

FRANCIS DAVIS IMBUGA: THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

BY

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FRANCIS DAVIS IMBUGA

THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

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This project is my original work and has not been submitted for the award of a degree in another

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ABSTRACT

This research study focused on the life of Francis Davis Imbuga. Francis Imbuga is a renowned playwright, gifted actor and a seasoned director who has contributed immensely in the establishment and understanding of African drama, especially through his published plays and novels that have been read far and wide. His is a story of a journey by a young naïve, little known village boy coming from a humble background, but like a soldier progressing steadily as he endures the harsh realities of life in the rural, colonial and post-colonial Kenya, all the way to a destination of greatness and still maintaining the humility of the vivid past. Imbuga's unique style of telling the truth laughingly as reflected in most of his works of art, describes a man who has a way with words that leaves one laughing and crying at the same time. Imbuga will never fail to deliver when it comes to leaving a mark in a reader's life, so is his personality and character which are equally compelling. Unfortunately the literati community appears to have forgotten about him soon after his death, such that nothing has been organized in Imbuga's honour.

Chapter one introduces the biographical subject and biography as a genre of Literature. It explains the genesis of biography and its place in literature. The chapter also contains the statement of the problem, objectives, hypotheses, justification, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology and scope and limitation.

The chapters that follow narrate the life of Francis Imbuga. This narrative was created after a research carried out on the facts surrounding Imbuga's life, tracing the genesis and development of him as a theatre artist. The writing was guided by biographical theory and the theory of narratology.

The purpose of writing the story is to monument a Kenyan who has played a significant role in contributing to the welfare of the society especially in African Drama and to display to the reader lifelong lessons.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

“Characters give us qualities, but it is in actions- what we do- that we are happy or the reverse ...” (Aristotle) A biography encompasses an analysis of a person’s whole life or portion of life through the in-depth, semi-structured or unstructured interview, or through personal documents.

Harold Nicholson in The Development of English Biography defines biography as, “The history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature” (7) Nicholson here presents some important aspects of a biography as history, the individual and literature.

Biographical writing can be dated back in the Victorian age with biographers like Plutarch who wrote *Parallel Lives* and published in 80 A.D. During those days, biographies only covered prominent figures in the classical world, for instance people like Cornelius Nepos wrote *Lives of Commanders* in the 44 B.C. which looked at the great men who had done exploits in their time and era.

During the Middle Ages, the concentration of biographical writing in Europe shifted from great leaders to the Roman Catholic Church where Hermits, priests and monks used this period to write biographies of martyrs, Fathers, Popes and saints. This was aimed at inspiring people for conversion to Christianity. A good example of such a biography is his courtier Einherd’s, *Life of Charlemagne*.

This was also a period of prophetic biographies in the Islam religion where biographies of Muhammad and other Islamic historical figures were written in what was referred to as the Medieval Islamic Civilization (AD 750 to 1258). Such biographies like *The Book of the Major Classes* by Ibn Sa’d al- Baghdadi.

By the late Middle Ages, religious biographies in Europe were being overtaken by those of knights, tyrants and kings. A famous biography is that of *Le Morte de Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, which gave an account of King Arthur and his knights at the round table.

The renaissance period followed which promoted writing biographies on secular subjects such as artists and poets. They also encouraged writing in vernacular. A notable biography is Giorgio Vasaries' *Lives of the Artists* (1550) where he made his subjects heroes and celebrities.

A first modern biography which contributed immensely in the evolution of the biographical genre was James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, a biography of a lexicographer and a man of letters published in 1791. It was claimed to be the greatest biography ever written in the English language because of its unique level of research, which involved archival study, eye-witness accounts and interviews, and its honest depiction of all aspects of Johnson's life and character. Boswell understood that personality, not action, is central to comprehending a life.

The turn of the 20th century led biographies being seen as influenced by science of sociology and psychology. Human behavior was seen to be influenced by the environment as interpreted by Darwinian Theory. At the same time, the emergence of psychoanalysis also led to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the subject. These biographers gave more attention to the childhood and adolescence stages of the subject.

This psychological approach changed the way biographies were written; from the conventional heroes stories and success narratives to the psychological interpretation of the subjects.

Other writers who revolutionized biographical writing were Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf. During this era literary biographies began to form breaching the gap between the high and middle-class culture.

