

# Professor of Linguistics and a great enunciator of words in English

***When he was a child, his siblings gave him the name Duncun so that he could be baptised in the local SDA church.***

**I**N THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE VILLAGE, AT LEAST WHERE HE WAS BORN, IT IS DISRESPECTABLE TO CALL YOU BY YOUR GIVEN AFRICAN NAME. So “I am Okombo as the given family name or surname, and for the first part of my life, my Christian name sort of replaced the praise name given in the village”

Today, we know him as Okoth Okombo, Professor of Linguistics and a great enunciator of words in English. So how did “Duncun” become so interested in linguistics, was it his first love? Okoth-Okombo was born in the early 50’s at Rusinga Island. Here, he led the usual life of the village, attending the local primary school at Kaswanga. “This school is currently the Tom Mboya secondary school. I did class 1-4 at Kaswanga a District Education Board (DEB) School. I did my intermediate or class 5-7 at Kaswanga. A DEB school is probably the equivalent of what is known as public school, differentiated from mission or independent schools. Originally Kaswanga had been owned by the SDA church but it was handed over to the district education board. DEB schools were often built better than the mission school.

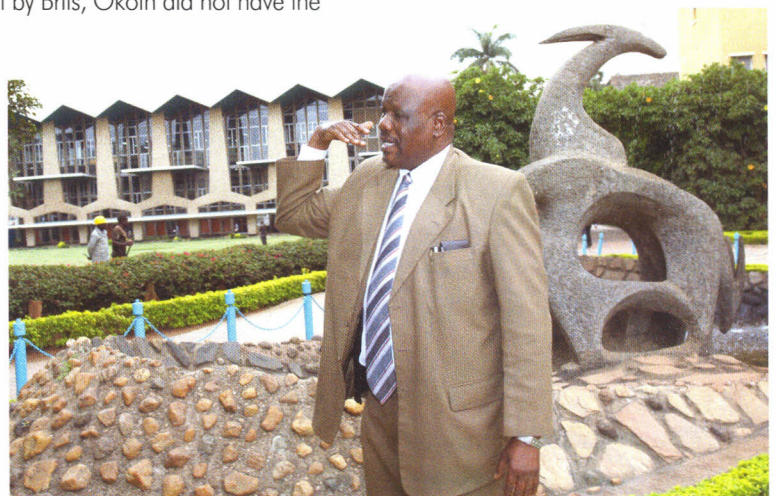
When he passed his exams, Okoth was admitted to Mbita Secondary School, a walking distance, but the school was

not ready to admit students until the second term when it was complete. “In high school I was confused about which subjects to pursue. So I did both arts and science subjects, I have always found choosing difficult so I just did what was being offered.” High school at the time was an interesting place to Okoth. The school was young and was the project of the late Thomas Mboya who had wanted to create similar facilities with those at Starehe where he was the patron. The school had good teachers, and the English teachers were British. Again, the school had facilities such as bathrooms and toilets, in the dormitories, which at the time, were not existing in the good schools such as Maseno, which had pupils bathing outside in the open.

It is interesting that although English was taught by Brits, Okoth did not have the

specialist mind to do English. This is because the foundation for grammar was laid in primary school. “The only thing I got from the wazungus was the speech part of English, that is, elocution and pronunciation”.

After high school, Okoth took the option of training to be a teacher. A crash program for training secondary school or SI’s had commenced at KSTC, Kenyatta College and Egerton. Okoth was selected to join Kenyatta College and his usual general refusal to specialise meant that he trains as a teacher of English and Mathematics. Ideally, most schools required teachers for these two subjects. Okoth only taught for one month, after graduation. “Although I personally had refused to fill the forms for special admission to



