

LITERARY DISCOURSE | Right of reply

# The harvest is great, we need literary critics

UoN literature don puts forward his side of the story after a string of scathing attacks from renowned Sudanese professor Taban Lo Liyong

BY CHRIS WANJALA  
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**T**aban Lo Liyong is now an old professor who travels from Juba to Nairobi to international book fairs and to launch his new books every year. He enjoys literary debates with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ali A. Mazrui, the late Professor William Robert Ochieng' and I. In most cases, William Ochieng, who died three weeks ago, and I bear the brunt of the debates, and we seldom answer back.

But now, in honour of my friend Ochieng, my reply to Mwalimu Taban lo Liyong will take the form of narrating the sequence of events involving all of us.

Taban wears a long white beard with a long grisly moustache. I have since these exchanges with him nurtured a beard to countermand his.

I first knew him when I was a young academic at the University of Nairobi and enjoyed a love/hate relationship with his writings. But now, with both of us getting advanced in years, we seem to be losing our balance.

In my culture, when you challenge a son to a duel and you learn that he is handling his weapons as dexterously as you do, you halt the fight and shake hands in appreciation of your son's growth. Taban has ruminated over what I said, and of course shot back, and created conditions for a truce. I am a grown up man now, but I can allow him to call me names as we part, knowing that he is the elder to whom I owe respect.

Taban is a great thinker, an essayist and wordsmith whose communication skills have greatly matured. He lives his life as a man of letters optimistically. If I had another life, I would reconcile with him because of his genius and industry as a writer. But now he has to keep his way as I follow the one I have charted for myself.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, and Owuor Anyumba are Taban's comrades-in-arms in their struggle to liberate literature from the hold of the West. They did for Kenya what Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and John Pepper

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The challenge that our generation is putting to you is that knowledge has a bigger picture than some of us may imagine,”

Chris Wanjala

Clark did for Nigeria.

Ngugi's genius could not blossom in the harsh climate of dictatorship and oppression in Kenya's one-party rule. Of all the four, he was the man of the essay, drama and the novel. His impact, however, thawed in the poison-like Kanu regimes when he and his foot soldiers told the then powerful Attorney General that the Englishmen at the helm of the Kenya Institute of Education must leave with their curriculum that put English literature to the fore and African literature to the rear.

Ngugi's future is in the white man's country, wretched in the mist of exile. We are the former young scholars at the University of Nairobi—William Ochieng, the true disciple and Bethwell Allan Ogot's loyal student who wrote for the *Sunday Post* and the *Sunday Nation* as he studied the history of Abagusii, Elisha Atieno-Odhiambo who came from Alliance High School and Makerere University wielding his fountain pen as he commented on politics and wrote his poetry. Henry Mwanzi was our theorist who dabbled in Hegelian dialectics. We assigned him the study of the Kipsigis and prepared him very well for the Maasai studies, which he is doing today.

I did the East African studies touching on Ngugi, Taban, Okot, Leonard Kibera, and

David Maillu, published in my two books, *The Season of Harvest* (1978) and *For Home and Freedom* (1980). I was a columnist with the *Sunday Nation* and a TV and radio personality.

Some people have said unwise, uncharitable and self-adoring things about us, but we have developed thick skins. We say in culture, every generation has its own songs. In the University College, Nairobi, days, when the Sierra Leonian, Dr Arthur Porter, was the principal, you could count the number of creative writers from East Africa with the fingers on your two hands.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o had only his trilogy of prose fiction to his credit — *The River Between*, *Weep Not Child*, and *A Grain of Wheat*. For his drama, he had only *The Black Hermit*, a play which was a hot number in Uganda on the independence day celebrations. Today, librarians cannot cope with the number of books which are being released by publishers.

John Sibi-Okumu and David K. Mulwa are present-day playwrights who were also Dr Porter's and Dr Josephat Karanja's graduates, respectively. Sibi-Okumu has authored more than six plays to date; David K Mulwa has more than 10. In the words of Sibi-Okumu, "Francis D. Imbuga wrote to his grave... and I would bet the Great Prefect has neither read nor seen any of

them. There is enough for all of us to create. Prof. And I really think we do not give a good example to younger generations by fighting each other."

The harvest is great; what we need are literary critics to pore over the products and report to us what they see in them. Prof Ochieng slipped out through the fingers of the East African intellectual scene almost in the same way Elisha Atieno Odhiambo, Aloo Ojuka, Henry Odera Oruka, and G.S. Were went.

