4th
Inaugural
Lecture

October 29th 1971
Education
Centre

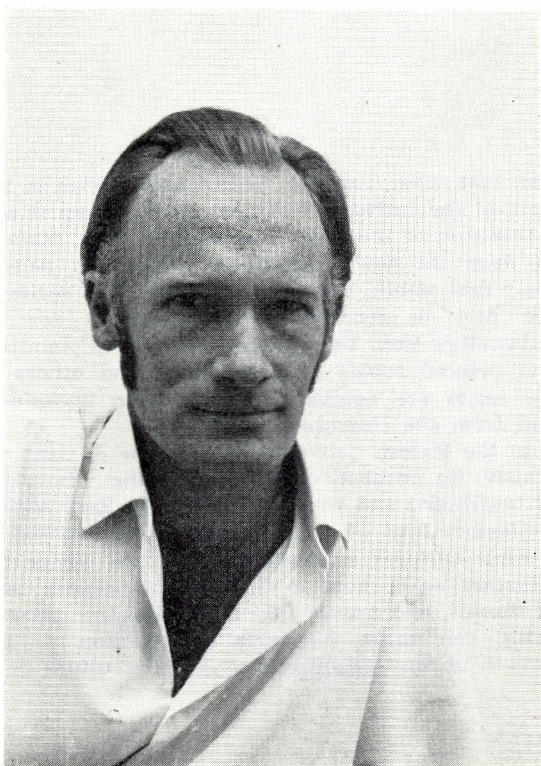
UNIVERSITY
OF NAIROBI

Home is neither here nor there

VICE-CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF NAIRO

THE INAUGURAL LECTURE SERIES was started in the days of the University of East Africa when it was a tradition of the then University College, Nairobi to have its newly appointed Professors deliver their first public lecture in Nairobi. This series is the first to receive financial support for its publication from the University Deans' Committee and printed copies of this lecture and others in the series are available on sale from bookstores and from the University itself.

In the lecture delivered by Andrew J. Gurr we realise the problem of cultural conflict, the clash of traditional and western cultures in East Africa. Professor Gurr who has himself been exposed to various cultures suggests that for the writer the situation holds more in the way of promise than of threats, and argues that the culturally uprooted artist can make a major contribution to the growth of an especially East African culture.



Andrew J. Gurr

Professor Gurr was born in England and emigrated to New Zealand at the age of nine. After taking a degree at the University of Auckland and spending a period as junior lecturer at the University of Wellington, he returned to England in 1959 on a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. At Cambridge he gained a Ph.D. with a study of the Shakespearean theatre, and went to teach at the University of Leeds in 1962. His academic interests are divided between Shakespearean and modern post-colonial literature, especially that of New Zealand, to which he returned for a year in 1966. While at Leeds he started a publishing company which is still flourishing, and for several years was warden of a hall of residence. He came to the University of Nairobi in 1969 on a four-year leave of absence from the University of Leeds.

1971

A publication of the University of Nairobi

Printed by afropress ltd., P.O. Box 30502, NAIROBI, KENYA

Cover designed by Mr R. C. Aguma, student of the Department of Design, University of Nairobi

"HOME IS NEITHER HERE NOR THERE"

One problem that underlies all others in East Africa today is cultural conflict. It is the only possible subject for a lecture such as this. If it seems presumptuous of me, not having yet been three years in this country, to speak on such a subject, I would plead that my own cultural deracination goes back more than twenty-five years, and there are many features of the East African situation which I find recognisable in my own experience. The fragment of the problem which I hope to corner is homelessness, cultural deracination, and especially deracination as it affects the creative artist, the writer.

My title I'm sure needs some explaining. In concocting it I tried to bring two points together. First, that it is a fact of cultural life in Kenya today that most of us are unsure of what is really 'home'. Most of us here for instance will have houses in Nairobi, but few of us were born here — and which is 'home', birthplace or dwelling place? Is 'home' here or is it there? For the culturally uprooted it is nowhere. The second meaning that I tried to build into my title is the suggestion that for certain categories of people, notably the creative artists, it is the problem which is neither here nor there.