***Prof. Okoth Okombo at the Fountain of Knowledge, Main Campus.***

# Prof. Okoth Okombo

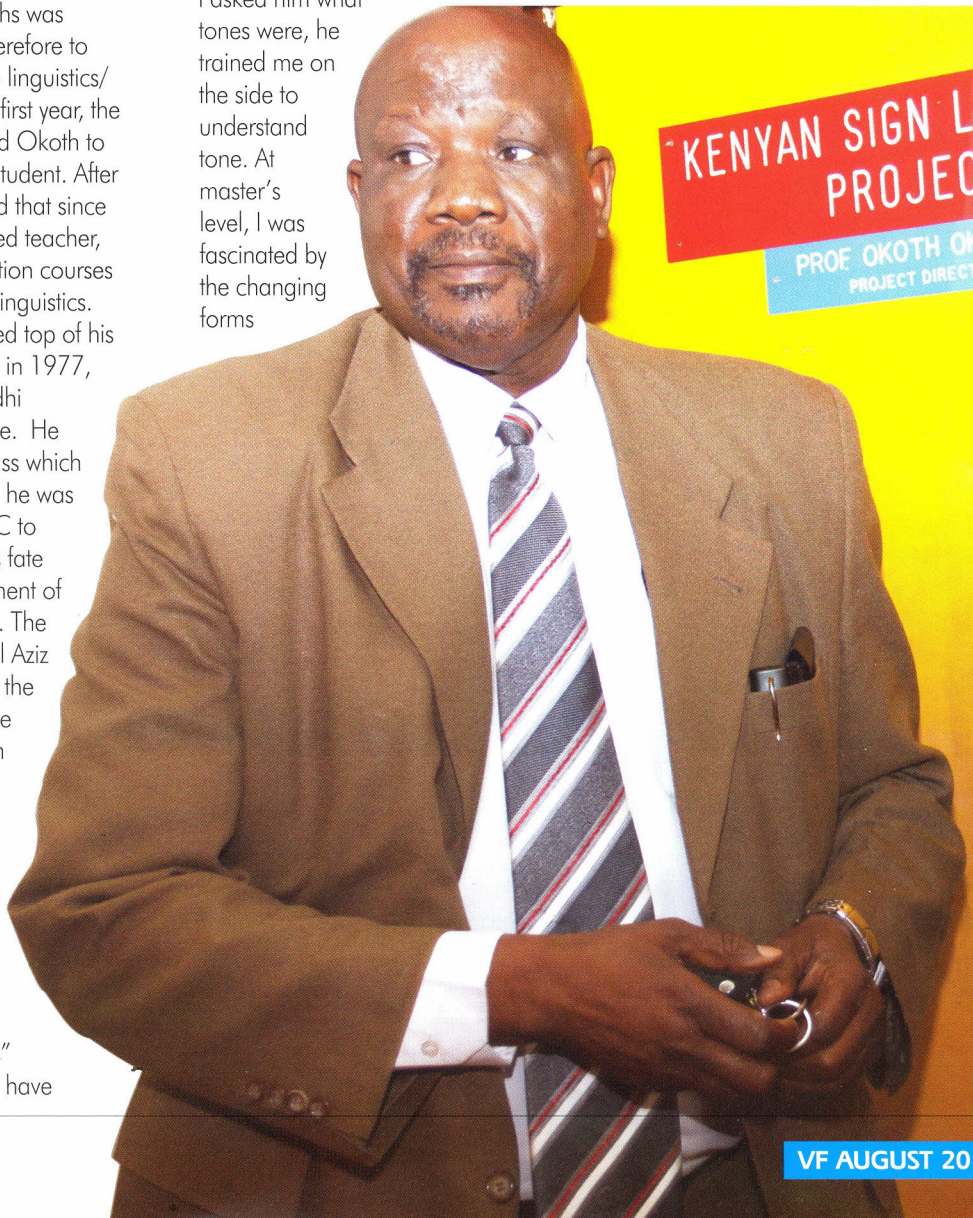
university, my teachers filled the forms for me. I only learnt this after I reported to my school in Kisii, and the head teacher told me that he had seen my name on the list of admission at the University of Nairobi."

In 1974 therefore, Okoth was admitted to the Bachelor of Education course. "When I joined the University, the option of linguistic/maths was not available. I was told therefore to change my combination to linguistics/literature. At the end of his first year, the head of department wanted Okoth to pursue studies as a 3.1.1 student. After consultations, it was agreed that since Okoth was already a trained teacher, he did not need the education courses and thus could transfer to linguistics. Ultimately, Okoth graduated top of his class and top of the faculty in 1977, receiving prizes from Gandhi Smarack and the Shell prize. He was invited join the MA class which he did and on graduation, he was planning to go back to TSC to his job as a teacher, but as fate would have it, the Department of Linguistics had other plans. The Chairman, Professor Abdul Aziz sent a telegram to say that the university had agreed to the proposal to appoint Okoth as tutorial fellow in the department.