For me, the death of Ochieng was a personal loss because he was the other general in the war against what Nuwa Santongo once called "stereo-typed pseudo-intellectuals." Our struggle to reinforce intellectual life in Kenya is not directed at an individual. As Taban Lo Liyong said in 1969, in the *East Africa Journal*: "Knowledge about Africa can only be gained, as indeed knowledge on anything whatever, through hard study."

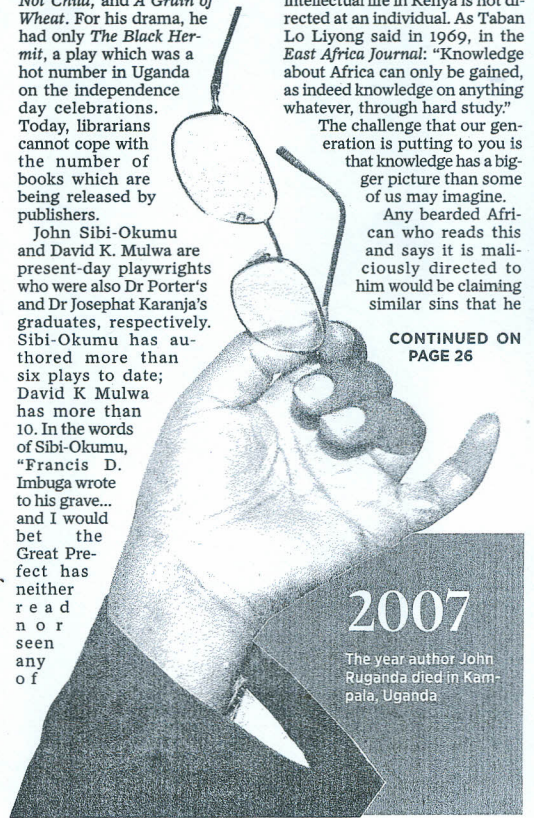
The challenge that our generation is putting to you is that knowledge has a bigger picture than some of us may imagine.

Any bearded African who reads this and says it is maliciously directed to him would be claiming similar sins that he

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Prof. Chris Wanjala of the University of Nairobi



2007

The year author John Ruganda died in Kampala, Uganda

## Applied theatre comes under pressure from modern technology

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fering viewers dramas exploring issues that were traditionally considered the domain of theatre. Also appearing on the screen was social media with its unlimited possibilities.

Of interest is that the interactive FM radio programs are hailed as 'shows'. This is in a sense imagining a performance. Moreover, most presenters of radio talkshows have a strong theatre background and have brought techniques from theatre into FM radio.

Most talkshows are performed by two or three actors or presenters: one a serious "professional" radio presenter and the other an actor. The presenter-actors are ever playing roles,

acquiring pseudonyms and accents that are obviously different from their real identities. Listening to some of these shows, one is inclined to imagine that one is watching a performance constructed to intervene in a specific societal concern.

The real tyranny of the new media is what a Kenyan theatre practitioner, film script writer, actor and director, Kamau wa Ndung'u, calls the game of numbers. Kamau, who has worked in theatre for community development with Sponsored Arts for Education (SAFE-KENYA), notes that funders of intervention theatre are usually obsessed with the numbers of persons that such interventions reach and not necessarily their transformative impact.

The more the number of people who attend the performances the happier the sponsors are. According to Kamau, funders have realised that the new media have a far wider reach and are now diverting funds there.

It can, thus, be argued, according to David Poole and Sophie Le Phat, that "the advanced media technology has significant and profound impact on the arts." Social media, for example, tends to create a site for imagined communities to foment and exchange content, to organise, exchange and collaborate.

What are the consequences of this incorporation? One that comes to mind easily is the role social media played in the mobilisation of the masses in the recent Arab spring.

This is what theatre practitioners have been struggling with for a long time. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Kamirithu theatre that terrified the Kenya government is what Augusto Boal calls "rehearsal for revolution."

The messages disseminated by these new media assume that the imagined communities of listeners, viewers, servers, bloggers and twitters are homogenous. In this sense, global issues are apparently privileged over the local ones.

The point of contention here is who sets this agenda, how and why.

Since the messages are framed without considering the peculiarity of listeners, this promotes the top-down approach in communication.

The question is: can virtual communities that participate in development debates bring about real change? The answer, according to cultural analysts, is that the media creates communities with "no sense of place".

Theatre for community development deals with problems facing communities in real places. In this age of advanced media technology, theatre for development, especially in Africa, needs to reinvent itself if it has to remain relevant.

