

Ali Mazrui, 1933-2014: A Tribute

Laa ilaaha illal-lahuu
Muhammadur Rasuulullah
[“There is no good example except Allah (SWT).
Muhammad is the Apostle of Allah (SWT).”]
Inna lillaahi maa akhaza,
wa lillaahi maa a’ataa,
wa kullun indahu,
bi ajalim musamman,
faltasbir waltahtasib.
[“Verily everything belongs to Allah (SWT)
that He hath taken away,
And belongs to Allah that He hath given.
Allah (SWT) is with him for an appointed time;
forbear and except reward.”]

The colossus with the feet of steel joined his ancestors in the early hours of 13 October 2014. Ali Mazrui was larger than life! The most prodigious scholar of African politics, his multiple talents combined creative work in elegant prose and poetry with polemics. A teacher, orator, journalist, filmmaker, and public intellectual, he was arguably the most connected and best known African scholar for over half a century. There will be a legion of tributes in his honor all over Africa and elsewhere. My tribute will be limited to the place of language in his long writing and scholarly career.

Growing up in Christian homes, many Africans believe that they would hear about *Babel* only in Christian parlance – or, if you will, in Christendom – where it refers to the countless tongues when the “Tower of Babel” was being built. However, in this tribute, I crave your indulgence to allow me to use the opportunity of Mazrui’s death to re-introduce *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience* published by the University of Chicago Press in 1998. This seminal book was co-authored by Professors Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui (two Mazruis, needing only one more to create a triple heritage of names!). I would like to use this book to pay tribute to a legend, to talk more broadly about the power and ambiguity

Toyin Falola
University of Texas at Austin

of languages, how word choice connects you and me to society, and how language opens a window into the world of politics. Ali Mazrui certainly used languages to distinguish himself.

Autobiography is connected with language. *Mwalimu* Ali Mazrui (also honorifically called *Nana* in Ghanaian royal parlance) was born and raised in East Africa, where he learned English, Swahili, and Arabic. He was a Creolite, that is, one who had the capacity to mix languages, and became entangled in the cultures as well as the identities of these languages. Years later, when he became a respected scholar, he formulated his eclectic language background into what he called Africa’s “triple heritage”: indigenous, Islamic, and Western. That triple heritage, as he defined it, has a foundation in language. Undoubtedly, the Creolite in Mazrui came across very forcefully in this articulation of the triple heritage in a successful documentary film series on Africa.

Orality is critical, and it is sometimes presented as the use of African languages or their revival to advance the agenda of modernity. The endorsement of the creative power in orality becomes a sort of theatrical performance itself. The people whom he wrote about are grounded in orality, and they represent this orality in conversations and text. Mazrui was able to capture their imaginations and reality.

To Mazrui, English was a vehicle to mobility, modernity, and intellectual power. His prolificacy was facilitated by the infrastructure of the English language. His works are focused on African politics and economy, the search for change agents, and the understanding of processes in the *longue durée*.

The *languages* of Mazrui, a Creolite, embedded the narrative of the self in that of the nation. Although he did not pursue

his work in a chronological fashion, the genealogies are clear. There was the autobiography of childhood in the TV series, one that talked about his family, and how that family was connected to an identity. This is how orality structures a narrative. He possessed a nostalgia for Mombasa, Kenya, and lamented the passing of many of its cultural elements into oblivion, just as the griot in Senegal would present a storyline. Mazrui was fond of placing stress on space and memory which, although presented in the colonial language of English, he always grounded in orality.

Orality recognizes the organic relationship between the environment and human beings, as humans use the powerful animals in the jungle to describe themselves. Human beings developed a strong understanding of everything around them, from insects to trees, and call upon the resources of the environment to organize their religions and rituals. This connection with the environment can be characterised as sensing nature itself, and in doing so, using a language that draws heavily on all available objects and elements and working them into idioms, proverbs, and parables.