The word 'culture' and the nature of the problem of cultural conflict perhaps need some outline first of all. By 'culture' I mean not just art and literature but that whole complex of attitudes, behaviour patterns and even moral values which are learnt with one's first language, at home. In the words of Aimé Césaire, "culture is everything. Culture is the way we dress, the way we carry our heads, the way we walk, the way we tie our ties — it is not only the fact of writing books or building houses."[1] Cultural values are the oil which help the machinery of a society to run smoothly. In a 'traditional' society, so the social anthropologists tell us, they create the decorums, the patterns of behaviour which assist social harmony.

The problem of cultural conflict as it is usually defined, is that new situations are created to which the old values do not apply. Individuals are affected by the uncertainty between the different demands of the two kinds of society. They become alienated from the traditions of their home, and escape into individualism. In a culturally confused

situation, neither culture can operate smoothly. An easy attachment to one or the other is difficult. The answer in the long run is what the social anthropologists call 'acculturation', the building of a new synthesis out of the conflict, one evolved to cope with the situations created in the new society.

In East Africa we are singularly fortunate in having a pair of poems which present the problem of cultural conflict with splendid vividness. Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* is a warning cry about the erosion of a culture and its decorums, a home and the cultural values it teaches. Lawino's situation is created by the impact of Western culture upon her traditional culture. Her husband Ocol has been seduced away from her by Western education (he is a B.A. Econ. from Makerere). She is th victim of social change.

Her situation has been explained by social anthropologists in various ways. Margaret Mead, for instance, in her recent book *Culture and Commitment*[2] offers this paradigm. First, she says, there exists a stable society. In it the processes of change are minimal, and the wisdom of the past is of continuing value in the present. Traditional cultural values, ancestral wisdom, are still valid. The second kind of culture she identifies is one where the pace of change has increased to the point where traditional wisdom no longer fits the new situation, and where men look to their peers rather than their elders for learning. In such a situation, universities have some value. And the third state of society is one where the pace of change is so great that even the wisdom of institutions such as universities is out-dated by the time it is institutionalised. Then, she says, you have the generation gap and a revolutionary situation. Lawino and Ocol, of course, are the victims of social change struggling between the first an second categories, between traditional wisdom and the learning of one's peers.

Another social anthropologist, Raymond Firth,[3] has also tried to identify the stages of absorption of the impact of Western culture on traditional societies. Firth, dealing with isolated Polynesian societies, suggests first a ready acceptance of artefacts such as tools and guns, but little change in the traditional social structure. Next, he saw a process where community values begin to give way to individualism, creating strain between old and new values. The third stage he sees as the

self-conscious one, involving a hostile reaction to the new and an attempt, as he expresses it, to put the clock back. Finally comes a synthesis, the process of 'acculturation', the creation of a novel social organisation which owes a little to both traditional and modern, but which is a unique product of the successful marriage of the two.

Looking at Lawino and Ocol[4] and the cultural crisis they represent one has to marvel at how much the anthropologists have had to ignore in constructing their paradigms. Cultural uprooting is too violent and basic an experience for the synthesis to come as easily as Firth implies it can. Ocol's problem in the cultural world of East Africa is not going to be resettled easily. And deracinated Ocol, uprooter of pumpkins, is a key figure in East Africa today.

Ocol has generally received less sympathy and less attention than the forsaken Lawino in Okot's two poems. *Song of Lawino* is a masterpiece of satire, both in its author's creation of Lawino herself and in her own trenchant language as it lays into the foolish superficialities which her husband has left her for. When she says

> My mother taught me
> The way of the Acholi
> And nobody should
> Shout at me
> Because I know
> The customs of our people!

we know she is right, we are on her side. But Ocol has his side too. *Song of Ocol* to my mind is a more complex if less entertaining work than *Song of Lawino*, and equally successful in describing cultural alienation. Ocol, too, is a victim with a grievance. He calls Lawino's *Song* "the mad bragging/Of a defeated General . . ./It is the pointless defiance/Of the condemned." And there is, sadly, truth in what he says. Lawino is defeated. She has no weapons to recapture Ocol with. She cannot put Ocol's clock back. When he faces Lawino, Ocol is the winner — but it is a Pyrrhic victory, and I would suggest that we should pay some attention to the problems attending it.