It is also the same period in which autobiographies began to emerge, with writers like Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope writing on their lives, when there was a rise in education and cheap printing.

In the twentieth century, there arose a revolution in biography writing which was referred to as the “New biography” spearheaded by Virginia Woolf. The “New biography” was a reaction against Victorianism. It established a relationship of equality between the biographer and subject, preserving, “the freedom and his right to independent judgment” (231).

Just like in autobiographies, subjectivity in the writing of a biography was important in determining and shaping the features that form a biographic portraiture.

There were other critics who focused on satire in biographical representation, for instance in the work of Lytton Strachey; *Eminent Victorians*. The critics looked at the role psychology played in understanding the personality of the subject. This, according to Gamaliel Bradford and Emil Ludwig is the “key to character” which illuminates every aspect of the subject’s personality and career.

Strachey’s writings revolutionized the art of biographical writing during the 20th century, as its appeal to readers was based on “curiosity more than morality or patriotism.” He emphasized on presenting the subject, the cherished national heroes, as normal human beings with flaws who he regarded to be no better than “a set of mouth bungled hypocrites”

Strachey therefore defied the Victorian tradition of “undue subjectivity” where the biographers had to serve and preserve reputations.

Since that period up to the present, the writing of biographies has risen both in the popular culture and scholarly work, and as Rachel Morley puts it, “ from Plutarch to James Boswell,

Lytton Strachey to Virginia Woolf, Janet Malcolm to Richard Holmes, biographers continue to find life, as it were in life writing.”(Morley 2012, p9)

The Victorian writers believed that a biography could only be written on a subject of personality “magnitude”. Sidney Lee, one the Victorian critics, argued that only those who have excelled in some discipline or life can be worth being written on.

However, Virginia Woolf disputes the belief that it is only the great achievers who deserve to be written on, (the Victorian “Great men” so to speak). Everyone who has lived has a record of the life he/she has lived and therefore a story to tell, including the “obscure” ones,

Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography-the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what is smallness? (97)

Scholars like Sidney Lee were obsessed with the great men as the only subjects of biographies. But Chinua Achebe puts it in a more metaphorical manner, “let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wings be broken.” It’s only fair that each person who has lived is given an opportunity to tell their story as it is.

It is for this reason that I dwell on the life of the son of Samwel Govoga which could be regarded as a “second-rate life” (Lesley Stephen 1907) by virtue of not being known as a great personality as compared to the likes of presidents, scientists or great writers.

But as Stephen puts it, “second-rate lives” are of more interest because they are less documented than those of the “great”. This allows a biographer to focus on the subjective nature on the interpretation of the subject. A good illustration is: very little is known about the soldiers who stood by great men like Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte and the likes. Those people

are overshadowed by the huge image through the successes and achievements of their “bosses”. I therefore, focus on the life and times of Francis Imbuga and how being a teacher, family man, an actor and a playwright shapes his individuality as a man.

I wish to state here that I set out to examine the life of Imbuga as a biographer and not a chronicler. A biographer is more of an artist than a chronicler because of the way he selects and synthesizes information as opposed to a chronicler who is more interested in history in the story. A biographer documents fact about the subject, describing how they occurred, but a chronicler puts much emphasis on the time than the actual life of the individual.

According to Andre’ Maurois, the task of a biographer is to “search for the thematic unity and harmony of the life he recounts, claiming that this is not imposed but natural aesthetic.”(92) This explains the subjective nature of biography which allows the writer to recount the life events of the subject, harmonizing the motifs and metaphors of an individual’s life.

A biography plays a monumental function as it attempts to capture “life” as it was lived by the subject and presents it as bare as it could possibly be. It attempts to immortalize the subject. Sidney Lee asserts, “A biography exists to satisfy a natural instinct in man-the universal desire to keep alive the memories of those who by character and exploits have distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind.” (‘Principles’ p.7)It is in this light that I delve into the life of Francis Imbuga to attempt to capture his personality, his guiding philosophy, his role as literary scholar, a dramatist (including his involvement in the Kenyan politics) and how all these shape him as a man, therefore attempt to establish him as humanly as he possibly could be.

In my research to narrate the story of Imbuga, I attempt to be like a mirror, as Laura Marcus comments, “it is in the mirrors of our friends that we chiefly live.” (91) Every human being has

a reflection in the society based on the things they do, which linger in the minds of the people even after their departure. A biographer therefore attempts to create a new image of the subject, and therefore I chose to do that.

