CONVERSATION · NYBALF 2026

Mahmood Mamdani: Slow Poison

Mahmood Mamdani in conversation with Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún

FESTIVAL	NYBALF 2026 (second edition), The Village in the Book: Literature and the Near
DATE	19 September 2026
VENUE	Harlem Stage, The Gatehouse, New York
RECORDING	52:12 · youtube.com/watch?v=RhuXLS_kcoQ
PRESENTED BY	Harlem Stage. Supported by the Open Society Foundations

How do the categories of colonial rule outlive colonialism? In conversation with Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún, Mahmood Mamdani discusses Slow Poison, his account of Uganda under Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni, and explains why, after decades of writing as an academic observer, he wrote himself into the book as its fourth character. He reads his first encounters with Amin at Makerere in 1972 and with Museveni in Dar es Salaam, and answers headlines that presented the book as an apology for Amin.

Mamdani traces how Amin was shaped by the British army and its methods of counterinsurgency, why his rule became popular after the expulsions of 1972, and how colonial distinctions between natives and migrants survived independence across Africa. The conversation moves through V. S. Naipaul's pessimism and an optimism that, in Kampala, had to be willed; Museveni's choice of power over conviction; Israel's long involvement in Uganda's security services; and why American nativism belongs to a different history. In the audience questions, Mamdani discusses generational views of Museveni, a state Pan-Africanism, and his argument that African studies should study the world from an African vantage point.

CONTENTS

0:00 Introduction: Mahmood Mamdani and Slow Poison
1:50 Why this book, and why now: writing himself into the story
4:27 An apology for Amin? The book against its headlines
6:45 First encounters: Amin at Makerere, Museveni in Dar es Salaam
10:12 Decolonization, and how Amin was made
14:57 Why Amin was popular: kingship, land and a truth commission
20:08 Native and migrant: the colonial question independence inherited
26:33 Naipaul, Kampala and an optimism that had to be willed
28:43 Did Museveni change? Power over conviction
32:23 Reception in Uganda, and Israel's long role
38:05 Is American nativism the same story?
40:40 Audience Q&A: Museveni and the generations, state pan-Africanism
45:11 African studies: the world from our own vantage point
50:20 Closing question: optimism as a will to change the world

0:00

Introduction: Mahmood Mamdani and Slow Poison

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 0:01

He earned his BA from the University of Pittsburgh, an MA from Tufts University and his PhD from Harvard in 1974. His books include Citizen and Subject, 1996; When Victims Become Killers, 2001; Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, 2004; Neither Settler nor Native, 2020. And the one we're discussing today, Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State, 2025. [Applause] He is also the father of the New York City mayor, Zohran Mamdani. A round of applause for our professor, please. Just in case you don't know. He was recently appointed as the Director of African Studies at Columbia University, which is probably a good place to start. Thank you for coming. We welcome you and we're happy that you've graced our stage with your presence.

Your book is Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State. It's a book I really enjoyed reading because it examines and makes us question what citizenship means on the African continent. And it has a unique position, unique point of view in that your you were a victim of one of the administrations you critiqued, that of Idi Amin, who exiled South Asians in 1972. But let me give you a chance to tell us why you decided to write the book and why now.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 1:49

Thank you.

1:50

Why this book, and why now: writing himself into the story

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 1:50

So, why did I decide to write the book and why now? Yes. My PhD thesis was on Uganda. And the first book that I published was a book on being expelled from Uganda called From Citizen to Refugee. Since then I've moved away from Uganda, although the Ugandan experience has always shaped my perspective and point of view. So I thought it was time to write on Uganda, but to write a different kind of books. The difference being that I wrote as an academic for decades, and that meant claiming to be an objective impartial observer to stand outside and look inside. And I said to myself that no, this book has to be different. I didn't say to myself, actually, my wife and my son, my partner and my son who you already introduced.

So they said to me, look, when we're sitting and talking, you tell us all these stories. So where are they now? Why don't you bring them into the book? And I thought, yes, but once I began to bring the stories into the book, I realized that I was part of the story. I was not an external observer. I couldn't claim objectivity. I had to own up to a point of view. And that was a learning experience for me. So this book has several characters. Idi Amin is one of them. Yoweri Museveni is the other. Julius Nyerere is the third. And I'm the fourth. So I expose myself in a way and I present myself as a target, possibly.

