

THE GROWTH OF A LITERARY TRADITION IN EAST AFRICA

**An
Inaugural Lecture delivered
at the
University of Nairobi**

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By
Chris L. Wanjala
BA (Hons), Ph.D (Nairobi)
Professor of Literature

Venue:
8-4-4 Building, Main Campus, University of Nairobi

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TRADITION IN EAST AFRICA**

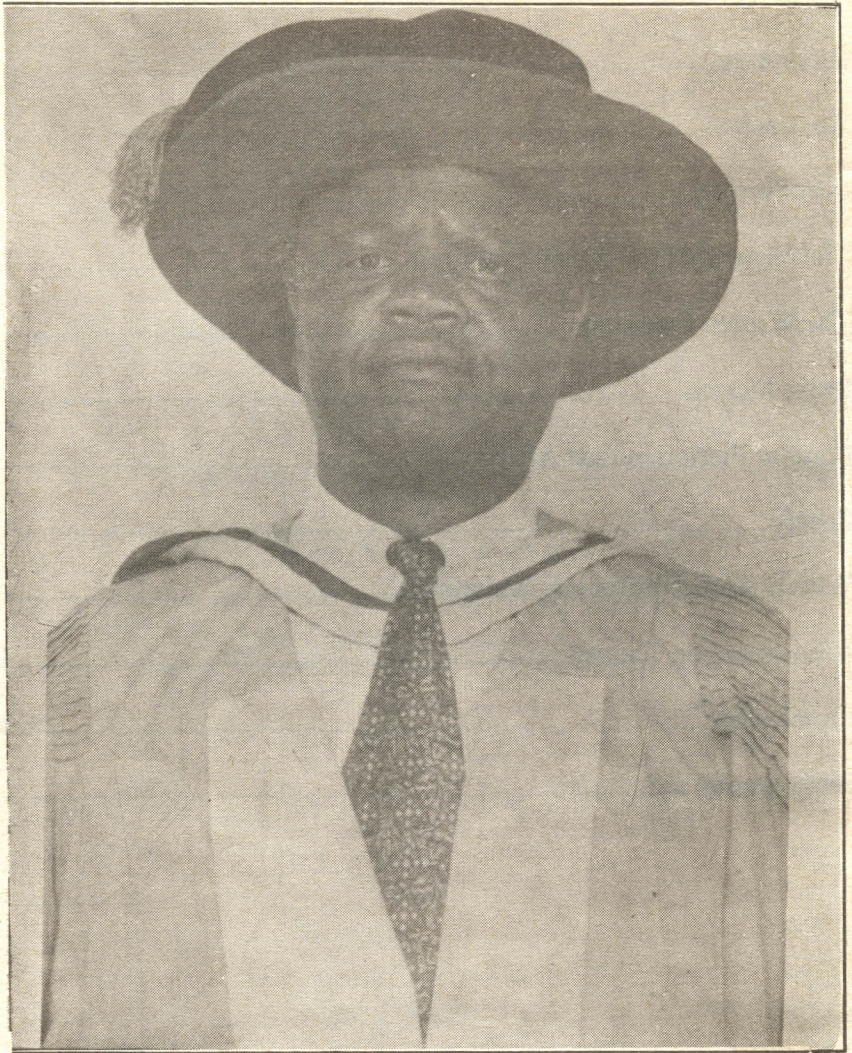
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Professor Christopher Lukorito Wanjala

BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Lukorito Wanjala is a Professor of Literature in the Department of Linguistics and Literature, at the College of Education and External Studies, University of Nairobi, where he lectures in Practical Criticism, Theories and Concepts of Oral Literature. The Oral Literature of Kenya, East African and South African Prose. He is currently conducting research on Culture and Tourism, sponsored by the Ministry of Information and Tourism. He is seeking to redefine the role of the Bomas of Kenya in the promotion of tourism in Kenya. Professor Chris. L. Wanjala returned to the University of Nairobi in October, 2000, after his stint in Egerton University between April 1990 and October 2000.

Chris L. Wanjala was born at Chesamisi Village on the 4th of April 1944. He went to school at Kamusinde F.A.M. Primary School (1952 -1957), Chesamisi Intermediate School (1957-1961), Bungoma Secondary School (1962 – 1965), Friend's School, Kamusinga (1965-1967). In September 1968, he joined the University College, Nairobi, to study English, History and Education. In his Second Year of study at the university, he dropped History and Education, and concentrated on Literature (with the University College, Nairobi, becoming the University of Nairobi). The Department of English converted to the Department of Literature in 1970. Chris Wanjala graduated in Literature in 1971. He worked with the East African Literature Bureau as a Book Production Officer for four (4) months, before being recalled by the University of Nairobi to embark on his PhD degree studies in East African Literature in November 1971. He was at the same time appointed a Part-Time Lecturer in the Department of Literature, University of Nairobi, to teach *African Poetry*, *East African Writing*, *Fasihi ya Kiswahili*, and *Shakespeare* and *Toistoy*. In August 1973, he was among the four members of staff (besides Dr. Eddah W. Gachukia, Prof. Micere Githae – Mugo and Mr. G.R. Gacheche) who were appointed lecturers in the Department of Literature.

Wanjala taught and conducted research for his Ph.D degree. On being appointed Lecturer in the Department, he worked on his postgraduate studies as a Part-Time student. He taught African Poetry, East African Literature, Theory of Literature, at undergraduate levels and Criticism of African Literature, at postgraduate levels. He published books and articles on literature, and edited journals, the highlights of which being *The Season of Harvest* (1978) and *For Home and Freedom* (1980). He also conducted programmes on radio and television on literature and culture. He travelled widely, writing, reading papers on African Literature, and speaking on culture and development.