Ocol's bond with the Western culture he has adopted is a love-hate one. His own Song ends with hysterical defeatism, sarcastically praising the monuments to Leopold of the Congo and Speke of the Nile, who opened the world of the Acholi to the white man's burden. He denies his right

to the praise-song which Lawino wants to sing him, asking

> What proud poem
> Can we write
> For the vanquished?

He may be able to defeat Lawino, but he cannot win the cultural conflict. His rejection of Lawino and her values, her world where "ignorance stands . . . /Like an elephant", is hysterical. His knowledge of her ignorance is a self-inflicted curse. To use a Biblical analogy, he is a fallen Adam cursing his innocent Eve — still in her Garden of Eden — for her continued ignorance of their nakedness. So he cries

> Smash all these mirrors
> That I may not see
> The blackness of the past
> From which I came
> Reflected in them!

His affliction is self-knowledge, a double standard of cultures. He sees that Lawino is defeated but knows he is not the real winner. His bitterness is very largely self-contempt.

Ocol is tormented because he has lost his dignity and his self-respect. Lawino is secure in her knowledge of the values of her culture, and is a dignified and admirable figure. But through his uprooting Ocol has lost both his symbolic virility and his dignity.[5] The knowledge he has been given and which he cannot now shake off is that he is, in his own word, vanquished. It is Ocol's knowledge which isolates him, and he hates his isolation even as he proclaims what it gives —

> Behold
> Africa's wildest bush
> Is now a garden green
> With wheat, barley, coffee . . .

Ocol is the man of the future, though, or at least a substantial part of it. What Ezekiel Mphahlele said of South Africa ten years ago has some relevance to Ocol today. Writing of negritude, Mphahlele said

> We dare not now look backwards, or fight a rearguard action no matter how much ethnic grouping white authority wants to impose on us. Even if it were desirable for us to piece together the shattered remnants of 'Bantu

> culture', the artist, the musician, the writer wouldn't wait for that day.[6]

Early this year in Japan the writer Yukio Mishima shocked the world (certainly the part of the world in touch with the West), when he committed ritual suicide in protest against the abandonment of traditional values in modern Japan. Not many people outside Japan, and probably not many in it, would go to Mishima's lengths to uphold the *Bushido* code after more than a hundred years of thorough (and many would say very successful) Westernisation. Mishima's gesture was shocking because it was futile. Mphahlele is arguing that a cultural rearguard action in Africa is futile.

I think he is wrong in one respect. He assumes like many anthropologists that tradition is static, the kind of phenomenon suitable for a museum. In my definition cultural tradition is alive like the society it is born in; it grows and adapts itself and gets tortured like a human being. In East Africa traditional culture is far from dead, and provided it can assimilate and live with the Western viruses, there is no reason why it should die.

The chief characteristic (almost the chief virus) of Western cultures is individualism. Westernised man, like Ocol, is isolated. Thomas Carlyle said more than a hundred years ago of Western society that

> We call it a Society; and go about professing openly the totalest separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named 'fair competition' and so forth, it is a mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that Cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings.[7]

This is a bleak picture, and I don't believe it will ever become wholly true in Africa. But it is the sharpest stake in the pit Ocol has fallen into. Isolation — alienation of the educated man from his cultural home — is a fact of contemporary life, and it is one we must try to come to terms with.

Consider, for instance, the difference between oral and written forms of literature. In a small community oral forms are possible as the most important and perhaps only form of communication. A larger community, however, — and

especially communities like the modern nation states — needs a form more widespread and more precise. The larger and more complex the social organisation is, the more dependent it tends to be on written forms of communication. Now oral literature is communal — everyone gathers to listen. But written literature is private, individual. You write or read on your own. And so even a mechanical instrument like the medium of communication becomes an isolating force. Simple literacy can begin the process. Ocol is a product of his education, and pending a total transformation of the educational system, or a revolution, there are more of him growing every day.

It may by now look as if I am trying to put forward a new version of an old story — traditional culture was perfect, innocent, its society like the Garden of Eden. Then along comes the wicked white serpent Satan and offers the gardeners the apple of knowledge — education. And so their primal innocence is corrupted and evil enters the world. Now as someone who is, after all, involved in the process of education here, an apple-offerer, I would think twice before putting forward any interpretation which involved aligning myself with the forces of Satan. It is much too simple a formulation. However, something rather like the Garden of Eden metaphor does lie behind *Song of Ocol*. The garden "green/With wheat, barley, coffee" is the wrong sort of garden. But Ocol does live in the present and does with most of his mind accept the inescapable. What he cannot do is look forward to it with any pleasure. He is culturally and emotionally alienated.