Moving into the school system, the language of orality is not discarded but expanded upon. English and Swahili become juxtaposed, and indigenous languages may be added to create a creolisation. One sees in a number of Mazrui’s writings this juxtaposition. Strikingly, he also brought in poetic stanzas, woven into prose, stylistic choices that embroidered an argument or were used as transitional connecting points in building an assembly of ideas.

In Mazrui’s work, poetry reveals creolisation, the unconscious recourse to the multiplicity of languages and creative genres. This brings the otherwise estranged languages of the farmers and the professor closer to a mutual understanding. Mazrui was a language bargainer, shopping for the appropriate genre in which to negotiate in the marketplace of ideas. He was indeed a smart bargainer, as he drew from so many diverse sources.

Orality is about dialogue, and Swahili is conversational. Thus, Mazrui often wrote as if he were engaged in dialogue, with a few sentences forming short paragraphs. These shorter paragraphs tended to invite another set of dialogues, a style not drawn from the European languages but from East African oral culture. When you “call out” in orality, it takes the form of a performance. Orality does not encourage monologue. Orality is spontaneous and creative, and one sees the deployment of both aspects in the way Mazrui answered questions in seminars and conferences. He could be theatrical, using imaginative and figurative language.

Mazrui’s intellectual assembly was a combination of the plurality of issues, the plurality of subjects, the plurality of perspectives, and the plurality of languages. But that plurality of languages was enfolded in what I have identified as the recourse to orality, the constant references to fragmented histories and memory. But as Mazrui deployed the English language, he needed to fracture and fragment himself, that is, his own being and body; his presentation of the past, grounded in orality, sometimes became “mythical.” Indeed, he often took the Islamic as “indigenous,” thus casting its impact in mythical ways as well. This is where Mazrui not only betrayed his preference but his transparency: the Western and the Christian became patriarchal and masculine, in opposition to the innocence and femininity of the mythical.

The dominance and status of the English language in Mazrui’s work are clear. The English language was used to present Africa to Africans and to the world, and to re-Africanise Africans in drawing from lost traditions. A blended language, the “Englishes” with doses of Swahili and Arabic revealed creativity but drew attention to curiosity as well. Creativity and curiosity raised questions not just about intellectual innovations, but the content of ideas. A language has such a powerful linkage with culture that writing in English does not mean a rejection of one’s cultural immersion. Let me illustrate this point with a citation from *The Power of Babel*:

Where do the ‘pronouns’ come in? Languages betray the cultures from which they spring. Pronouns are part of that story. In referring to a third

person English is gender-conscious – so the pronoun *he* refers to the male and the pronoun *she* refers to the female. In many African languages pronouns are gender-neutral. The words for ‘he’ or ‘she’ are fused into one. To the present day many Africans competent in the English language sometimes refer to a third person female as ‘he’ when speaking in English because of the linguistic influence of their own mother tongues. [210.]

And there are cultural nuances:

Most African languages do not have separate words for ‘nephews’ and ‘nieces’ because your sister’s children are supposed to be equivalent of your own biological children. The same word which is used for your child (*mtoto* in Kiswahili) is used for your niece or nephew. Very few African languages have a word for ‘cousin’. Your uncle’s daughter or son is the equivalent of your sister or brother, so cousins are counted almost as siblings. Once again language betrays the tightness of kinship ties in the African extended family. [*The Power of Babel*, 210.]

Identity is central to this language use: how Africans see themselves, how others gaze upon them, how they are represented. Mazrui had to define himself, and language enabled him to do so. Then he had to define his continent, again falling on the power of language to do so.

Turning again to *The Power of Babel*, specific elements emerge in how Mazrui and his co-author presented language in terms of its acquisition and usages, its universal nature, its connections to ethnicities, and its linkages to identity and nationalities. The way and manner that words are used can reveal a lot about people and places.