Despite the fact that a historian and a biographer are different as mentioned earlier, history plays a crucial role in biography writing. The biography can be read so as to give history a human face. It therefore reconstructs the history of communities, families and nations. As David Wafula in his MA thesis on The Biography of Mary Okello, puts it, “The lives of people encompass the history of nations; this is sometimes through the courses which they lived for”. For instance, Francis Imbuga’s biography brings into remembrance the socio-political issues like corruption and misappropriation of public resources that Kenya had to crapple with immediately after independence.

Paula Backscheider writes, “...readers come back and back to biography, ceaselessly seeking to understand the way human beings have lived, the shapes of life, how individuals fit into history, and the ways human kind has grappled with the advantages and obstacles that life inevitably entails.”(xxi)

The facts outlined in the biography need to be historically verifiable. Woolf assesses the role of the modern biography as reconciling fact and fiction with contingencies of time and history,

The biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe. (195)

This research will be aimed at giving a true account of Francis Imbuga as it is without any fabrication or bias whatsoever. My work will focus on a man who contributed greatly in the

scholarly world, especially in the understanding of theater with his published plays being widely performed and his work discussed in international seminars. Several of his books like *Betrayal in the City* (1976), *The Successor* (1979), *Man of Kafira* (1984) and *Aminata* (1988) have been used as course books in schools, colleges and Universities in East Central Africa

Just like an autobiography, a biography plays a role of searching one's inner discovery (or inner self) through the narrative. It is a quest to understand and transform the self through a journey of feeling and self-discovery. As Rachel Morley explains,

It offers the biographer access not only into the private sphere of another individual but also into the biographer's own mortal, personal being, whether acknowledged or otherwise, real or imagined.(9)

I therefore illuminate the life Francis Imbuga as experienced through public and private spheres. By giving a true account of my subject, I fulfill the role of a biography in which the life of a subject is revisited to show where he/she did well and at the same time where they failed.

Autobiographies and biographies invoke varied philosophies of life. Apart from satisfying human curiosity, the auto/biography also outline a pathway to destiny of human beings. For instance a person reading about an individual, who has worked his way up the ladder, be it socially or academically, gets inspired to also pursue the best in life no matter the challenges encountered.

Francis Imbuga's story is one created to inspire and teach lessons to other people in the society, as it will look at a man who rose from a humble background and worked resiliently his way up the academic ladder to become a distinguished Professor of Literature in one of the leading Universities in Africa as well as a respected playwright. Therefore, Imbuga's story is worth being told as it "enchains the heart by irresistible interest"

1.2 Statement of the problem

There are many Kenyans who have contributed immensely in the development of the society in different spheres like sports, arts, academics and many others, but whose stories have remained untold. Despite numerous biographies being written on and by Kenyans, there are still more people whose stories need to be told especially those in the academic fraternity. This project aims at analyzing and documenting the life of Francis Imbuga in a bid to narrate his experiences and contribution in the making of a Kenyan nation and also find out why the society especially the literary intelligentsia, have been so silent on him after his departure. Through the biography of Imbuga, I wish to contribute to the writing of biographical genre in Kenya as well as to the scholarly world in writing of a biography as a genre.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To document the life of Francis Davis Imbuga.
2. To contribute to the growth of biography as a literary genre.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

1. The story of Francis Davis Imbuga offers crucial lessons to the society.
2. Biography employs aesthetics when narrating the story.

1.5 Justification of the Study

Biography is a literary genre that is aimed at communicating the truth about one's life. Unlike other literary genres like fictional novels, biography focuses on authenticity since it is based on a real person as the subject of the work and not fictional characters.

It also seeks to immortalize the people who have played outstanding roles or in Sidney Lee's words, "distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind." I therefore wish to keep alive the memories of a man, who has distinguished himself as a literary playwright through generations, contributing through writings on drama and performance in auditoriums as well as on television, engaging in many social, political and cultural endeavors but still maintaining his role as a family man.

Francis Davis Imbuga's tale has not been told exhaustively despite his immense contribution to the society. I set to find out why he has not been remembered through celebrations in his honour by the literato. Through the biography of Imbuga I wish to contribute to the writing of biographical genre in Kenya as well as the scholarly world.