Prof C.J. Odhiambo teaches at the Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies at Moi University and is a Wits University SPARC Distinguished Scholar award winner

BOOK REVIEW | The history book is meant for children

# The story of a professor and Kenya's history

Granpa Prof traces links his life's story and the changing times of the country over the last 50 years of independence

BY DANIEL SIFUNA  
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Abinya-Ansaa Adjei's book *Grandpa Prof's Story: Kenya is 50* is the third in a series that also featured Ghana six years ago and Nigeria three years back.

It is a history book meant for children. It is based on a narrative by one of the country's leading educationists, Professor Jotham Ombisi Olembi of Kenyatta University. He is fondly known as 'Grandpa Prof'.

Prof Ombisi narrates Kenya's history since the colonial period and through independence, which was achieved in 1963 when he was 23, up

to present day.

Among the fascinating features of the book, published last year by Frangipani Books Ltd, is blending Grandpa Prof's experiences and the history of the country.

Grandpa Prof spent his early childhood in the western Kenyan village of Wanakhale in Bunyore.

His grandfather, Olembi, was a headman who worked under chief Otieno.

At the age of six, Grandpa Prof became a herdsboy. What was most exciting were evening stories told by grandma Amimo.

Grandpa Prof joined the American missionaries of Church of God, with its headquarters at Kima, where he

## 1697

The year that the Omani Arabs ended the Portuguese rule along the Kenyan coast

Professor Jotham Ombisi Olembi

attended Sunday School.

He joined standard one at Kima Primary School. He really missed grandma's stories, which his father filled in by teaching him the history of Kenya, including the people who visited the Kenya coast. These included Egyptians, Phoenicians, Persians, Chinese and Arabs.

The Portuguese rule at the coast was ended by the Omani Arabs in 1697, who also introduced slave trade.

Slave trade was abolished in 1807, although it continued until the Hamerton Treaty of 1873, when British warships began patrolling the coast to intercept slave ships.

Britain formed the Imperial British East Africa Company, which led to the scramble and partitioning of Africa in 1884. The East Africa Protectorate, as Kenya was known then, became a British territory.

The Agirima, Nandi and Bukusu

fought against the British, who seized fertile land from Africans. During the First World War (1914-1918), Africans were forcefully drafted as Carrier Corps.

In order to compel Africans to provide cheap labour on European farms, payment of taxes were introduced. African dissatisfaction led to the formation of political associations from the early 1920s.

In 1944, the Kenya African Union (KAU) was formed, strengthened by the return of war veterans from the Second World War (1939-1944).

However, the failure by KAU to bring about change led to the Mau Mau armed struggle, which was crushed in 1956, and independence came in 1963.

Post independence political developments are well discussed from the Jomo Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga era in 1963 and their fall-out in 1966, followed by the Moi era of 1978 to

2002; the Kibaki, and Kibaki Jr; Ralla era giving way to the current Uhuru and Ruto era.

As a political narrative, the book quite comprehensive and interesting to read. However, there are a number of flaws which the author Adjei ought to have addressed.

Although the story is meant for children, a degree of objectivity is required. For example, there were some positive elements of colonial development which needed to be acknowledged.

On post-independence developments, the narrative is totally silent on bad leadership, tribalism, repression and corruption.

Lastly, the story needed to be organised in chapters instead of one long narrative.

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The book is based on a narrative by one of the country's leading educationists, Professor Jotham Ombisi Olembi"

Daniel Sifuna

## Kenya hosts many foreign writers

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might have committed and therefore stands guilty as charged.

This country has created a home for many creative writers, artists, musicians, dramatists, and literary critics as arrogant and self-opinionated as Es'kia Mphahlele of apartheid South Africa; to the extent that when I read Ghana's Joe de Graff's play, *Muntu*, or watch a production directed by the Sierra Leonean Janet Young, or visit Elimo Njau's Paa Ya Paa Art Gallery which arose from Es'kia Mphahlele's Chemchemi Cultural Centre, I do not feel that these people are foreigners in our midst.

I am so used to Okot p'Bitek and Theo Luzzaka working with me at the East African Literature Bureau, Austin Bukanya, Cliff Lubwa p'Chong, John Ruganda, Elyvania and Pio Zirimu, Charles Oluoch, Bahadur Tejani, Henry Kimbugwe, Esther Mukuye, Patroco Abangira (all Ugandans) and Gabriel Ruhumbika, Euphrase Kezilahabi, Ebrahim Hussein, and Florence and Francis Msangi (all Tanzanians) as my brothers and sisters in the literary fraternity that I do not see foreignness in them.

