



# The Power of Babel: Language and Governance in the African Experience

*Ali A. Mazrui, Alamin M. Mazrui*

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Linguists estimate that there are currently nearly 2,000 languages in Africa, a staggering figure that is belied by the relatively few national languages. While African national politics, economics, and law are all conducted primarily in the colonial languages, the cultural life of the majority of citizens is conducted in a bewildering Babel of local and regional dialects, making language itself the center of debates over multiculturalism, gender studies, and social theory. In *The Power of Babel*, the noted Africanist scholar Ali Mazrui and linguist Alamin Mazrui explore this vast territory of African language.

*The Power of Babel* is one of the first comprehensive studies of the complex linguistic constellations of Africa. It draws on Ali Mazrui's earlier work in its examination of the "triple heritage" of African culture, in which indigenous, Islamic, and Western traditions compete for influence. In bringing the idea of the triple heritage to language, the Mazruis unravel issues of power, culture, and modernity as they are embedded in African linguistic life.

The first section of the book takes a global perspective, exploring such issues as the Eurocentrism of much linguistic scholarship on Africa; part two takes an African perspective on a variety of issues from the linguistically disadvantaged position of women in Africa to the relation of language policy and democratic development; the third section presents a set of regional studies, centering on the Swahili language's exemplification of the triple heritage. *The Power of Babel* unites empirical information with theories of nationalism and pluralism—among others—to offer the richest contextual account of African languages to date.

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