1.6 Literature review

This part examines the works that contributed to the formation of an argument to write a biography on Francis Imbuga. I first of all examined stories written on Kenyans who have contributed to the making of a Kenyan nation in general and on Imbuga in particular. I also studied various biographies and then evaluated other comprehensive works on the nature of life narratives and biographies.

In the *Weekly Review*, Francis Imbuga is documented as one of leading dramatists in Kenya. This assisted me in understanding who Imbuga is and his contribution to the society. However, the narrative focusing on Imbuga fails to highlight on the finer details surrounding his life. My work therefore seeks to fill the gap by situating Francis Imbuga in the historical times hence giving a wider understanding of his life right from birth to his last position in the society.

As Jennifer Muchiri in Women's Autobiography: Voices From Independent Kenya argues, "the process of memory is not a mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively recreates the meaning of the past in the act of calling to mind...History influences memory, such that how people remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific"(29). With this insight in the reconstruction of Francis Imbuga life, I will be careful with the nature of truth that I document. This is so because I will attempt to recreate the meaning of my subject's past encounters with people who affected his life in one way or the other. I also have to seek to know how the significant experiences encountered in Imbuga's life had an influence on him as a man.

Although Muchiri was focusing on the autobiographies of Kenyan women, she also offers valuable information on the biography as a genre. For instance she argues, "Biographies offering different interpretations of particular historical figures or other individuals may appear periodically over many centuries" (38). This helped me to understand that the time and timing of biography differs significantly in autobiographies and biographies. My work in this case was to tell the story of a man who has lived through the colonial and post-colonial times.

E. M Foster in Aspects of the Novel states that every writer while writing goes through a state known as inspiration in order to present a good story. Forster puts emphasis on the story-telling aspect of the novel, which could also be applicable to the writing of biography. He goes ahead to argue, "Since the novelist himself is a human being, there is an affinity between him and his subject matter..." This brings into light another important aspect of a biography writing- people. The relationship between a biographer and his subject is in away strong especially by virtue of

the subject being a living person in the real world. Although Forster focuses on the novel but I focus on the biography which is closely related to a novel as a literary genre.

Nicolson Harold in The Development of English Biography attempts to distinguish the “pure” and “impure” biography. He foregrounds the issue of truth in a biography by arguing: “the primary essential is that of historical truth, by which is meant not merely the avoidance of misstatements, but the wider veracity of complete and accurate portraiture” (10). Harold disputes Sidney Lee and Carlyle who embraced exaggerated regard for biographical subjects. He quotes Sidney Lee who argues that the inspiration of biography is, “an instinctive desire to do honour to the memories of those who, by character and exploits, have distinguished themselves from the mass of their country-men” (12).

In the same vein, Harold attributes the lack of truth in biographies to the inflated regards of the great as proposed by Carlyle who he quotes proposing that, “the history of mankind is the history of its great men: to find out these, clean the dirt from them and place them on their proper pedestal” (11). Lee and Carlyle have no sense of truth as far as biography is concerned. In other words, such inclinations as of Lee and Carlyle have ruined biographies.

Harold assisted me to understand that a biography should not be turned into a platform for hero worship; it should, as Marcus argues “attempt to grasp the life as it was lived” (94).

Andrew Morton in, Moi: The Making of An African Statesman, depicts an all-rounded picture of the former president, including his strength and weaknesses. “Decades of his self-sacrifice have taken their toll on his personal life.” This work was helpful to me in a way that it made me

cautious not to exaggerate in presentation of my biographical subject and more so since my work is more practical, (Harold's work is more theoretical.)

Laura Marcus in Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice disputes what Leslie Stephen asserts that the biography is a slave to history. Quoting Sidney Lee who affirms that the biography is, "a genre separated from history, ethics and science." (60) He further compares biography to Chemistry, which analyses substances and resolves them into constituent elements. In the same vain a biographer subjects an individual to close examination in order to understand real person and what defines him. In determining the worthiness of a biographical subject, Marcus quotes Edmund Gosse who argues that the individual should have possessed "qualities, moved in conditions, assumed characteristics, so unlike of other men as to justify his being raised from their ranks." (60) This means that a biographical subject should be a unique person. Again the impact that an individual causes in public life should be relative to the figure created in the narrative. Gosse's argument agrees with Sidney Lee's monumental aspects of biography, in which he asserts, "The subject of a significant biography should be a personality of magnitude."(90)

