



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

## Ali A. Mazrui (1933–2014)

### Author:

Petr Skalník – Philosophical Faculty, University of Hradec Králové, The Czech Republic

### Recommended citation:

Skalník, P. (2014). Ali A. Mazrui (1933–2014). *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 2(2), 5–9. Retrieved from <https://edu.uhk.cz/africa/index.php/ModAfr/article/view/120>



University of Hradec Králové  
Philosophical Faculty

## OBITUARY

Ali A. Mazrui (1933–2014)



The famous African political scientist died at the age of 81 in the United States where he taught politics for the last 40 years. He was laid to rest in the 900-year old family cemetery in Mombasa, Kenya, the town where he was also born. A Muslim of Afro-Arab descent, born into a Swahili and Arabic bilingual environment, Mazrui instead of Al-Azhar went on to study at Manchester, Columbia and Oxford where he acquired a perfect proficiency in English and matchless erudition on politics, history and society, on Africa, the Arab world, Islam and the world at large. He was perhaps the most important scholar who brought Africa into the world context. Mazrui coined the term Afrabia, denoting the intertwined nature of Africa with the Arab world. Mazrui served at the faculties of the Makerere University (1966-1973), University of Michigan (1974–1989) and then until his death he was an Albert Schweitzer Professor of Political Science at the Binghamton University. Even though he opposed Rodney's radical theories, upon his formal retirement, he accepted the first Walter Rodney professorship at Georgetown, Guyana. Concurrently he held faculty appointments at Jos, Ithaca and Nairobi. He was known as an excellent teacher and lecturer. Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová worked for a year as his assistant at Makerere and she remembers him as a vivid, warm personality accessible to the younger adepts of African studies.

Mazrui's arguably most important contribution was on the role of culture in politics. His book *Cultural Forces in World Politics* (1990) had to be published in England because the Westview Press in the

U.S. wanted to purge three chapters from the book: Rushdie's Satanic Verses as cultural treason, comparison of Palestinian intifada with the Tiananmen rebellion, and finally comparing South African apartheid homelands with the Zionist doctrine of separate states for Jews and Arabs. Mazrui was close to Amilcar Cabral in appreciating the role of culture in politics but otherwise he championed a liberal approach against the tour de force of most Marxists. In contrast to the latter he divided the world history into the three imperatives: god, gold and glory: "the pre-capitalist world upheld a universe of the supremacy of God. The capitalist phase manifested the supremacy of gold. In the post-capitalist world which is governed by the supremacy of glory, the main issue is whether that glory is sectional or planetary, chauvinist or humane" (1990: 29). In Mazrui's conception god, gold and glory have been as important in cultural expansion as the modern revolutionary slogan "liberté, égalité, fraternité."

He argued that the biggest contributors to world culture are the Semites (Jews and Arabs) and the Europeans. While the former tried to change the world through religion, thus introducing the theocratic approach to cultural universalism, the latter strived to change the world through science and technology, which is the technocratic approach.

Early in his career Mazrui criticised monarchic and militaristic tendencies in independent Africa. He branded Kwame Nkrumah as a Leninist czar. But Mazrui was also an ardent Pan-Africanist and there he appreciated Nkrumah highly. He was one of the initiators of the First Pan-African Congress on Reparations, held in Abuja in 1993. He also admired Julius Nyerere for his honest even though unsuccessful reach towards the Tanzanian village. He was a strong critic of socialism as unsuitable for Africa but did not hesitate to call Karl Marx „the last of the great Jewish prophets“. That was said in his very successful television series „The Africans“ but only in the British version while in the American version the phrase was purged.

Mazrui was an excellent commentator and he was a respected public figure. Although he never sacrificed scientific quality of his work, he was able to popularise science skillfully and eloquently. I have been present at two of Mazrui's lectures and was surprised by the ease with which he managed to explain even the most complicated political conundrums. Best of all, perhaps, he was able to present the qualities of

his thinking when explaining Islam and its relationship to modernity and the West. While being a strong oponent of Islamist radicalism and terrorism, he saw in Islam political and moral precepts which could not only be acceptable for the West but used as examples of tolerance and cooperation between political cultures. Mazrui was a relentless critic of western cultural imperialism in Africa and the Muslim world. Throughout his long career he published more than 30 books and dozens of articles in major journals. His penetrating mind which did not shy away from controversy will be missed especially among those Africanists who cherish scholarship that freely moved in different cultures but did not hesitate to be critical when cultural bias would limit reason. One commentator saw in him a truly global African who managed to make Africa visible in the world of ideas, by portraying the continent correctly. I think this best characterises him.

