cannot adapt perish. Adaptation, not sameness will be the key to our survival and ultimate success. Africa cannot grow without changing. Alterity is the byword, not rigidity. Meshing in and interpenetrating is the way, not standing out.

A functionalist approach would be the most effective way of going about determining which traditions to preserve and which ones to discard as one goes about glocalizing. Traditions that serve no function, like superstitious beliefs and female genital mutilation, should be discarded. And aspects of western culture that can better our lives, like communication technology, should be fully embraced. This will bring about a confluence of cultures that will see

the maturity of a hybrid, heterogeneous culture, instead of having isolated pillars of African culture soaking in a sea of western culture.

The fear that African culture will be engulfed by western culture should instead be replaced by optimism about the synergy that can result from this convergence of cultures.

Domestication is, in fact, antithetical to the spirit of globalization because it entails selective incorporation of certain ideas into our curricula based on locality. Globalization entails outward focus, not inward focus. Today, self-organizing collaborative communities like Apache and Wikipedia are rapidly evolving and they have served to break down cultural and market barriers and render the world "flat".

Pushed further, domestication breeds ethnocentrism and xenophobia. It is xenophobia, among other reasons, that led to the decline of the once leading, Egyptian civilization.

Thus, instead of domesticating, we should seek ways of collaborating. We have to find "connectors" between western and African tradition that will enable us plug and play in our increasingly "flattening" world that is inexorably forcing a global cultural amalgamation.

Further, research in management models have indicated that coalescing different ideas and cultures improves decisions and this further indicates to us that we ought to seek a free convergence of our cultures. Convergence is the way to go.

The Strategy of Diversification

Under this strategy, Mazrui proposes that the cultural content of modernity be diversified because it is safer to depend on many countries than upon one country. This would transform the universities from "a multinational corporation to a multicultural corporation". He suggests studying Chinese, Indian and Islamic civilizations alongside the introduction of the history of science in African secondary schools. He laments that western leadership in science and technology has led people to regard westernism as interchangeable with science.

Mazrui notes that African reactions to western pre-eminence of science in the past included negritude, which was led by Leopold Senghor, and Marxist ideology. He suggests that African students be taught how the west found intellectual and scientific benefactors from different civilizations over the centuries including the Egyptian, Chinese and Islamic civilizations. The awareness brought about by such instruction, he argues, would "reveal the

diversity of the human heritage, and break the dangerous myth of Western scientific pre-eminence"

Since access to a culture is largely facilitated by knowledge of its language, Mazrui suggests that "Each African child should learn a minimum of three languages – one European, one Asian and one African." He lastly suggests a departure from "excessive Eurocentrism and toward a paradoxical combination of increased Africanization and increased internationalization of each department programme."

As noted earlier, the African society is a hybrid of several societies. Kenyans for example, drive Japanese Toyotas, wear American clothes, and learn under a British system of education. As such, they do not depend on one country culturally or ideologically.

Being a technological dimension of culture, language provides the learner with an understanding of a different culture and different reality whilst deepening ones knowledge about a culture. Kenyan secondary schools almost all have instructions in three languages. Typically, there is Swahili, English and an additional European language like French or German. Where they fail to meet Prof. Mazrui's diversification imperative is the lack of an Asian language. How significant on our development efforts is our failure to learn an Asian language?

The Indian Case

To answer that question, let us consider India: a nuclear superpower and the second most populous nation. India is among the fastest growing economies in the last decade in spite of the fact that in higher levels of learning in that country, English is the language of instruction that is used. That means they are facing the same situation Kenyans are facing, with Swahili being dropped at the University level except for those studying linguistics. Yet this has not impeded Indians from developing technologically, to the extent that the west needs them. American multinationals are increasingly opening subsidiaries in India and off shoring jobs that cost billions of dollars to India.

Prof. Mazrui's suggestion that a third Asian language be added to the curriculum appears incognizant of the fact that in almost all Asian countries, with the exception of Japan and China, instructions in high levels of education are conducted in English. Are Indians, with their caste system and Hindu religion, culturally dependent on the west? Hardly. The Indian example

demonstrates that whatever problems may be facing African, cultural dependence on the west is not a significant one. In fact, the west has saved Africans the trouble of having to re-invent the wheel by sharing with Africans the final products of the renaissance, the enlightenment and other cultural revolutions in form of educational content.