1.7 Theoretical framework

In this research I will focus on theory of biography which guided me in writing this narrative on the life of Francis Imbuga. Biographical theory is divided into psychobiography and interpretive biographical theory. But in this case, I foregrounded on interpretive biographical theory because my research was based on a departed subject, as opposed to psychobiography which focuses on

the inner conflicts within a living subject, as Bruce Nade explains, matching the “retrospective, external views of a life with an internal, contemporaneous perspective of the individual.” (187)

Interpretive biographical theory involves the use and collection of personal life documents, stories, accounts and narratives which describe turning-point moments in individuals’ lives. Norman K. Denzin in Interpretive Biography notes, “The subject matter in biographical method is the life experience of a person.” (10) The tenets of biographical method include: the existence of the others, the influence and importance of gender and class, family beginnings, starting points, known and knowing others and observers, objective life markers, real person with real lives, turning-points experiences and truthful statement distinguished from fiction.

The theory also postulates that biographies are ideological “statements often representing or defending the class or gender of the writer” (18). This shows that however objective the biographer may claim to be, he or she will eventually show his or her standpoint on gender and class.

The concept of “the other” monitors the honesty of the biographer. Denzin notes that “the eyes of the other direct the eye of the writer” (18). In this case, a biographer writes the life story of his or her subjects knowing well that God in heaven, people who are very close to the subject and a specific intellectual community can tell exactly where biographical injustice (false representation of the biographical subjects) has been committed.

1.8 Methodology

This research was mainly based on a close reading of library, archival and online materials written on and by the subject as well as other biographies. The library materials included primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consisted of articles and books written by Imbuga himself while the secondary sources were articles and commentaries written on him. All these were obtained from the University of Nairobi library, bookshops, internet and daily newspapers in the library.

I studied biographies that have exhaustively interpreted the lives of different personalities. This will enable me to understand the process of writing Biographies, as well as history, nature and function of biographies.

I also conducted conversational interviews with the people close to Imbuga (friends in theatre), former school mates from primary school up to the University, his (former) students at the University, former classmates and colleagues in the Universities he taught.

The interviews were in form of written Questionnaires, mobile phone conversations, and e-mails.

Sadly, I could not be able to interview the family of my subject, in spite of meeting them one time in Wenyange village and chatting briefly. However, this did not interfere with the research.

I managed to talk to the relatives, friends and neighbours to the family of Imbuga who were willing to give out as much information as possible.

1.9 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This research will mainly focus on writing the life history of Francis Imbuga. It is an account of his background, personality, career and political convictions as viewed from different perspectives such as his fellow critics, friends and colleagues.

This research is limited to Francis Davis Imbuga as a person and what I gathered about him was from existing sources such as newspaper articles and interviews with those who had known him for some time. I personally never met Imbuga but only knew him through his literary works and interaction with his relatives and friends and therefore, found it necessary to write on him just as his Maragoli community believed, “it is only after a man’s death that the story of his life becomes ripe for telling.”

In this study, I examine the issues that molded his life, his educational experience and career. At the same time, I attempt to find out why the world, especially the intellectual community have kept silent about Imbuga despite his contribution in drama. He has not been celebrated with much enthusiasm as some other writers in this country and continent.

CHAPTER TWO

SON OF WENYANGE

It happened in the dead of the night. This was during one of those long dull, cloudy and sleepy nights; at the exact gate separating midnight and daybreak, when most people have drowned in a deep slumber, with the exception of a few notorious ones who could still be staggering in the deserted streets, unaware of the danger that lurks in the lonely dark alleys, trying to find their way home (perhaps) from their favourite “keshas”. The city was dead silent, unusually quiet, too quiet perhaps for a city that is known to operate on a twenty four -hour- economy basis; muted and subdued. It was on Monday, November 19th 2012 at 12am in Kahawa West estate.

Suddenly the internet went viral; the first message was “*a literary icon Francis Imbuga passes on,*” ran a headline on the Standard Group online page at exactly 00:00 GMT by one Phillip Etyang, “*Final curtain falls on Francis Imbuga.*” was another heading reported on the Daily Nation twitter page.

