

FOND MEMORIES

Professors pay glowing tribute to 'academic doyen'

By GEORGE MAGOHA

The world woke up to a rude shock last Tuesday with the news of the death of a founding academic icon, Prof David Peter Simon Wasawo, who passed on at the Aga Khan Hospital early that morning at the age of 91.

Prof Wasawo was a pioneer African zoologist in East Africa who taught at Makerere University in the 1950s and 1960s and at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s and early 1970s before joining international bodies including UN agencies, Tanzania Scientific Research Council, and the Organisation of African Unity panels and countries.

In those earlier years of independence when the country was charting its path in higher education, Prof Wasawo was appointed Vice-Principal of the University of Nairobi College in 1965 and served until 1970 when the college was upgraded to a full-fledged university. Thus, he is easily credited for laying the foundation for what was to become a successful university in the region.

Later he served as the pioneer chairman, Department of Zoology and dean, Faculty of Science. He resigned in 1973 to serve on international bodies.

Prof Francis Gichaga, who was later to become vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi in the 1990s and who worked with him for years, describes him as "a humble man you could not easily tell was so educated".

For his excellent service to the university and the world, his impeccable academic credentials, his enormous contribution to research and teaching in science, his outstanding role in the application of science and technology for development, and above all unsurpassed humility, the University of Nairobi awarded him the Degree of Doctor of Science (Honoris Causa).

From where I sit, I know that the university benefited greatly from Prof Wasawo's leadership as Chairman of Council between 1998 and 2005 - a critical period when the university implemented module II programmes and pioneered the competitive hiring of top managers in the university. This practice has since been emulated by other state bodies.

As an academician Prof Wasawo was without parallel, a fact acknowledged by Margaret McPharson in her book, *They Built for the Future*, A chronicle of Makerere University College 1922-1962.

She wrote: "Tutors had the joy of reporting an outstanding student in biology, D.P.S. Wasawo, who is now the vice-principal and professor of Zoology, having been sent straight to Oxford University from Makerere."

As an outstanding zoologist, he researched extensively on various biological species in East Africa and published many scientific papers. He will always be remembered for his original contribution to the study of the lung fish (protopterus aethiopicus) the largest fish in the lake region before the introduction of the Nile Perch in Lake Victoria.

His contemporaries in Makerere included eminent scholars like the late Prof Simeon Oginge, Prof Joseph Lule, Prof Wilbert Chamide and Prof Y.M. Bora. His former students remember him for his powerful intellect; he could conduct a three-hour lecture without referring to his notes. Among his



students were the late Prof Hillary Ojiambo, the late Prof Joseph Maina Mungai, Prof Richard Musangi, late Prof George Kinoti, Prof Canute Khamala, the late Prof Nimrod Bwibo, Prof J.K. Mati and the late Prof Ambrose Wasuna. This cohort of scholars played a critical role in the expansion of university education in the country and to a large extent were the founding scholars in their respective disciplines.

A true scholar, Prof Wasawo's contributions were felt beyond our borders. In Tanzania, when serving as Unesco's scientific adviser, he was instrumental in the establishment of the Tanzania Scientific Research Council.

Again, while serving as the Chief National Resources Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) based in Addis Ababa, he was instrumental in setting up the regional centre for services in surveying, mapping and remote sensing.

Further, Prof Wasawo was the post-apartheid Director of Training at the African Institute of Policy Analysis and Economic Integration in Cape Town, South Africa. As a true scholar, he documented his experiences in a report which he presented to the then President Nelson Mandela's government, as the way forward to cooperation in science and technology for development.

His best contribution to the field of academia and leadership of learning institutions is best captured by the following comments by University of Nairobi scholars.

Prof Gichaga: "He was a humble man you could not easily tell was so educated."

Prof Gitahi Kiama: "We shall miss his guidance and leadership for he served the university with dedication."

Prof Charles Okidi: "He was a pioneer scholar who provided intellectual leadership." Prof Bernard Sihanya: "He pioneered the essence of administration in the university."

A respected family man, Prof Wasawo was married to Ruth and the couple was blessed with four children - Fredrick, Delia, Steven and Lavinia and many grandchildren.

As we celebrate the life of this incredible man whose trademark was simplicity and humility despite remarkable achievements, the valuable services he rendered to society and his commitment to scholarship will forever remain etched in the annals of history. Fare thee well Prof David Peter Simon Wasawo.

Prof Magoha is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi



Prof David Wasawo (left) greets Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni at a past event. FILE | PHOTO



Prof Wasawo with his daughters Delia and Lavinia. PHOTO | COURTESY

Mr Odinga says the professor served as a mentor and friend of many in Kenya's academia and was easily recognised as one of the world's greatest brains to date but who remained immensely simple and humble despite his great name.

Moi University Chancellor, Prof Miriam Were, describes the scholar as supportive to younger colleagues.

University of Nairobi Vice-Chancellor, Prof George Magoha, says Prof Wasawo was exemplary during his tenure as chairman of the governing council at the university between 1998 and 2005 (see Prof Magoha's tribute).

Maseno University Vice-Chancellor Dominic Makawiti describes the late scholar as an

"academic doyen".

Prof Wasawo became the first post-apartheid Director of Training, Africa Institute for Policy Analysis and Economic Integration in Cape Town, South Africa.

During the end of his tenure in 1996, he prepared a report titled "A Reconnaissance Visit to South Africa on Science and Technology", which he presented to President Nelson Mandela's Government as the way forward in co-operation in science and technology for development.

Prof Wasawo may be gone, but it is clear his legacy remains throughout Africa and beyond.

91

Age of Prof Wasawo when he died.