The three Ugandans who enriched the Institute of African Studies of the University of Nairobi include Taban Lo Liyong, Okot p'Bitek, and Francis Nnagenna. No one discriminated against them. They complained more about the wildness of Idi Amin's Uganda than the wildness of Kenya.

Taban, for one, was received with open arms and got a job at the Cultural Division of the Institute of Development Studies, which he could not get in Uganda. He subsequently moved to the Department of Literature, when the University College, Nairobi, became a full fledged university.

Before that, all African lecturers were

called "Special Lecturers" whether they had doctoral degrees or not; Ben Kanta, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Fred Okatcha, Godfrey Muriuki and probably Taban Lo Liyong himself. They did not qualify to be lecturers because of their skins. White academics from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa were given preferential treatment.

When Ngugi wa Thiong'o took over as chairman of the Department of Literature from Professor Andrew John Gurr, as the latter left the University of Nairobi for the University of Leeds, he was appointed by the central management of the university. He was not installed by Taban Lo Liyong as an individual. It is common knowledge that departments of English in Kampala, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi had British heads and it took them many years to believe that an African could head a department of English in a university.

University of Nairobi's English department, with the campaign mounted by members of the Fourth Estate like Philip Ochieng, Awori wa Kataka and Christopher Mulei, drummed the need for change until it was accepted not only by the university management, but by senior professors like Bethwell Ogot, who was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and Simeon Ominde, who was the head of the department of Geography.

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The more the changes took place at the University of Nairobi, the more sordid and draconian affairs of state became in Uganda. Taban Lo Liyong, through Franz Nagel, the director of the Goethe Institut, had developed a cordial relationship with the German government. After a violent quarrel with the late Okot p'Bitek, his former teacher and fellow countryman, he left for Papua New Guinea. I met Taban at the FESTAC 77, Nigeria, where he had brought Papua New Guineans to participate in the cultural festival. He did not like the burgeoning nationalism in the Papua New Guineans. He wandered his way back to Africa through Khartoum.

Okot p'Bitek and David Rubadiri went to the University of Nsukka, Nigeria, as visiting professors. They came back to Nairobi famished and disillusioned. Although the politics of Uganda and Malawi had slightly improved for them, they were not psychologically ready to go back. At this time Okot p'Bitek was ill and more or less followed his personal physician who had moved to Uganda. Unfortunately his physician died, and Okot p'Bitek also succumbed to his illness.

John Ruganda moved his family to Canada after obtaining a Canadian citizenship. He did his doctoral studies in Canada but returned to Kenya and joined the teaching staff at Moi University. He did a stint there before moving to Swaziland and to the University of the North. No one can say John Ruganda was forcefully sent packing by the University of Nairobi. By the time Ruganda went to Moi University, I had long moved to Egerton University, where I founded the Department of Literature. Ruganda died in Kampala in November 2007. Anyone who knew Ruganda and Wanjala will tell you that the two were great friends and were sometimes persecuted together.

## Daystar to host new academy for writers

BY PETER ODUOR

Daystar University and a group of Kenyan writers have come up with a 14-week course on creative writing and publishing aimed at budding writers. The concept of the 14-week course came after the success of the Authors' Buffet that was organised last year in the city and saw several writers within the city come together for discussions and book signing sessions.

"The Creatives Academy," as the project is dubbed, will bring together some of the recognisable names in the current literary scene in the country for classes that will be held at Daystar's campus at Valley Road. There will be weekly (on Saturday) classes from the January 18 to the April 29 from 8am to 11am, during which different literary personalities in the country will facilitate the learning sessions.

The discussion and learning sessions will revolve around the basic and most often misunderstood ideas about writing, including why people write, the tools people need in order to write and whether anyone can actually write. The facilitators will also look at how to develop good story ideas, how to tell



Muthoni Likimani

stories across generations and what makes a good manuscript.

Aside from these, there are questions that have plagued writers since the days when they wrote on papyrus reeds on creating a distinct voice and identity as a writer, how to earn money from writing and how to look at writing as a career.

The list of the facilitators and instructors is as diverse as the issues that will be looked into. They include John Sibi Okumu, Binyavanga Wainaina, Stanley Gazemba, Julius Sigei, Ken Walibora, Robert Alai, Ministry of Culture, Muthoni Likimani, and Alex Nderitu.

Some of these people will handle legal matters involved in the world of publishing and writing and online publishing and all that comes with it.