All I want to suggest in this lecture is that if Ocol were a creative artist in this situation he might have much greater cause for optimism. An unhappy situation such as Ocol's for the educated writer is not necessarily an unproductive one. Cultural alienation is a feature of the life of most artists. Alienation in Marx's sense may be damaging to society; alienation in the psychologist's sense may be damaging to the personality; but to the creative artist cultural alienation — deracination, rootlessness — is rarely anything but a stimulus. It is part of his need for freedom to create. For an artist living in a community as large as the modern nation states to fully share the life of his community would mean accepting communal direction of his art. And that would mean accepting some such precept of the com-

munal will as A.V. Lunacharsky's demand for state-controlled art. Lunacharsky said:

> To indicate where to direct artistic forces, artistic attention, artistic talent — that is the natural conclusion from all our understanding of socialist construction. We know very well that we have the right to intervene in the course of culture, starting with mechanisation . . . and ending with the direction of the most delicate forms of art.[8]

Artists usually prefer to go their own way. In so doing, they usually become alienated in one way or another.

The experience of alienation by the artist, of cultural uprooting, is strikingly uniform across the globe. The Nigerian Mabel Segun writes:

> I'm tired
> I'm tired of hanging in the middle way
> — but where can I go?[9]

The American Elizabeth Bishop writes:

> Should we have stayed at home,
> wherever that may be?[10]

(she, incidentally, has lived in Brazil since 1952). The point I would like to make is that alienation is neither here nor there for the artist — cultural uprooting does not necessarily mean cultural disloyalty. Let me give just one example.

V.S. Naipaul is to me one of the most fascinating writers in English today. Not because he is an excellent writer — though at times he is — but because his position is central to the question of cultural 'homes'. He stands out as the most comfortably homeless writer, a man with no clear cultural identity, not even as an exile. By birthplace Naipaul is West Indian, from the same region as Césaire and Fanon, though totally different in outlook. Ethnically he is Indian. His grandfather emigrated from a village in Uttar Pradesh in central India to Trinidad, where he worked on the plantations. Naipaul himself decided when he was twelve that he would leave Trinidad for good in five years, and managed to do it in six, when he was eighteen. He went, of course, to England, and was, of course, disappointed. In his own words,

> I came to London. It had become the centre of my world and I had worked hard to come

> to it. And I was lost. London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go. It was a good place for getting lost in, a city no one ever knew, a city explored from the neutral heart outwards until, after years, it defined itself into a jumble of clearings separated by stretches of the unknown, through which the narrowest of paths had been cut. Here I became no more than an inhabitant of a big city, robbed of loyalties, time passing, taking me away from what I was, thrown more and more into myself, fighting to keep my balance and to keep alive the thought of the clear world beyond the brick and asphalt and the chaos of railway lines.[11]

This was what he found when he went in search of a cultural home to replace his geographical home. London, the urban jungle, proved not so different in this respect from Trinidad, which he described in a book about the Caribbean as

> a materialist immigrant society, continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern, always retaining the atmosphere of the camp; . . . not an expanding society but a colonial society, ruled autocratically if benevolently . . . . All this has combined to give it its special character, its ebullience and irresponsibility. And more: a tolerance which is more than tolerance: an indifference to virtue as well as to vice.[12]

London is a clearing in a jungle, Trinidad is a camp. For Naipaul neither offered a home.

In 1963 Naipaul went to his grandfather's home, his ethnic home, India. (He was, I may say, paid to do so, to write a book which became *An Area of Darkness*.) He spent a year in India, basically experiencing what other Indians in the Caribbean found when they returned to their ancestral villages. In his earlier book about the Caribbean Naipaul had written "Indians who went to India returned disgusted by the poverty and convinced of their own superiority."[13] In its way that quite well describes his own discovery of India in 1963. At the beginning of his book on his visit he explains how "the India . . . which was the background of my childhood was an area of the imagination."[14] It was the country where his imagination was allowed to grow. His visit put a dark world in place of the imaginary one. "India had not worked

its magic on me. It remained the land of my childhood, an area of darkness."[15] And so he gave his book that title.

