Renowned South Sudan professor Taban Lo Liyong talks about the edifice literature departments in Kenyan universities, his life as a writer and the politics of his home country.

A at 77, he is surprisingly sprightly, and we had to literally run after him as he trotted across the university of Nairobi compound into the university’s Senior Common Room because of the speeding vehicles.

As we hopped in the dark tunnel below Union Highway, he remarked matter-of-factly that one was damned if he crossed the road above because of the speeding vehicles.

We had earlier easily marked out Prof. Shem Mokoreng at the university’s Senior Common Room because of the impossible traffic jams, but none of us was an independent thinker.

Writers were second tier fighters against decolonisation. We were playing second fiddle to politicians. We were really praise-singers – adjudicators. Even Prof. Ali Mazrui never saw anything ill of Nyerere, referring to him as a philosopher king, while Ngugi wa Thiong’o called Kenyatta a Black Messiah, which was the original title of his Way Not Child.

No politicians is a philosopher king, they always have something up their sleeves. Anglocentric politicians sought answers from Nicoclas and George Pacharou while the Francophone had the Negritude group. Achebe was, what he termed, the black intellectual.

I had always said that political activism is different from literary creativity.

Ngugi is being treated as a possible winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature this year. Does he deserve it?

The setting of the novel is the town in which I was born. The setting of the novel is the town in which I was born. The setting of the novel is the town in which I was born. The setting of the novel is the town in which I was born.

But above all, this is a European prize and only they have the criteria. I would have given Achebe or Leopold Sedar Senghor, but they said his most creative works were done earlier and then went abroad to seek Vil. Instead the works he had written even much earlier. But it not should even be about the prize. The important question is: Does the chosen book speak on our behalf? What does it say about us? It (the prize) is given at the behest of Europe. If it were left to me, I would give the Nobel to jua kali artisans who do a lot to boost the economies of their countries.

You write The Last Word, then Another Last Word. Why can’t you conlude?

I will conclude when I die. I have just published my latest book, Christmas in Leifseer. The setting of the novel is the town in Turkana where I spent my Christmas of 1979. You know I write to please myself. I write to commensurate with myself. I write to exorcise the anguish.

Telling of pleasing yourself, you have defended the edifice literary conventions and even described the English language as a “prostitute with whom we have all had all in our different ways.” You come out as so individualistic.

I am above discipline. I owe it to my grandmother Kiden Song, who was touching all over she couldn’t be stopped. She was even sold into slavery twice for her restless soul. I am brimming the giant (the multi-eyed ogre in Gilipau folk tales) and I want children to chase me. And if you can’t catch me, then you are not up to the task. Some of you are too reverential of Europe. The white man was here (in Kenya) for too long, and even the economic development that you enjoy is an atrocity of your Europeans. We fail to recognize that the white man, too, has lines. We grew up in an era where we were saying let everything be interrogated, shaken and the luminaries petted. My job is to puncture out what the king is nailing. If he it. The amount of time I have burned and energy I have invested into redefining the world is enormous. At Iowa, I would write for 36 hours non-stop. Even here at the University of Nairobi, where I had to wait 24 hours for my bookshop, I would occasionally work until I slept then. Africa deserves the best.

Which body of literature most fascinates you?

I am in search of intellectual satisfac-
tion. What life is all about, and how it could be lived well. I am a student of Shakespeare’s plays and poems, the main Greek playwrights (Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes) and Homer’s epics.

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Bertolt Brecht and Amos Tutuola also fascinate me. Tutuola (author of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*) saw ahead of his time and imparted in us some of his wisdom, which we now see.

So what are you reading now? I brought along the *Uganda Journal* of 1952. I like it because it has Lango origins and Basoga folk tales. I am also reading *Voices from the Mountain: Personal Life Histories from Mt Elgon*, which is edited by Masheti Masinjila and Oxoth Okombo.

When you bring books from the continent, what is the feedback you've received? No feedback. I don't go with your clan and say you want to reconcile so that the blood of the dead is washed off your hands.

Prof William Ochieng has accused you of making Nairobi your 'Centre for Invertebrate Dispersal', where you changed every aspect of the ivory tower and leave the campuses aflame with clamorous debate. What fire have you brought this time round?

Tomorrow (last Wednesday) I am presenting a paper 'It is tribal values; not tribal numbers that count.' Watch out.

But in March, numbers did change the course of this country's history.

Well, I wrote the paper last December, which was before the elections in March.

Prof Ochieng further says: "You no longer deserve publicity and can only be dotted as a museum piece. He lacks P'bithe's artistic brew and Ngugi's restless soul. He punches his colleagues without regard to reason."

