

OBITUARY

Abdul Samed Bemath (10 October 1944 – 31 July 2020)

The name of Abdul Bemath will be familiar to readers of *ARD*. He appeared frequently in the reviews pages, both as reviewer and reviewed. He is best known for his dedicated and indefatigable documentation of the words and works of Ali Mazrui. Abdul was unashamedly passionate about the man and his writings and Mazrui himself said that Bemath located work that he had forgotten he had written. He was also a master of the art of indexing, twice winning the Association of South African Indexers and Bibliographers (ASAIB) Award for the best index of the year, and twice being runner up.

Abdul was born in Newclare, Johannesburg, into a South African Indian and Muslim family. His schooling was cut short by the Apartheid regime's imposition of segregated schooling and the early death of his father. He began work for Pilot Radios but his passion for reading and learning was deeply engrained. In his early twenties he was able at last to complete his formal education at High School and he matriculated at the age of 25.

In 1974 while working as a laboratory assistant at the Geology Department at the white University of the Witwatersrand he found his way to the Africana and International Affairs Library where he discovered Mazrui, a fellow African and a fellow Muslim. He went on to complete a BA in Sociology and Politics and an Honours Degree in Developmental Administration, specialising in African politics and registered for a Higher Diploma in Library Science. He joined the staff of Lenasia (his home town) Secondary School as a librarian assistant teacher. His first job as a librarian was with the South African Institute of Race Relations where he worked until 1990. He later joined the Johannesburg office of the Financial Times of London as a research assistant. There, he was known as a treasure trove of information.

In 1990 Abdul met Mazrui for the first time in Johannesburg where he came to deliver the Archbishop Desmond Tutu Lecture. The two developed an active correspondence and in 1995 Abdul proposed to Mazrui that he compile an annotated bibliography. Mazrui cautioned him that a librarian in East Africa had already tried and failed to keep up with his output. Abdul was not deterred. His quest for every word written by or about Mazrui was pursued through correspondence, networking and library visits. The resulting volumes were hailed as masterpieces of the bibliographer's art. They occupied him for the rest of his life, alongside exemplary works of indexing.

Abdul imbibed a deep sense of justice, honour, respect and integrity from his Islamic upbringing. He observed the requirements of prayer five times a day, and read the Quran almost daily throughout his life. Modest about his own

achievements, he yet touched many lives, taking a personal interest in the affairs of local high school and university students, the local schools, street dwellers, beggars and the vulnerable. He loved children and in the last few years of his life, he would treat children in the neighbourhood to pizza on a Saturday afternoon and to Sunday Lunch at a local restaurant. Mazrui's family as well as his own loved and honoured him.

His voice can be heard in a radio interview recorded with the "Voice of the African Renaissance" some years ago – <https://iono.fm/e/401537> – in which he speaks of his passion for knowledge and passing it on. It was as a librarian that he wished to be remembered.

A tribute from the Library of Congress can be found at <https://blogs.loc.gov/international-collections/2020/09/in-memoriam-abdul-samed-bemath-a-committed-librarian/>

Major Works

The Mazruiana collection: a comprehensive bibliography of the published works of Ali A. Mazrui, 1962-1997, 1998

Southern African political history : a chronology of key political events from independence to mid-1997, compiled by Jacqueline A. Kalley, Elna Schoeman, and L.E. Andor ; assisted by Abdul Samed Bemath, Claire Kruger, and Beth Strachan; 1999

The Mazruiana collection revisited: Ali A Mazrui debating the African condition: an annotated and select thematic bibliography 1962-2003, 2005 (Winner of the ASAIB Award for Best Bibliography 2004-2005)

A giant tree has fallen: tributes to Ali Al'amin Mazrui, edited by Seifudein Adem, Jideofor Adibe, Abdul Karim Bangura and Abdul Samed Bemath, 2016

Ali A. Mazrui: reflections on and by an Africanist, scholar and poet: an annotated and select thematic bibliography (2003-2018), 2019 (reviewed in ARD 137)



*Abdul Bemath meets Nelson Mandela
Photograph supplied by Ismail Bemath*