What Africans need to do, in the humble view of this author, is not to introduce a competing culture, but to surpass western intellects in the mastery of western science and out-innovate them as the world gets "flatter", to use an expression coined by Thomas Friedman. Asian countries do not teach Swahili, Wolof or other African languages. Why? We need to ask ourselves these questions even as we consider teaching Asian languages in our schools. What economic or cultural gain can Kenyans for example acquire by learning Hindi in the increasingly highly westernized society?

Christianity is taught alongside Islam, Buddhism and other religions in schools. Christianity has only won more converts because of Christian missionization. Islam is a religion and cannot be juxtaposed with Chinese and Hindu cultures as Mazrui does. Kenya, for example, is a secular state and it would be unconstitutional for the government to be behind an initiative to promote the teaching Islam in the Universities in the name of "diversification of cultural content".

Science: A *sine qua non* of Occidentalism

Regarding Mazrui's concern toward the equation of westernism with science and lack of awareness regarding the fact that the west had "intellectual and scientific benefactors from different civilizations over the centuries", we first need to understand what westernism is before we can address his concern properly.

Westernism refers to a characteristic of people in the occident. The occident, as opposed to the orient, refers to the European and American Nations. It is true that the west had benefactors from different civilizations, but most of these benefactors mostly contributed, not in science *per se*, but in related fields like mathematics and philosophy. The Egyptians taught Pythagoras, who is credited with the discovery of the numerical ratios and western science employs Arabic numbering system.

But the west took off when they developed the scientific method. And that is what set them apart from their benefactors. Turning points like the enlightenment and the renaissance culminated in the west's acceptance of positivism in place of metaphysics. Positivist philosophy, per Auguste Comte in the 19th century, held that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge. The history of science informs us that all the major contributors to the development of the scientific enterprise, from Henri Poincarre, Larry Laudan, Karl Popper and Bertrand Russel, were westerners. And it is upon the adoption of the scientific method as the authoritative source of knowledge that the west started making phenomenal progress. Great progress in science was made from the First World War onwards. The 20th century saw a steady increase in the publication of scientific journals. And to date, more than ninety per cent of them are western. This alone has forced the rest of the world to learn English in order to access the works of the best minds in science. Nobel prizes for science are almost all bagged by westerners. Thus contrary to Prof. Mazrui's contention that it is incorrect to equate westernism with science, we see that modern science is a western phenomenon. In fact, science is a *sine qua non* of Occidentalism.

The Counter-Penetration Strategy

This strategy seeks to reverse the flow of cultural "influence back into western civilization itself". Cautioning against withdrawal and cultural autarky, Mazrui notes that what Africans should seek is how to decolonize modernity and save it from excessive Eurocentrism, not withdrawal from it, which can end up alienating Africans from the world culture.

He notes that Africa has achieved artistic counter-penetration in Jazz and through workmanship and the importation of African slaves into the New World. Mazrui argues that to balance the asymmetry of the reciprocal cultural penetration between Africa and the west, Africa will need allies and they consist of the Arab world and the black Diaspora (chiefly black Americans). Because Arabs share a continent with black people and have already started a strategy of counter-penetrating the west through economic maneuvers, they present an attractive ally, he observes. He also sees OPEC as a viable vehicle for penetration of the west and the political resurrection of Islam.

As for making each university bi-gender, a strategy Mazrui calls *Androgynization*, Kenya recently appointed the first female Vice-Chancellor, Prof Olive Mugenda, at Kenyatta University so Kenya is on its way to further cultural maturity. Geographical imbalance in terms of distribution of the institutions of higher learning, however, persists due to poor infrastructure that renders huge parts of Kenya inaccessible.

Mazrui remarks that the brain drain occurring in Africa, characterized by Kenyan professors going to teach in other continents, and has enabled Africans to penetrate the citadels of power in other civilizations.

Pioneering New Niches

It is true that the full "maturity of African educational experience will come when Africa develops capability to innovate and invent independently" However, it is a bit limiting to seek "reciprocal penetration" from a cultural angle only. Further, as we have seen above, the cultural angle is a path riddled with both practical and conceptual difficulties.