I don't know what he is talking about. But you know he became a permanent secretary, and maybe he was speaking for the powers that were. He has, in the past, shed a lot of tears for Tom Mboya, but was silent on Robert Ouko. Why?

But some say you played safe yourself, not contributing much to the liberation of South Sudan by staying away at the time, your country needed you most.

Some of us were justified to be circumspect because the various communities were suspicious. We did not know which way it would go. Dr John Garang was ambivalent about where he wanted to take the people. I think he wanted to be the president of a united Sudan, riding on the deaths of the leaders. I did not count for that. When he came to South Africa when I was teaching there, I pushed him a note saying: "If you want to drag us to Khartoum, then give leadership to another person." Even if he had lived to win, he would have been killed. God works in mysterious ways.

The new nation seems unstable. What's not being done right? Other than having tight grip and control of the army. He chose for his assistant a lowly educated person who never challenged him during the 21 years he was his deputy. (President Salva) Kiir is what Mbi is to Kenya. But he is not as intellectually poor as people think as he is a graduate of military intelligence. Like Mbi, he is only playing the fool among the PhDs. You learned here when this was a campus of the University of East Africa. What are your recollections of the three East African leaders of the time?

Nyerere appropriated some of the resources meant for the college to the University of Dar es Salaam. (Dr Milton) Obote was a fool who led a strike at Makerere because of food. Regardless of his poetic mind, he had second-rate brains.

You masqueraded as a Ugandan for many years. Some would find this uncharitable for a country that brought you up.

I did not masquerade as a Ugandan. I was carried to Uganda as a baby to escape an aunt who wanted to kill me. I lived my full life there as a citizen. I went to Samuel Baker School in Acholiand trained at Makerere University in Gulu in Uganda. Immediately, I took Ugandan citizenship and tore my passport after I came back from Papua New Guinea and found Idi Amin had come over.

Whatproperty do you own as a global citizen, yet you retreated to your village and became an MP during President Numeiri's rule between 1982 and 1985. Was that not a diminishing role?

If you can leave a local centre, then you can't have a claim to a global position. Even Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea and people knew him as the son of Joseph of Nazareth. In my thinking, I am international, but when it comes to doing something for the betterment of the people, I go to the local place.

In your play "Showwhat and Sowhat", you seem to celebrate wife-swapping as a catalyst of national cohesion, almost suggesting it as the answer to Kenya's violence.

Symbolic writing is different from realistic writing. I am talking about a marriage of cultures. I wrote that book specifically for Kenya and South Africa. There is a parallel between South Africa's Khosa and Kenya's Kikuyu on the one hand, and the Zulu and the Luo on the other. Look at Kenya's Indians for example. They largely don't integrate socially with other Kenyans and that should change.

As I have said Africa is frustrated because it has been sexually starved. What do you mean?

I drew that from Kuku mythological. What I meant by that assertion is that Africa cannot possibly take off unless it has suffered enough. Have we suffered as much as the Jews? No. Have Kenyans suffered as much as South Africans? About the only torture that comes to mind is that we shall not be more mediocre.

As a modern intellectual, what justifies your marriage to five wives?

There are more girls than boys in our society. Don't you have pity for the girl child? When a man marries, pays dowry. Do you want the dowry to go to waste if he dies in war? But more seriously, literature is my first love and she holds me tight. If all of us were to be married to our professions, there would be fewer problems.

You founded the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi in 1969 together with Ngugi, Owuor Anyamba and Otok P'bithe. Today, no much debate is coming from there. What is the department?

We left the war half-way, a war we did not win in 1966. We did not produce captains to complete the war. We were just writers. None of us was a literary scholar. There was no intellectual solidarity. We were just promoters of literature, but not really professionals. The debate has died. Is it not shocking that Moi, Egerton and Kenyatta universities have never organised a conference on literature, yet there are literature professors there? Only when I come do we talk again.

Is this why you have said you are fed up talking to yourself?

Nobody has studied my books to interrogate me since 1965. Nobody has followed the arguments. I am always explaining myself. I feel that I have not been taken seriously. I am frustrated. I feel let down. The so-called intellectuals have been seized by the tribal god. They are pseudo-intellectuals, whose knowledge can't apply because it is irrelevant. They are conveyor belts.

That is why we are telling them don't vomit on us the vomit of the white man. I have always thought that those of us identified by America and assigned American supervisors at universities were taught to criticise Mother Africa and its leaders. Only (former Central Bank Governor Duncan) Ndgewa has reflected on Kenya outlook through the eyes of a civil servant.

(Mr Ndgewa's memoirs *Walking in Kenyatta's Struggles: My Story* is considered one of the most illuminating stories to have emerged from former government insiders.)