Mazrui presented the creative aspect of language in many ways. He used language to inspire heroism, as in his celebration of the career of poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor, who was nominated many times without success for the Nobel Prize for his command of French (written and spoken), and his poetry and philosophy. To Mazrui, the love for John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is said to have influenced Apolo Obote (1925–2005), president of Uganda, to

adopt Milton as his first name. Mazrui was full of praise for Julius Nyerere, the late president of Tanzania, who translated William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* into Swahili. Mazrui valued these translations for advancing the modernist agenda of African languages.

Politics was always central to Mazrui’s philosophy. Indeed, just as he saw politics as influencing language, he saw language as also influencing politics. He linked the end of the Cold War and the fall of apartheid to the possible decline in the use of French, Russian and Afrikaans. Charting the rise and fall of European languages in Africa was like playing “a chess game with African cultures. Will the African languages be Europeanised or will the European languages be Africanised?”

This “chess game,” as Mazrui explained, dealt with choices and options, negotiations, and brokerages. The game was played in the context of globalisation. Power had to be extended, as part of imperialism, which involved the imposition of language. Power, too, had to be resisted, in the nationalism that called for self-assertion, for which, as Mazrui saw, language, too, was crucial. To him, no matter how the issue of control or resistance is resolved, language becomes the critical part of that resolution: the very possibility of co-existence within national frontiers and of cooperation between frontiers involves language.

Back to Mazrui and the “chess game”: as individuals struggle for influence, resources, money, power and more, we are drawn to those very institutions and structures that society puts in place to resolve our struggles. The state’s structures and its coercive apparatuses use the language of law and order to legitimise their violence. In the fabric of society itself, where these conflicts play out intensely, language mediates the struggles between men and women, matriarchy and patriarchy. The language of respect recognises boundaries between the youth and the elderly, resolving conflicts of interest in favor of older men. What we call persuasion is grounded in idioms, metaphors and similes that appeal on the basis of culture. The language of persuasion is of course different from that of threat.

To an extent, my point is that at the very heart of politics and political discourse is

the deployment of language. This language, in words and texts, communicates processes and actions. Each action has its own characteristics. The word, as Professor Ademola Dasylva of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, is fond of reminding me, can be transformed into a spirit – as in words of prophecy, of curses, of wishes, of incantations. If many political scientists ignore language, Mazrui recognized fully its association with political discourse, both in the context of politics itself and the texts used to communicate its contents.

I began with autobiography as foundational, and I want to close with a celebration of this genre. Mazrui deployed various first-person narratives in his presentations. He defended the preservation of traditional institutions, but he was not a traditionalist. He was a man of multiple cultures, but he celebrated identity. Amazingly, he lived in the West, but he

translated Africa. He was, on the one hand, an autonomous scholar but, on the other, he was imbricated in the “arrested development” of Africa. Mazrui was a Creole, with a style that showed how to accept the cultures of the West while retaining an African identity.

Mazrui was the Griot of critical narratives, an agent provocateur of deeply rooted intellectual discourses. Never before have we seen an African intellectual so controversial, yet so loved by the same critical mass that pointed to his “controversiality.” What he wrote about, what he spoke about, how he wrote about them, and how he spoke were often the bones of contention – a fact that underscored the power of the spoken (and the written) word as observed in the life of this departed giant!

As a Creole, he maintained a stream of dialogue with the colonisers and the “globalizers”: he rejected de-persona-

lisation; he rejected de-culturalisation; and he rejected de-Islamisation. In sum, that is our *Mzee* – our *Nana* – the indomitable Ali A’lamin Mazrui, the teacher, scholar, global citizen, the embodiment of refined African-cum-Western cultural being, and, above all, a tireless and incurable pan-Africanist.

May Allah forgive his failings

And reward his contributions to the human spirit

May Allah (SWT) grant *Mwalimu* Mazrui *Jannat*

May the *Mzee* be received by all our ancestors

May Allah provide those of us he has left behind

The fortitude to continue the *Nana*’s work.

Let us proclaim today as the beginning of a new ideology: *Pax Mazruiana*!

Jazakumu Allahu Khayrain!