4:27

An apology for Amin? The book against its headlines

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 4:27

I think one of the first things that struck me when I first heard about the book, even before I read it, long before I was called to come moderate this conversation was that when the book was announced many of the headlines in the news took the position, the point of view that Mamdani has written a book that apologizes for Idi Amin. And I thought that was awkward because I know your background of South Asian African that you must have been part of those victims of Amin's regime. But a lot of the media narrative kept doing that one-sided type of narrative. So I was really curious to see how you were going to talk about it.

And of course, like you said, you implicated yourself in the beginning as being a part of it. And yet... I came away getting a very nuanced view of the Amin regime, of course, because again, I was born in 81. So all the things we knew about Amin was from The Last King of Scotland or the one where he was eating human flesh and all of that and many people of my generation that's all they knew about him so it was interesting to read a different perspective But again from somebody you don't usually expect it from especially someone who had suffered the consequences of the Amin's regime So I was very curious when I read it to know how you were able to suspend that part of you that must be resentful, must have been resentful from having to deal with that expulsion of Asians that happened and yet been able to as an academic observe him and observe the administration and what it meant for

Uganda and contrasted, of course, with Museveni but before we get there Amin himself and the subject and how did you feel when you were reading about how people thought of the book at least when it first came out?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 6:30

Well I didn't suspend any part of me. I learnt as I went on, as I did the research, and as I began to write.

6:45

First encounters: Amin at Makerere, Museveni in Dar es Salaam

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 6:45

You asked me to read something. -

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 6:49

Yeah, use the mic. -

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 6:51

Oh. You asked me to read something which would... My introduction to Amin and Yoweri Museveni. I'll first do that and then I'll answer your question. [Reading from Slow Poison] I first saw Idi Amin in 1972 after I returned home to Kampala from the US to begin research on my doctoral thesis. Ali Mazrui, the head of the political science department at Kampala's Makerere University, had suggested I join the department. I'm sorry, as a teaching assistant, which I was delighted to do. That same year, Amin came to Makerere to preside over the university's 50th anniversary celebrations. From the moment he arrived, Amin was the center of attention. As he took the podium, Amin's remarks had the effect of a tremor.

"I came here with a battalion of soldiers so that when you lift your heads from your books, who has power." We were stunned. Then came an even more outrageous statement. Quote, "On my way to the main hall, I stopped at Mulago, the university hospital. I looked at your records. I see that most of you are suffering from gonorrhea. I will not tolerate you spreading political gonorrhea in Uganda." This was my introduction to Amin's many uses of public buffoonery as a political performance. A year later I joined the University of Dar es Salaam as a young lecturer. There I met Yoweri Museveni who had graduated from the university and taken a job as an instructor at the cooperative college in Moshi, Tanzania.

I had heard of him as the charismatic head of the university student's African Revolutionary Front at the University of Dar es Salaam. Perched on a hill several miles from the city center, the university campus was generally known as the hill. Never a shortage of anecdotal stories when it came to Museveni. One went like this. In the week after Mao's death, Chairman Mao, Museveni was teaching at the cooperative college. Before class began, he walked to the blackboard and wrote something like,

“Marx was a great man.” Marx is dead. Lenin was a great man. Lenin is dead. Mao was a great man. Mao too is dead. I too am not feeling so well. There was little reason to think of Museveni as modest. [End of reading] Now, what was your question?

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 9:48

Okay, let me phrase it this way. Excavating your memory of the exile from Uganda and being able to write about it. What did you discover about yourself and how were you able to look at Amin’s regime enough to be able to write about it? Dispassionately in some way.

10:12

Decolonization, and how Amin was made

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 10:12

Look, when I came to write the book. When I came back to Uganda in 1972, I was a Pan-Africanist. And of course I was kicked out of Uganda as a non-African. This got me thinking. When I started writing the book, I was interested in the question of decolonization. And I had read as much material as I could on it. I understood that most people who wrote on decolonization wrote from a theoretical point of view. They had the vantage point of what is decolonization. It is economic liberation, Not Yet Uhuru, the title of one book, or it is epistemological. You must think afresh, not just take on. The sediments of thinking that the empire has left behind.