This writer then is a cosmopolitan, deracinated wanderer, who has lived most of his adult life in that most homeless cosmopolis London, and who has lived only as a traveller in the Caribbean, in India, even for what I understand was an eventful year at Makerere. The extraordinary thing about such a writer is that all his novels have been about Trinidad. *Miguel Street, The Suffrage of Elvira, The Mystic Masseur* and above all *A House for Mr. Biswas* all take their setting, their subject and their outlook from Trinidad.[16]

The biggest and best of the novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas,* is for my money one of the best books — certainly the best comedy — produced in the Third World in the last twenty years. C.L.R. James, the veteran West Indian historian and cricketer, has called it "the finest study ever produced in the West Indies (or anywhere that I know) of a minority and the herculean obstacles in the way of its achieving a room in the national building."[17] That I think is a characteristic West Indian comment; putting the main emphasis on the race aspect and the Indian community of Trinidad where Naipaul gets his subject-matter. Naipaul himself once said that "to the initiated one whole side of West Indian writing has little to do with literature, and much to do with the race war."[18] James omits to mention comedy and the humanity, and suggests that it's about the struggle of a racial minority in a racially tense situation. In fact it is about the Hindu minority, on the surface, but the toleration which I've already mentioned in an earlier quotation from Naipaul is more conspicuous than any racial issue.

In outline the book is a biography of Mohun Biswas, Hindu journalist, who is invariably spoken of as 'Mr. Biswas', even as a three-year-old child. Mr. Biswas is introduced in the prologue when he is dying, sick and worried, in Port of Spain, Trinidad. We are told (p. 7)

> Mr. Biswas was forty-six, and had four children. He had no money. His wife Sharma had no money. On the house in Sikkim Street Mr. Biswas owed, and had been owing for four years, three thousand dollars. The interest on this, at eight per cent, came to twenty dollars a month; the ground rent was ten dollars. Two children were at school. The two older children,

> on whom Mr. Biswas might have depended, were both abroad on scholarships.

Not, you would think, a happy situation for a dying man. And yet, Naipaul tells us,

> during these months of illness and despair he was struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house, the audacity of it . . . . As a boy he had moved from one house of strangers to another; and since his marriage he felt he had lived nowhere but in the houses of the Tulsis [his in-laws], at Hanuman House in Arwacas, in the decaying wooden house at Shorthills, in the clumsy concrete house in Port of Spain. And now at the end he found himself in his own house, on his own half-lot of land, his own portion of the earth. That he should have been responsible for this seemed to him, in these last months, tremendous.[19]

The clown and victim, which was the character he carried through most of his life, has acquired human dignity. Along with this achievement goes the loyalty of his wife — daughter of a wealthy and extensive family where Mr. Biswas was poor and solitary, and who ten years before would have walked back to her family for shelter and financial help.

Victory in life for Mr. Biswas is a bourgeois one — a middle-class establishment, house, family, loyal wife, even a car. As a home and a cultural focus the house is a ramshackle affair. But it was all Mr. Biswas could aim for. It is his freedom, his emancipation, his dignity.

The measure of Naipaul's success is that in the end the reader, who has lived with Mr. Biswas as a clown and victim even to the buying of his own house — over which he was of course tricked — should assent to his own judgement of his achievement as tremendous. Naipaul as a rootless alienated artist has something to offer to the place from which he uprooted himself.

In his recent book *The Loss of El Dorado* Naipaul has, I think, committed himself even more openly to his artistic duty to his birthplace. The book is two stories from Trinidad's history. Both are about failures, two grand schemes two hundred years apart in time, each of which tried to use Trinidad as a base for conquest. First there is Walter Raleigh's attempt to find the golden territory of El Dorado at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and second the British attempt early in the

nineteenth century to take over Spain's American colonies by stirring up revolution in them. Both failed and both set their mark on the character of Trinidad as it has developed today. Naipaul is looking for his island's identity in its history. Professor Ogot, in a recent address to East African writers, spoke of "self-knowledge" as being "the cornerstone of all our enquiries in the field of culture".[20] Self-knowledge is the tool of a man writing the history of his own people; like Professor Ogot himself, and like the homeless Naipaul.