A more efficient approach would entail seeking a niche in the global market and developing competitive strength in it. That niche can be in any area and Africans must find it, whether collectively or by country. It may not be technological know-how because India University education is very accessible to Indians and is more than twice as cheaper as education in Africa and at a population of 1.2 billion, Africa, with a meager 770 million has a long way to go before it can come close to India. But that does not detract from the idea that high levels of literacy is a fundamental starting point in our development, not Africanization agenda. Africans must seek ways of reaping maximal benefits from western education through mastering it, harnessing it and making it accessible to more Africans.

The present reality is such that we live in a world flattened by technology, a world where most market barriers have been broken down. Making western education more accessible like India has, is one sure way of making ourselves more relevant globally and will offer us a means of occupying a niche in the global economy.

China, a classic victim of her own success, is now reaching to India for cheap supply of labor. The west is itself reaching out to India for cheap technological know-how. While Africa forms part of the global supply chain, she has not yet found her place in the scheme of things.

Africans function largely as takers and receivers not as producers and givers. Even in the agricultural sector, the South American countries and other European countries are out-innovating Africa. There is an acute lack of reciprocity in the current scheme of things. We need to find our competitive strength in the new landscape and occupy our niche.

As I have noted, to make an impact in any conceivable sphere of development, whether cultural or economic, Africa will require high levels of literacy. It was long observed that "Cultural development first shows up as a rise in the rate of literacy. Then a fall in the rates of mortality and fertility follow the rise in literacy" (Emmanuel Todd, 1987, p.1)

Conclusion

It is clear that Prof. Mazrui's assumptions regarding African culture may need revision because his strategies appear to underestimate the extent of the penetration of western culture in the current African society and the degree of cultural mutation the African has undergone since his colonial masters abandoned her. It will be difficult to isolate the hybridized individual that is the modern African, from his western environment to allow a clear treatment of his African heritage, separate from his western inheritance as the able professor suggests.

Whereas the strategies Prof. Mazrui offers are worthwhile, it is more critical and urgent for Africa to have high levels of literacy. Otherwise, the isolated efforts of the few African scholars will lack both a critical mass and the long-term sustainability that is required to yield any meaningful impact.

Rather than strive to Africanize our institutions, strategies that seek economic empowerment relate better with the global trends and would be more efficient and likely to yield returns, as compared to adversarial strategies that are culturally competitive and that seek to attain an identity in a dynamic world where cultures are meshing, technologies are converging, standardization is the byword and where collaboration is increasingly a preferred strategy in business.

The world is awash with information and the countries that will succeed will not be those that can manipulate and access information, but those that will be able to decipher the relationships between the information and link critical entities in the global market as the systems age emerges in the "flat" world.

* Jacob Aliet is a final year MBA student at Nairobi University. He holds a B. Sc. Information Science Degree from Moi University, is a Microsoft Certified Professional (MCSD) and holds a UK Diploma from the Institute for the Management of Information Systems (IMIS). He works as a Senior Systems Analyst at the Kenya Revenue Authority. His interests are in Literary Theory, History, Archaeology, Sociology, Philosophy of Science and Artificial Intelligence

References

Barthes, R. (1957). *Mythologies*. Canada: HarperCollins.

Bartie, P. (2005). *Sapir Whorf and the Influence of Language on Culture*. Retrieved April 17, 2006,

<http://www.bartle.disted.camousin.bc.ca/soc-sap.html>.

Danet, M. (2006). *Can Confluence of Imperfect Ideas Catalyze Innovation?* Brussels: WCO.

Friedman, T. (2005). *The World is Flat: A Brief history of the Twenty-First Century*. Straus and Giroux: Farrar.

Hall, S. & Jefferson, T. (1976). *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Hutchinson: London

Hammond, P. B. (1964). *Cultural and Social Anthropology*. The MacMillan Library: New York.

Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd Ed). University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Lee, J. B. (1997). Anthropological Intolerance: A Discussion on the Issues of Cultural Relativism, Universal Human Rights, and the Role of the Cultural Anthropologist, *Internet Journal of African Studies,* Vol 1, Article 2.

Parsons, T. (1977). *The Evolution of Societies*. Prentice Hall: N. Jersey

Todd, E. (1987). *The Causes of Progress: Cultural Authority and Change*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford.

Mazrui, A. A. (2003). Towards Re-Africanizing African Universities: Who Killed Intellectualism in Post Colonial Era? *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*.

http://www.alternativesjournal.net/volume2/number3and4/mazrui.pdf. Vol. 2, No. 3&4, Fall & Winter 2003, 135-163.