But everybody, even Fanon, theoretical. And as I researched Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni, both, I realized that both of them at some point saw themselves as anti-colonial. And yet, of course, they had very, very different trajectories. I decided to read more and more to find out what changed. I realized that you could not write about Amin as a singular character who had not changed over time, who was born in particular person for most people evil and died evil. I realized that he had gone through tremendous transformations. Amin was recruited in the British Army as a child soldier. The British even changed his date of birth so that he would not be registered as a child soldier, but two years older.

I realized that Amin was trained in the art of counterinsurgency, which is a polite name given to state torture. Amin used to boast of how he could kill Mau Mau guerrillas with just a single handkerchief. When he was sent to northern Uganda to discipline pastoralists, his mode of disciplining was to kill the first few that he came so on and so forth. When Amin came to power, he was accused of mass murder. The killing of over a thousand pro-Obote soldiers in different camps. If you read the British press and the Western press generally during that period they loved Amin. They hailed him as this great son of Africa who was a baboon, but he was a lovable baboon. They described him in a language in which they would describe life in the jungle. And then Amin changed. He changed dramatically.

14:57

Why Amin was popular: kingship, land and a truth commission

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 14:57

That change took place in one year when he expelled three different groups from Uganda. The first were the Israelis, the second were the Asians, the third were the British. The Israelis and the British tried to overthrow him. For as long as he was in power, they couldn't succeed. We can talk about what interests you. But all I'm saying is they couldn't overthrow him because he was very popular. And the reason he was popular began with the Asian expulsion. But its particular reasons were that he addressed some of the most trenchant issues in Ugandan society. The first one was kingship, the return of the kabaka of Buganda. And you could see he was not playing for popular support because when the kabaka's body was returned from England, He gave a speech interring the kabaka's bones into the earth and he said, "Here we bury the kabaka, but we also bury the notion of kingship."

Which was stunning. Nobody could say anything. Because they loved it that it brought the kabaka's body back. But they couldn't go beyond that. Second thing he did was to take the land question. We had been a huge issue since the British came in, in 1900, and since they had distributed 8,000 square miles of land to 1,000 of their supporters. Those landlords treated the supporters as their tenants and squeezed rent out of them. Amin now nationalized the land and declared the right of occupancy for the tiller. This was the second huge change. Third change he brought in was that Amin, when he came to power, had sort of passed a decree that soldiers could arrest anybody on suspicion.

And this led to a terrible state of affairs, spreading of arrests, but also rogue soldiers renting their equipment and revenge dealing in large parts of the country. So at one point the chief of police, it also set the soldiers against the police because the police were in charge of civic order. At some point the chief of police along with a number of his lieutenants came to see Amin and briefed him on the situation in the country. Amin appointed the Commission of Inquiry, a very small Commission of Inquiry. It's the first truth commission appointed to my knowledge, in Africa in the modern period. Before the Latin American Truth Commissions, before the South African Truth Commission, this Truth Commission was not charged with looking at crimes of past regimes, but was charged with looking at Amin's own regime.

This is the first big difference. So this commission went around the country for a year. Initially, people were not very open to it. After all, it was a commission appointed by Amin. And he was asking people about the time of Amin. But gradually, word spread that the Commission was open to whatever stories people had to give. And it became, the reception got warmer and warmer. The commission was headed by an Indian judge who… I won't go into his… Let's not spoil all of the book for those who haven't read it.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 19:54

Sorry?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 19:54

I said let's not spoil the book for those who haven't read it. My wife always says that I do that. I don't want to tell them everything in the book.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 20:02

It's finished, I see. And they will read it. Let me steer you in a different direction.

20:08

Native and migrant: the colonial question independence inherited

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 20:08

One of the fascinating things about the book, in my opinion is your examination of the concept of citizenship from your own life using Amin and Obote, and not much Obote, Amin and Museveni and their regimes. And you've mentioned a few of them about how they each approached the idea of nationalism. Amin thought removing everyone else, Israelis, the English and the Asians would make Africa what he thought the future needed to look like. Museveni came with a different promise and at some point you and many other people gave him a chance to prove himself, give him a listen there. I was written about the NRM today and what kind of institution it was when it started.

And he pretended and convinced the world that he was a different administration and got everyone to hail him as the antidote to Amin. But in the end nominally allowed Asians back but as not as citizens even though you well you're not born your parents were born in East Africa and your grandparents had lived there for generations and defining citizenship. The Nubi, which Amin belonged to, also, as you said in the book, also were migrants, like most early African societies. And so wrestling with the idea that just because you had come from somewhere else meant you didn't fit in this space and having to walk without, throughout the different administrations that came in, I thought was very fundamental part of the book.