I am not, of course, offering Naipaul as any sort of a model for East African writers. In the amorphous, random, tolerant world of Trinidad there is nowhere for Naipaul and his Biswas to go but forward, no traditional values to cherish and build on. Moreover, as Ocol in Okot's poem shows, self-knowledge is not the East African writer's problem, any more than race is.

The problems facing the East African writer seem to me clear-cut. The cultural conflict has somehow to be resolved, and the artist as a member willy-nilly of an educated elite is stuck there in the middle of the fight. What I am trying to suggest is that there, in the middle of the fight, is exactly where he should be. His cultural alienation should be no hindrance to his art. This is a time for the artist of tremendous demands, but at the same time tremendous opportunities.

Cultural conflict is not all destructive. In the days when cultural conflicts did not exist, and there were wars instead, even then something would survive and grow after the battles. Conflict can be productive. Cultural alienation frees the artist to see the conflict clearly and to assist in guiding the process of reconstruction. Okot has a foot in both houses. He is therefore in a position to see what needs to be built.

I don't need to stress the importance in the process of construction, of 'acculturation', of the free imagination of the artist. In the words of William Carlos Wiliams,

> if it is not a dance, a song, it becomes an outcry, a protest. If it is not flamboyance, it becomes deformity; if it is not art, it becomes crime. Men and women cannot be content, any more than children, with the mere facts of humdrum life — the imagination must adorn and exaggerate life, must give it splendor and grotesqueness, beauty and infinite depth.

Here and now in East Africa the need is manifest. The creative artist has the stimulus, the freedom, and the self-knowledge. The potential for the future is impressive.

In conclusion, and thinking of beauty and infinite depth, I am reminded of a challenge I was offered when I was talking of this lecture some time ago. Surely, I was asked, as a Shakespearean scholar you'll find a quotation from Shakespeare to fit somewhere in the lecture. On the old principle that he had something to say about everything, that seemed a fair challenge, so I started to look for one. I thought of the first line of *Romeo and Juliet* — "Two households, both alike in dignity" — and discarded it. I even throught of the line later in the same play — "A plague on both your houses." Finally I chose this one, which must serve as my closing speech. It is spoken by Regan in *King Lear,* to her deracinated and homeless father:

> I am now from home, and out of that provision
> Which shall be needful for your entertainment.

NOTES

1. Aimé Césaire, in *Présence Africaine* VIII - X (1956), p. 225.
2. *Culture and Commitment,* New York 1970, *passim.*
3. *Social Change in Tikopia,* London 1959, p. 350.
4. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino,* Nairobi 1966; *Song of Ocol,* Nairobi 1970.
5. For Lawino the crucial symptom of Ocol's deracination is his loss of sexual potency. This is not just the consequence of his taking up with the Westernised Tina, of course.
6. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image,* London 1962, p. 39.
7. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present,* London 1843, Bk. III, Ch. 2.
8. The related problem of commitment in literature raises issues which affect this question of the alienated artist. In my opinion, however, they do not affect my conclusion in this context.
9. *Reflections,* ed. Frances Ademola, Ibadan 1962, p. 65.
10. *The Complete Poems,* London 1971, p. 109.
11. *An Area of Darkness,* London 1964, p. 45.
12. *The Middle Passage,* London 1962, p. 54.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
14. *An Area of Darkness*, p. 44.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
16. Naipaul's latest book, *In a Free State* (London 1971), spreads his net a little more widely. The title story in the book is apparently based on his year at Makerere.
17. Appendix to Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society*, London 1967, p. 74.
18. *The Middle Passage*, p. 68.
19. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, London 1961, p. 8.
20. B. A. Ogot, "More Sinn'd Against than Sinning", in *Black Aesthetics in East Africa: A Colloquium* (forthcoming).

The Lecture Series

1st Lecture	Kenya's Cancers
1st October, 1971	*Professor Hector M. Cameron*
2nd Lecture	A Definition of Teacher Education: Traditional growth and future development.
8th October, 1971	*Professor Francis C. A. Cammaerts*
3rd Lecture	The Relevance of Animal Physiology to Animal Production in Kenya
22nd October, 1971	*Professor David Robertshaw*