

ALI MAZRUI

– Celebrating the life of an intellectual giant

On 12 October 2014 Africa – and the world – lost one of its greatest sons with the passing of renowned Pan-Africanist, scholar and teacher, Prof Ali Mazrui. He died aged 81 at his home in Vestal, New York, following several months of illness.

Born in Mombasa, Kenya, Prof Mazrui was one of the world's most prolific writers on Africa, its people, history and future. In a career stretching over 50 years he authored and co-authored more than 40 books as well as hundreds of articles in major scholastic journals and for public media. In this way, he profoundly influenced ideas about Africa among scholars and members of the general public alike.

Described as a free thinker who would not distort the truth and facts to the dictates of the establishment, Prof Mazrui's views did not always sit well with some audiences, yet his powerful writing style made it impossible for even his harshest critics to ignore the unique perspective he brought to a variety of African issues. The subject matter of his writings ranged from politics, sociology, philosophy, languages, literature, history, heritage, religion, to spirituality, and demanded that people from all walks of life participate and contribute to discourse and dialogue.

His soft-spoken charm and eloquence as a lecturer also made him a favourite among students at every university he served. So revered was he as a teacher and mentor that family and friends referred to him as 'Mwalimu' (Swahili for teacher).

At the time of his death, Prof Mazrui was the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, State University of New York. He had also been serving as the Andrew D White Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies at Cornell University and as the Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large at the University of Jos, Nigeria.

Prof Mazrui became a well-known figure outside of academia in 1986 when he wrote and hosted the nine-part television series, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. The show's subtitle refers to the three legacies – Islamic, indigenous and Western – that have been most apparent in the formation of modern African identity.

Wrote the South African Presidency in 2007: "Prof Mazrui is one of the greatest minds ever to have been produced by the African continent. His prolific writing, coupled with the variety of fields he has been covering in his academic life proves the versatility of his intellect. He has put the African continent on the pedestal, unearthing and laying bare the grandeur of Africa to a world that had been but paying marginal attention to the intellectual depth of the African continent."

Mazrui's honours are numerous. For example, he won the Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award of the University of Michigan in 1988 and the Distinguished Africanist Award of the African Studies Association of the U.S. in 1995. The President of Kenya awarded him the National Honour of Commander of the Order of the Burning Spear and the President of South Africa made him Grand Companion of Oliver Tambo. Morgan State University awarded him the DuBois-Garvey Award for Pan-African Unity. In 2005, the American journal *Foreign Policy* and the British journal *Prospect* ranked Mazrui among the top 100 public intellectuals in the world.

In November 2012, the Water Research Commission (WRC) was privileged to host Prof Mazrui as a special keynote speaker at the International Conference on Freshwater Governance for Sustainable Development, held in the Drakensberg. Here he emphasised our inextricable link with water not only as it sustains life, but also in terms of culture, religion and heritage. "The issue of water affects the farmer praying for rain, affects a villager in fear of a hurricane, affects a mother terrified



Prof Ali Mazrui with WRC CEO Dhesigen Naidoo in 2012.

of river blindness, and affects the whole society in quest of hygiene in water usage," he said.

Prof Mazrui's vision for Africa, is in many ways shared by that of the WRC. In the words of lifelong friend Burjor Avari, honorary research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, Prof Mazrui wanted the people of his beloved continent to enjoy the benefits of modern science and technology and become more prosperous.

His eldest sons, Jamal, Alamin and Kim posted a heart-warming tribute to their father on Facebook: "Our father's love of life leaves us all to pause and consider more deeply: what would we be, what could we be, if we moved beyond fear and anxiety and embraced, as he did – our incredible human potential and the fulfilment of life in all of its glory."

Says WRC CEO Dhesigen Naidoo: "Baba Mazrui's empowering contribution has been to demonstrate that harsh corners of fundamentalism and discrimination can be smoothed through the calmness of intellectual enquiry, paving the way for a more informed dialogue to sow the seeds of sustainable solutions. His legacy will continue to inspire Africa and all her partners for many generations to come."

Prof Mazrui was laid to rest according to his wishes in the 900-year-old Mazrui family cemetery in old town Mombasa. He is survived by his wife, Pauline, five sons and a daughter. □