



## In Tribute to Mwalimu: Ali A. Mazrui, A Global African

October 2014

February 24, 1933 - 12 October 12, 2014

Dear Aiga,

As one of our friends wrote, bemoaning the passing of our author, friend and mentor, "A giant tree has fallen." Indeed, Mwalimu Ali (affectionately identified as such by many) is a uniquely irreplaceable Giant Tree. Professor Ali A. Mazrui, a devoted and committed scholar, an erudite speaker and debater, and truly someone touched and spirited by the African condition, has passed. His life and work was informed by his true love and care for Africa, his birthplace. His last resting place was in his birthplace in the hills of Mombasa, Kenya.

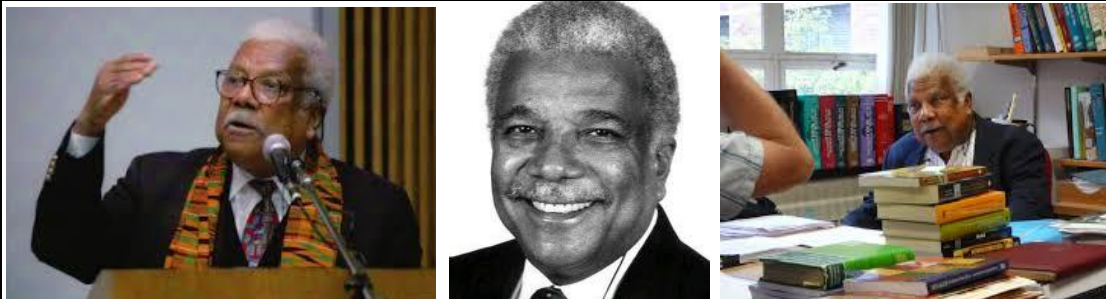
Mwalimu will be much missed, but his life's work and contribution to African and global scholarship lives in many of his published works, and in the many children, friends, students and colleagues he left behind. We experienced him as a kind and caring global citizen, who had absolutely no negative thing to say about those who challenged him, fiercely disagreed with him and unkindly tried to besmirch his name. As a true scholar he was committed to the search of the truth in politics and history.

We will always remember him as a giant whose "Triple Heritage" informed his relations with people around the world, with ideas and the intellectual pursuit therein. He was, surely, a Global Citizen who commensurated with Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. He respected and studied all religions, regions and peoples of the world. He was definitely a bridge builder. And this bridge builder is no more among the living, but his ideas, his writings, and his spirit live and will continue to inform and inspire us.

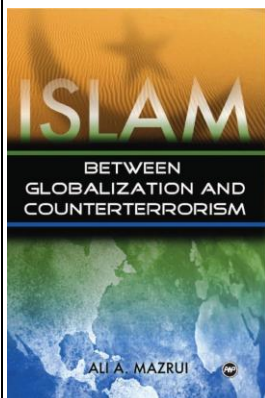
A journey of Peace, Mwalimu. May the ancestors celebrate your joining them as we celebrate your life and work here on Earth.

Please enjoy Dr. Toyin Falola's wonderful tribute to Mwalimu Ali A. Mazrui in this newsletter below.

Sincerely,  
Kassahun Checole, Publisher



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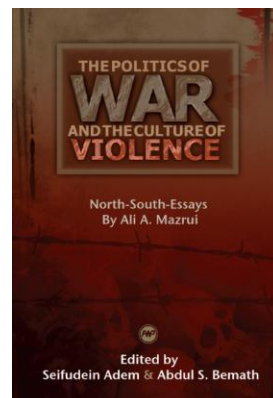


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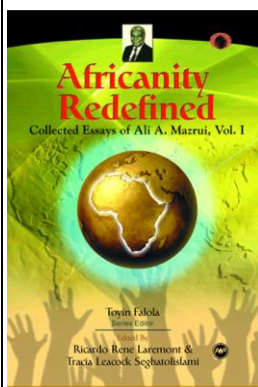
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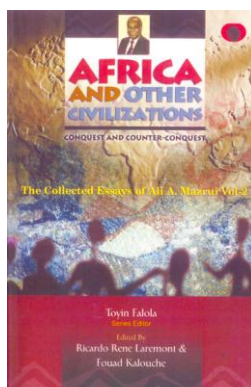
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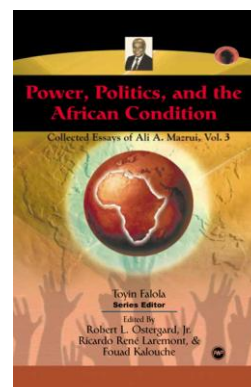
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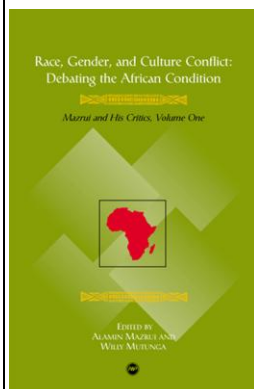
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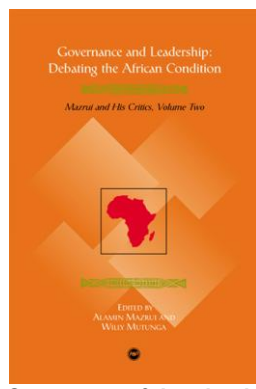
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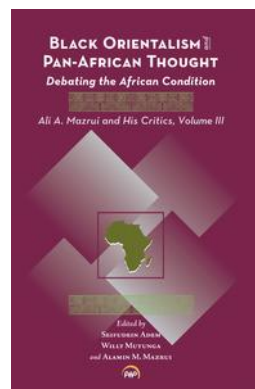
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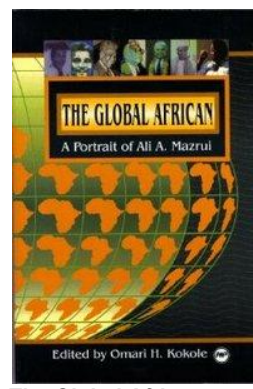
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## A Special Tribute to Dr. Ali A. Mazrui from Dr. Toyin Falola

### Ali Mazrui, 1933-2014: A Tribute

by Toyin Falola  
The University of Texas at Austin

*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."]

*Innalilaahi wainalaihi rajioon*  
(It is from Him did we come and it is Him shall we return).

The colossus with the feet of steel joined his ancestors in the early hours of October 13, 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 passing 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 of languages, how word choice connects you and me to society, and how language opens a window into the world of politics. Baba Mazrui 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, (*The Africans: A Triple Heritage*) 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 characterized 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 creolization. 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 creolization, 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-Africanize Africans in drawing from lost traditions. A blended language, the "Englshes" 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.]

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!*

**Special Thanks to Dr. Toyin Falola for sharing his poignant and touching essay on Professor Ali A. Mazrui.**

Sincerely,



Africa World Press & The Red Sea Press



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