And what has that taught you as a person who has had to go through all of this, who's lived in the US, who has lived on the continent, and following all the news of things going on every day now in South Africa, in Kenya, in Nigeria, we had our own Ghana Must Go as well. Seems to be the same conversation we keep having about who belongs, who is a citizen, and how much do you think this is a peculiar story to Uganda and or just a story of humanity and inherent of, latent tribalism?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 22:27

If you take a step back, you realize the story is not peculiar to Uganda. But, at least I realized that it was a distinctive story so far as Africa was concerned, for one reason. The political economy of colonialism in Africa was based on distinguishing between, if I may use the word natives, indigenous people, and migrants. The British… Then the French, then the Portuguese encouraged migrants from outside. And they encouraged migrants to come and occupy spaces which were the most sensitive. So

whether these spaces were soldiers… Like the Nubi. In fact, the first soldiers were not just the Nubi; they were also Indians, Indian Sikhs and Muslims, and they were brought in as soldiers, migrant labor, people working within the state.

So, and then they crafted a political structure which made a distinct political distinction between migrants and natives and privileged migrants at the expense of natives. When independence came, it was time to turn the world upside down even if you didn't manage to change the world. It was the same world, but different people on top, different people at the bottom. And I think every African country has had to deal with this question. Migrants and natives. What is to be the pecking order? How is the polity to be organized? If you look at the nationalist movements, the first nationalist movements considered the nation as simply natives. Nobody else. Then came radical nationalism. Radical nationalism considered the nation to be Africans.

Then came the question, who is an African? Again, it has its own different responses. The ANC had a response with Freedom Charter in 1954 saying, "South Africa belongs to all those who live in it." But the ANC never really practiced it, of course. Right up to their meeting in Zambia in the 1980s, the ANC did not allow non-black people to join its leadership. The ones who practiced it in South Africa were Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. Biko said, If you are oppressed, you are black. And he created an organization which completely subverted the apartheid architecture and brought together Coloured, Indian, African in the language of the time in a single group called Black.

So this has been a long story. Africa has been wrestling with itself. Now that South Africa has gone-- into this thing they call makwerekwere. We're seeing a second chapter. But it's a story that we are part of. And we have no choice but to be part of.

26:33

Naipaul, Kampala and an optimism that had to be willed

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 26:32

Thank you.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 26:33

I'm a little curious about a while ago I read this biography of V.S. Naipaul by Paul Theroux. And it was while reading a book that I recall that there were parts of it when Naipaul lived in Uganda and he kept telling everyone who could hear him that this place is going to go to the bushes, there's no hope there. And so he kept his cynicism all through before he eventually left. You had an optimism and wanted to be always felt as being a part of society. And you also described other Asian Africans like Rajat Neogy who edited Transition Magazine. What do you think Naipaul saw that was different from your own time and why do you think he never got that same sense of optimism that you did?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 27:27

Among many other people who lived there. If you lived in Uganda in that period, optimism had to be willed. It was optimism. Naipaul was passing through. And for Naipaul, everything sooner or later turned into a confirmation of the same thing. He turned into a skeptic. Anyway, but he spent one year at Makerere and then he went on. My own experience was, well, I was from Kampala. How? It's not easy to tell yourself that this place is damned. I still don't believe it's damned. And we had different ways of arriving at very different conclusions.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 28:36

Okay, that's a good answer. That's a good answer.

28:43

Did Museveni change? Power over conviction

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 28:43

I'm curious about something else, the book itself and how it's been. It's been received in Uganda because I know that you had contact with Museveni and his administration long before he even became president and you were colleagues at some point in the university. What did you think, what did you not see in him at the time? Or how was that? Do you think there was anything you missed about this character as an academic or as a freedom fighter at the time before he had power? that you found only when or is it just power that changed him? Or did you think he was always that kind of person? He's been in power for decades now. - And he's almost... -

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 29:27

Over four decades.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 29:28

Almost a hundred years old.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 29:30

Many of my friends in Kampala believe that Museveni was always like this. It was our problem that we never managed to see this. They think it was my problem. That it took me time to understand it. But I don't agree with them. I don't agree that Museveni had an innate characteristic which revealed itself over time. I think Museveni also learned, like Amin learned, both of them learned. And I think the human capacity to learn is the premise with which we must begin. Anytime we study anything. So, one thing Museveni had from the beginning was a conviction that violence will change things. Same conviction Amin had. I don't want to spoil the book. He went to Mozambique, etc.