1978 was a year of dispersal in the history of the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. Chris Wanjala obtained his PhD in East African literature at the convocation of the Great Court in November 1979. In 1981, he moved from the Department of Literature, to become a Senior Research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi. In his initial years at the Institute of African Studies, he showed especial interest in the performance arts in Western Province, focusing on *Litungu* lyricists and *Kumuse* historical reciters of Bungoma and Trans Nzoia Districts. He conducted field research on the oral literature of The Maasai (Kajiado and Narok), and the Boran, Gabbra, Konzo, Sakuye, Rendille, Samburu and Burji (Marsabit District). He accumulated a lot of oral materials which have informed his novel, and a book on the oral literature of Western Province. It is from this material that he is teaching *RLT 204 Theories and Concepts of Oral Literature* and *RLT 203 The Oral Literature of Kenya*.

The University of Nairobi appointed Chris L. Wanjala, Director of the Institute of African Studies in September 1983. During his tenure at the Institute, he was the Director of the District Socio-Cultural Profiles Project which conducted research in Culture and Development in Kenya. By the time he left the Institute in 1985, to join the Department of Literature, as Associate Professor of Literature, the Institute of African Studies had covered more than eleven Kenyan districts.

He returned to The Department of Literature to help reinvigorate the postgraduate studies in literature. He founded the Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) in 1986. In 1987, he was appointed Director, Kenya Airways, a position he occupied up to 1991. In April 1990, he moved to Egerton University as Professor and Chairman of Literature Department. He served the Egerton University Senate in several capacities, including, Representative in University Council. Professor Wanjala chaired several senate sub-committees of inquiry and participated in academic and statutory committees of Egerton University. He created a Department of Literature which taught courses in literary criticism and creative writing at Njoro and Laikipia campuses of Egerton University. He launched The Okot p'Bitek Arts Festival which ran in July every year for all the time he was Chairman of the Department of Literature at Egerton University. He attached Literature students to publishers, newspaper offices, broadcasting stations and to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and thus gave B.A. Literature students a vocational outlook. He was the founding editor-in-Chief of *Egerton Journal* (1996-present).

Since his return to the University of Nairobi, he has shown especial interest in book development, creative and critical writing. He is involved in the formulation of the Kenya Cultural Policy and participates in the activities of the committee on culture at the Kenya National Commission for UNESCO. He writes for newspapers from time to time, and debates on literature, culture and politics. Professor Wanjala is giving us a lecture on the East African Literary Tradition, a topic which has interested him for many years.

ABSTRACT

The concern for a literary tradition in East Africa is an old one. It is tied to the attempts by East African Men of Letters to liberate the African aesthetic. For a long time what held sway here was the Great Tradition. The literary culture evolved based on English letters. The English language was picked by the African child when he made the first journey to school. At school he or she was introduced to a culture of literacy. He or she was formally introduced to setbooks. He or she studied books to help acquire a certain level of literacy. The pupil formulated sentences in English, described his first journey to school. But when he came back home he was open to the world of his village, with all the narratives, the songs, the riddles and the proverbs. This was especially true of children in the colonial era who were told that the English language was the basis of their social mobility.

The literary education of the African child was more imitative than creative. The African school was based on the English School, with a Debating Society, a Sunday School, The School Magazine, and the Open School Speech Day. These institutions formed the first base available to the African child in entering the world of public debate. The school debate conducted its affairs in the English language. The school magazine accepted to publish short stories and poems in the English language. The subjects debated and written about revolved around career roles and the adjustment of the African child to the Western world. The English literary culture instilled into the African child was reinforced when he or she joined the University College. The literary education acquired manifested itself in the English Department Magazine, which changed its name to *Penpoint* and *Dhana*, *Nexus* which became *Busara* and *Darlite* which became *Umma*. There were other magazines available to the student, coming from Kampala, the cities of Nairobi and Dar es Salaam. They included *Transition*, *East Africa Journal* and its literary supplement, *Ghala* and *Zuka*.

Makerere University, more than any other institution of higher learning, did a lot to shape East Africa's literary culture. The writer at that campus fashioned his writings to the English literary tradition in themes and style. The definition of the writer and literature that came from Makerere reflected the view of literature by the New Criticism in England articulated by Mathew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, and later, F.R. Leavis. Makerere argued that a writer drew from the tradition which had been developed by writers who had gone before him or before her. This tradition suited critics of East African literature who focused on realism. But it did not fit into theoretical framework of the scholars who wanted to study literature in indigenous languages.

New schools of literature emerged at the University of Nairobi and at the University of Dar es Salaam. Others, like the song school was forged by writers who grew outside the University "Eng. Lit", literary culture. These included Okot p'Bitek, Okello Oculi, Taban Lo Liyong, and Ali A. Mazrui. These writers worked with Pio Zirimu, Peter Nazareth, Grant Kamenju, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Micere Githae Mugo and Chris L. Wanjala to sever the links of East African literary culture from The Great Tradition. East African men of culture redefined their literature. They consciously based their writings on the oral tradition, whilst keeping their literary practice within the whirlwind of the world debate. The rumbles in the United States of America and the United Kingdom over canon revision affects us here in East Africa in a very direct way. The Departments of Literature and English in those countries robbed our idea of literature and its relevance to history and society, and resold it to the whole world. But East African writers have built on the oral traditions which have become the bases for their creativity and literary criticism. This foundation is becoming stronger and stronger every day.