"I joined teaching because I liked being a teacher. Looking back this feels and sounds naïve but then when I was a child, professors were very big people in my eyes" As a linguist, the fact that I have

never liked to specialise led me to take practically everything being offered and I even took course in sociology, I did phonology, syntax and semantics, my BA dissertation was written out of a passion and interest in Dholuo tones. One of my lecturers and mentor, Kevin Tovel, was working on Gikuyu tones and when I asked him what tones were, he trained me on the side to understand tone. At master's level, I was fascinated by the changing forms

of singular words in Dholuo-morphology, and I wanted to explain the strange changes. When I did my PhD, I concentrated on syntax. Syntax is reference to sentence formation and concentration. The challenge was to explain to them sentence formation and I chose to do so in an approach grounded



in logic and mathematics. Actually, my mathematics mind stood me in good stand at this time and at an interview, Prof. Francis Gichaga, an engineer, was amazed at what I was doing with mathematics in social sciences.

“My passion for sign language began in the early 90’ when a group of deaf people came to the University in the company of some Swedish scholars. The group had come to say that they also had a language and during a departmental seminar, they fascinated me intensely because I found that sign language is based on the sound principals of linguistics and could be explained to a large extend on the principles that we use to explain spoken language. “We have often assumed that sound is the substance of language but we had forgotten that language is a sign system because when you use sound you don’t see it as a sign “the deaf are the most oppressed people in the area of human communication because their language is ignored”. This realisation ignited my passion for social justice. At the University, I have seen people with all manner of disabilities, but only two types have never been recognised. These are the mentally disturbed and the hearing impaired. Deafness seems to be condemned to the same fate as those with mental disability. In Kenya we have been used to a situation in which language minorities learnt the language of the majority for their survival.

Now that we are faced with a minority whose disability is that they could not join the majority “we needed to be serious about liberating them. We needed to address the deaf and sign language thus could be the liberation of the hearing impaired.” Today the world of the deaf has opened up at the University, the deaf are now coming to university, there are interpreting

facilities for them and we even have a hearing impaired lecturer teaching in the department of sociology. If this is not empowerment, then I don’t know what it is.

Okoth has had many moments of happiness but few doubts about his calling to be a ‘teacher’ he finds it beautiful to be a don of language “it is beautiful, whatever, the market forces may say or determine about you in terms of opportunities, you know that you are sitting at the steering wheel of life. Everybody appreciates the role of language in life whether they know it or not,” says Okoth, whose office has immense shelves with books/novels on any number of subjects, but language takes up easily over 500 Volumes. According to Okoth, when he is not teaching, he finds himself catching p with the social sciences, “after all the context of language is what people are doing and the issues they face.”

Okoth has some lessons he has for stereotyping, that attitude that people sometimes get. He believes that stereotypes are not preventable but you can disturb people who stereotype others from time to time by doing what they do not expect, that is, give them cognitive dissonance. Within language discourse, stereotypes can best be addressed through a higher level of cultural literacy or cross cultural literacy. Here we must understand the basics of cultural elements in cultures outside your own. We would all benefit from some knowledge, no matter how little, of other people and their languages

Some of Okoth’s most exciting moments include his address to the 11th world conference of the congress of the deaf in Tokyo, 1990. It is then that he understood how much the deaf appreciated him even when he was a hearing person. His achievement of a

first class honours degree in linguistics and the best student in the faculty of Arts at undergraduate level were high moments “it was kind of nice I must say”

There have been other exciting moments that include the last two months this year when he had the chance to address the Senate and MPs. Again when the team drafting the constitution agreed to make Kenya sign language one of the three languages of parliament and the subsequent close captioning on television during coverage of national issues is a real memorable experience for him.

Okoth is married and all his children have a first degree. “If you succeed academically and your children refuse to go that way, it is a loss” While not following the line of linguistics, two of his children are in engineering and actuarial science so he sees them as gaining from his mathematics background.

“If I were to write an autobiography, it would be guided by the philosophy of doing small things in a great way .In my life I have not grown up making clear choices, but I love where I ended up. I love the whole idea of being a professor, a professor of linguistics, I love what I do. People ask me what I am still doing teaching, but I laugh, what else would I be? If I had a second life, would I be a teacher, yes.”

“Although I wish that Sossion had succeeded because in a world where teachers are really appreciated, I would not think of any other job except teaching. I love my students and they trust me as their friend. I often want to come back to share with my students when I attend events. It is as if when I am going to class, it’s a date, I look forward to it. I don’t say No oh, not another class”.