You know, I remember two years after, I don't have this in the book, but two years after we came, we returned to Uganda in 1979. No, '86, two years after he came to power, there were demonstrations at the university. One student was killed. And at that time I still had contact with Museveni. I called him up and I said, "Look." I still didn't call him Mr. President. I called him Yoweri. I said, "Yoweri, you realize

what this means?" He said, "But you don't understand." I said, "What don't I understand?" He said, "This is about the state. We have to build the state." I said, "Who is this man I'm talking to?" But anyway, he learned, he learned.

He came to a point where there was no money in the treasury. He had sent delegations all over the world to anybody who would listen to the Islamic Conference, to the Commonwealth. Everybody had the same answer. Come to an agreement with the IMF and the World Bank and then come and talk to us. Finally he decided he had to do this. So it was between power and convictions.

32:23

Reception in Uganda, and Israel's long role

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 32:23

He had to keep power.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 32:25

Do you think he's read the book? And what has been the reception in Uganda?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 32:31

I don't know if he's read the book. Sometimes I think he has because the thing is that there has been no official response to the book. Except for one ambassador at the UN who wrote a kind of, as you would expect, a nasty kind of response, but nothing, no details, no depth, anything. Museveni is not one to remain quiet. But he hasn't said a word about the book, not a word. I go in and out of Uganda. Here we go. Even our son had his wedding party in Kampala. The mayor of New York City. The mayor. The mayor. Yes. Did you guys know that?

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 33:26

And you're safe when you go to Uganda. You're not persecuted or anything. Right here, right here. You're in the US. when you go to Uganda. I asked because I know what critics face in Africa and I know what happened to Ngũgĩ when he went to Kenya. So I just want to be sure.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 33:45

True. there has been terrible repression of opposition figures in Uganda. I've been safe. Okay. I think I've been safe because I took the risk. Because I said to myself, if I don't go, then it'll be more difficult next time.

KỌ́LÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 34:08

Yeah. I agree. And there'll be speculation. Why hasn't it come? Yeah. True. I have two more questions and I'll give the audience a chance to ask. I'm told you have to leave at five. First one... It's about the Israeli role in bringing Amin into power, which people pushed back on and I didn't understand. When I read the book, I was like, it makes sense that he, Israeli intelligence helped him overthrow Obote. And

when he decided that he wanted to consolidate power, they were the first, one of the first he had to evict from the country. And of course, the British and the South Asians. And because there was the Entebbe siege and all. I read a few weeks ago that there was a statue of Yoni Netanyahu at the airport.

So what do you think of that new rapprochement with the Israeli government by the Museveni regime? And yeah, what do you think it tells us about anything?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 35:20

Well, the rapprochement is not new. Israeli intelligence has been involved in the Ugandan security services ever since Museveni came to power. And the relations are very, very close. But this statue, this kind of visible display, I don't think it's Museveni doing it, it's his son.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 35:49

Who wants to be the next president, of course?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 35:53

Well, he acts as the current president. He's...

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 36:04

Mohammed bin Salman of Uganda.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 36:06

Yeah, the Crown Prince. Not a surprise. Museveni would not have done it that way. It's more subtle.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 36:22

Does it tell us anything about what to expect of African countries and the new world we live in? New alliances, new colonial relationships between African countries and empire, powers. Does anything we can learn from this new, at least this new public conversation between Uganda and Israel? in this case, especially because of the past they've had. Entebbe, because I don't know why you have the statue in the airport in... Kampala.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 37:00

That's when Netanyahu's brother was killed.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 37:03

Yeah. So this is commemorating.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 37:08

But some Ugandans, we killed that too.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 37:11

Yes, yes. And there are no statues of them.