Petr Skalník

### **Major works by Ali A. Mazrui**

2008. *Islam in Africa's Experience*. Editor: Ali Mazrui, Patrick Dikirr, Robert Ostergard Jr., Michael Toler and Paul Macharia. New Delhi: Sterling Paperbacks.
2008. *Euro-Jews and Afro-Arabs: The Great Semitic Divergence in History*. Editor: Seifudein Adem, Washington, DC: University of America Press.
- 2008: *The Politics of War and Culture of Violence*. Editor: Seifudein Adem and Abdul Bemath. New Jersey: Africa World Press.
- 2008: *Globalization and Civilization: Are they Forces in Conflict?* [editor: Ali Mazrui, Patrick Dikirr, Shalahudin Kafrawi]. New York: Global Academic Publications.
- 2006: *A Tale of two Africas: Nigeria and South Africa as Contrasting Visions*. Editor: James N. Karioki. London: Adonis & Abbey.
- 2006: *Islam: Between Globalization & Counter-Terrorism*. Editors: Shalahudin Kafrawi, Alamin M. Mazrui and Ruzima Sebuharara. Trenton, NJ and Asmara: Africa World Press.
- 2004: *The African Predicament and the American Experience: A Tale of Two Edens*. Westport, CT and London: Praeger.
- 2002: *Black Reparations in the Era of Globalization* [with Alamin Mazrui]. Binghamton: The Institute of Global Cultural Studies.
- 2002: *The Titan of Tanzania: Julius K. Nyerere's Legacy* Binghamton: The Institute of Global Cultural Studies.

- 2002: *Africa and other Civilizations: Conquest and Counter-Conquest, The Collected Essays of Ali A. Mazrui*, Vol. 2. Series editor: Toyin Falola; Editors: Ricardo Rene Laremont & Fouad Kalouche]. Trenton, NJ and Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- 2002: *Africanity Redefined, The Collected Essays of Ali A. Mazrui*, Vol. 1. Series Editor: Toyin Falola; Editors: Ricardo Rene Laremont & Tracia Leacock Seghatolislami. Trenton, NJ. and Asmara: Africa World Press.
- 1999: *Political Culture of Language: Swahili, Society and the State* [with Alamin M. Mazrui]. Binghamton: The Institute of Global Cultural Studies.
- 1999: *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* [co-editors Isidore Okpewho and Carole Boyce Davies]. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1998: *The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience* [with Alamin M. Mazrui]. Oxford: James Currey and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1995: *Swahili, State and Society: The Political Economy of an African Language* [with Alamin M. Mazrui] (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers).
- 1993: *Africa since 1935: VOL. VIII of UNESCO General History of Africa*. Editor; asst. ed. C. Wondji. London: Heinemann and Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1990: *Cultural Forces in World Politics*. London: James Currey, Portsmouth, NH and Nairobi: Heinemann.
- 1986: *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. New York: Little Brown and Co., and London: BBC.
- 1986: *The Africans: A Reader Senior Editor* [with T.K. Levine]. New York: Praeger.
1984. *Nationalism and New States in Africa: From about 1935 to the Present* [with Michael Tidy]. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
1980. *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis* [The Reith Lectures]. London: Heinemann Educational Books. and New York: Cambridge University Press.
1978. *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* [editor] (The Hague and Leiden: E.J. Brill.
1978. *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. London: Heinemann Educational Books and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
1977. *Africa's International Relations: The Diplomacy of Dependency and Change*. London: Heinemann Educational Books and Boulder: Westview Press.
1976. *A World Federation of Cultures: An African Perspective*. New York: Free Press.
1975. *Soldiers and Kinsmen in Uganda: The Making of a Military Ethnocracy*. Beverly Hills and London: Sage.
1975. *The Political Sociology of the English Language: An African Perspective*. The Hague: Mouton.

1973. *World Culture and the Black Experience*. Seattle: University of Washington Press).
1973. *Africa in World Affairs: The Next Thirty Years* [co-edited with Hasu Patel]. New York and London: The Third Press.
1971. *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* [novel]. London: Heinemann Educational Books and New York: The Third Press.
1971. *Cultural Engineering and Nation-Building in East Africa*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
1970. *Protest and Power in Black Africa*. Co-edited with Robert I. Rotberg. New York: Oxford University Press.
1969. *Violence and Thought: Essays on Social Tensions in Africa*. London and Harlow: Longman.
1967. *Towards a Pax Africana: A Study of Ideology and Ambition*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson and Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
1967. *On Heroes and Uhuru-Worship: Essays on Independent Africa*. London: Longman.
1967. *The Anglo-African Commonwealth: Political Friction and Cultural Fusion*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.