NEW YORK BLACK AND AFRICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 37:13

No, no, but this guy is trying to ingratiate himself with Netanyahu. That's what I'm saying. He's even promised to send troops.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 37:21

But Ugandan troops are going into Gaza. Right. That's what I'm saying. This is all… What's your feeling about it?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 37:30

Well, it's kind of more of the same because Uganda has been sending in troops encouraged by the US. Starting with Rwanda, then Somalia, South Sudan, Eastern Congo. It's not a big surprise.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 37:50

Okay, we have 15 more minutes, 20 more minutes. I have a last question and if you let me, I'm going to go on forever. There are several areas of the book that I wanted to explore but the time is going by. Here we'll be able to sign the books when after we're done. Hopefully we have some time.

38:05

Is American nativism the same story?

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 38:05

My last question is about a young man who was born in Uganda who migrated to the US. No, no, no, no, let me finish. I'm not asking about the man himself, but what the…

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 38:22

You're asking about the father.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 38:23

No, I know, I know. I'm asking about having read your book and the issue of citizenship I kept talking about and how you engage with that from an African perspective. I asked you earlier whether you think it's a uniquely Ugandan story or something that we can find almost anywhere. And I realized that you would probably also have a perspective on the on whether there are parallels or whether it's the same kind of situation we're dealing with in the US or whether it's just different. Do you think it's the same issue? when elections happen in here, oh, they want to find where you're from, where you're born, et cetera, et cetera. Is it the same type of issue we're dealing with in Africa, or is America unique in its own type of nativism, so to speak?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 39:20

I mean, America is a settler country. It's a different issue here. America is a settler country where the distinction between migrants and locals is a different one. Uganda, colonies like Uganda, are places where migrants were understood to be a privileged category and now are seen as rightful recipients of what they're getting. I don't think it's the same story. See? It was an easy question.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 40:14

Thank you very much.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 40:15

I could write a book about it.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 40:16

You should. Thank you very much. It's a really lovely book. There's so much that we haven't talked about. That's in the book. I encourage everyone to buy it and read it. I also want us to give a round of applause for Mira Nair, who is here, and she supports the professor. And we'll pass the mic around for some questions.

40:40

Audience Q&A: Museveni and the generations, state pan-Africanism

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 40:40

Thank you so much and thank you Professor Mamdani for this really really exciting book. For someone who works on Uganda and Rwanda, this is really getting to the heart of the matter. My question is around whether you think there's a generation or divide around perceptions of Museveni. So if I ask my parents, what are your perceptions of Museveni? There's great fear that comes with this idea of Museveni not being there anymore, particularly because he represented a type of peace and stability when he came into power. And any alternative is perceived with great fear and anxiety. Whilst with a younger generation, there tends to be an openness to something because of course what is the constant for people like myself, we've never known any other president, it's always been with Museveni.

So the possibility of something different that could be better is something that we're open to, but the parents are saying, no, don't you dare dream or imagine something else. My other question, sorry, which is very quick, is around this question of Pan-Africanism. You mentioned that you were a Pan-Africanist when you sort of ventured to Uganda and were engaging in those initial conversations with Museveni and you engaged with that as well in the book. And you mentioned this idea of running into Kabila in Kampala and running into people like Kabarebe from Rwanda as well. And I wanted to ask whether you think that there was a, in this particular period, a sort of a type of fermenting of pan-Africanness within that context in the 1980s, 1970s Uganda that has fundamentally shaped the region of, the Great Lakes region of Africa in a way that we sort of continue to grapple with today.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 42:32

So many questions. So, for the older generation people of my generation. Museveni is a code word for order, discipline order. For the younger generation, Museveni is the opposite, disorder, anarchy. The older generation, especially those with property, wants to safeguard that property the younger generation are less likely to be in that situation. I forgot the second part of your question. Oh, the Pan-Africanism. Well. Uganda has historically been considered a very parochial society. And many people in

Kenya and Tanzania used to say that Amin made Ugandans pan-Africanist because it forced many, he forced many to seek refuge outside the country and therefore to open their eyes to the world around them. It's a-- well, it's not a very satisfactory explanation of what happened.

But there's a different pan-Africanism in Uganda today, which is a state pan-Africanism. And the state pan-Africanism claims that Uganda-- can be the liberator of Africa, whether it's Rwanda or Somalia or Eastern Congo, or it's kind of an imperial Pan-Africanism. It's a Pan-Africanism which ingratiates itself to the US, but also-- plays kind of a game with the US bargaining what they would get from this.

45:11

African studies: the world from our own vantage point

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 45:11

–

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 45:12

Thank you so much, Professor Mamdani. My question is, I know you answered all these questions about citizenship. I don't want to rehash. I'm My question is about African studies because now you've been appointed the Director of the African Studies Department, or the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University. What has changed about African Studies? Have you changed your mind when you wrote this paper in the London Review of Books and you described it as disciplinary nationalism? Or the particular idea of area studies as something really problematic and that actually comes from the United States. So could you, what has changed about African studies? It's something that really is moving in a different direction from what it was in the 1960s?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 46:22

Look, when I became director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research in 2010, I made my point of view very clear because we had an extended discussion on what kind of teaching and study we were going to promote. And I said we're not going to be an area studies institute. We are not going to study ourselves separate from the world. We are actually going to study the world from our vantage point because we're part of the world. The world is not something out there. We are part of the world. And we opened up-- admissions to students from different, mainly from Africa, but not just from Africa, also from different parts of the world. We had language requirements which forced every student to be able to study not only his or her mother tongue, but also another African language besides English.

So we had a very open understanding. We changed the curriculum to, we had all come from the assumption that knowledge is produced in the West and it is disseminated in the rest of the world through an institution called the University. Historically, that's how it's been done. And we all sort of believed that this claim of Western knowledge, Western knowledge here meant mainly Greek, Roman and Latter-day Christian thought that Western knowledge was was in its embryo universal knowledge. So we changed this. We introduced students to different knowledge traditions: Christian, Islamic,

pagan, after all Greek and Roman knowledge is pagan knowledge, pre-Christian. So our students were-- were broadly oriented. I'm not saying it's a finished project, not at all, not at all, because there are still lots of questions.

The same questions which arose when Ali Mazrui wrote his Triple Heritage. What is African knowledge? So it began with this place-based, what is African knowledge, it went on to the question of what is oral tradition? How do we study oral tradition? But we only take credit for opening up a question, not for answering it.

50:20

Closing question: optimism as a will to change the world

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 50:20

Quick time check. We have eight minutes left, so this might be the last question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 50:25

Hi, my name is Jadai. I'm originally from Guinea, so I'm hailing from the western side of Africa. But I think something that resonated with me while you were talking is you mentioned if you lived in Uganda during that period, optimism had to be willed. So currently as an African, a Pan-African, seeing a lot of the poison percolate through the various presidencies in the West African context, the coup d'état space, how do we will optimism as Africans today, for our future, in the African context?

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 51:07

Well, if everything was going right, we wouldn't need optimism. I mean, I don't. We look at our son and we're just amazed that what's happened over the last couple of years and the optimism on his face. It's a daily lesson for us. The younger generation will not accept anything else but optimism, but a will to change the world.

KỌLÁ TÚBỌ̀SÚN 51:53

Thank you. A round of applause for him, please. I think that's a very good way to end. Thank you very much for a wonderful conversation. Thank you very much for coming. And I hope you had a great time.

MAHMOOD MAMDANI 52:05

I had a great time. Thank you.

ABOUT THIS TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was prepared by NYBALF from the verified caption track of the published recording and lightly edited for readability. The recording remains the authoritative record. Section headings are editorial. Timestamps refer to the recording on YouTube.

PARTICIPANTS

Mahmood Mamdani is the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government and Director of the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University. His books include Citizen and Subject, When Victims Become Killers, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, Neither Settler nor Native and Slow Poison: Idi Amin, Yoweri Museveni, and the Making of the Ugandan State (2025).

Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún is a Nigerian poet, linguist, translator, filmmaker and publisher. His poetry collections are Edwardsville by Heart (2018), Ìgbà Èwe (2021) and Èṣù at the Library & Other Poems (2024). He founded the YorubaName.com dictionary project and publishes OlongoAfrica. He serves on the NYBALF board.

HOW TO CITE

> New York Black and African Literature Festival. “Mahmood Mamdani: Slow Poison.” Mahmood Mamdani in conversation with Kọ́lá Túbọ̀sún. NYBALF 2026, 19 September 2026, Harlem Stage, The Gatehouse, New York. Transcript, 2026. blackandafricanlitfestny.com.

USE

Published by the New York Black and African Literature Festival for reading, teaching and research. The words spoken remain the work of the speakers. For republication or any other use, please contact the festival through blackandafricanlitfestny.com.