The news spread fast and furious courtesy of the social media, as the whole University found itself thrown into a cauldron of confusion and sorrow. This brought to memory what one pastor had preached on television the previous day, that Sunday morning, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed a good seed in his field. But while everyone was asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and quietly went away.” The title of the sermon was “Keeping watch,” (Mathew 13:24-26).

The preacher explained how the birth of a child could be likened to a good seed sown by God into the “soil” earth. Then as the child grows into maturity, the devil secretly comes and sows

into the child's life calamities, pain, disease, disillusionment and emptiness, which would in most cases, make him or her feel both sad and empty within, and when worse comes to the worst, death strikes. All these happen when men are in a deep slumber by being too preoccupied with their day-to-day activities that they can't have time for God, some can't remember the last time they made a prayer, leave alone visiting the church. That is when man's adversary the devil strikes, he comes to steal, kill and destroy what was meant to be a precious and useful piece of creation from God. "It is important therefore, that we watch and pray." Was the parting shot from the servant of God. The man from Wenyange had departed from this earth and left for the "Promised Land".

2.1 Welcome to Wenyange

Wenyange is a small, little known village in the heart of Vihiga County of Western Kenya. It sits at the junction of Kaimosi -Chavakali road and Kisumu- Kakamega highway. The area is densely populated but also occupied with a cluster of mud and semi-permanent houses which look a lot the same, (except for a few permanent and magnificent ones as seen from a distance) that are close to one another, only being separated by similar bushes of tall grass and occasional footpaths that demarcate the land belonging to different individuals. This land is occupied with fields of maize, tea, bananas and Napier grass which are grown as both staple and cash crops.

The people of Wenyange also engage in cattle keeping although done at small scale. This is where Imbuga was born and brought up during the colonial era. By then the area was under the leadership of Chief Joel Abere. During that time the villages were ruled by local headmen

“*magutu*” who assisted the colonial government in running the country and therefore as a result, they had more powers than even the said colonialists themselves.

Looking straight on Eastwards from the main road at Chavakali Junction, stands a lonely stone-walled house which is just close to the rough road. This was Imbuga’s house that was put up as rest-house just before he relocated to Kisatiru, a few metres away from Wenyange. Behind the house, is a well cultivated farm occupied with a mixture of banana stalks, sorghum and maize crops, that are then joined by another large semi-permanent house. It belonged to Imbuga’s father, Samwel Govoga and his family.

Although at the time of his demise, Imbuga had moved slightly away from Wenyange and conveniently settled in Kisatiru, which is about a kilometer away, this place remained reserved and the most treasured home to the playwright. To get to Kisatiru, one takes a rutted rough road that branches off the main road between Chavakali and Kaimosi; a place known as Bendera. The track is flanked on either side by knee-high grass mixed with some trimmed bushes that form a natural fence. The track snakes downhill going past a school (Kisatiru primary school) then leads to a flat field covered by a cluster of indigenous mahogany trees.

There are a number of decent homes along the way with well-trimmed fences and painted gates that are constantly locked. Imbuga’s home is inside the third gate from Bendera stage, a huge black gate that is constantly closed and surrounded by a well trimmed natural fence which is reinforced by a closely-knit mesh wire. It is not easy to see what goes on inside the big home due to the closed fence, although the place looks well kept, a sign that there is a caretaker. Initially nobody could dare come near that fence because of the fierce dogs that were kept inside. That

was long before the beasts were secretly eliminated (strangled using wires) by the workers, which left the place quiet and deserted.

2.2 Tracing Imbuga's roots

Francis Davis Imbuga was a Luhya by tribe but from the Maragoli sub-tribe. The Luhya are a heterogeneous group that comprise of many sub-tribes, all of which are Bantu speaking. The Maragoli, who form part of the Luhya tribe, are believed to have originated from the first man, Mulaguli (meaning prophet).

According to Joram Lidiolo, the Chairman of the Maragoli Council of Elders, Mulaguli is said to have first lived in Museno (now Maseno) before migrating to Kizava near Musunguti area at around 1560. He later married a wife, Kaliyesa and together they got five children; four boys and one girl. The girl, Kavogoi unfortunately died at a tender age leaving the four boys to grow to maturity. The boys were Musali, Mukitsungi, Mukilima and Mumavi who later on formed the four major clans of Maragoli; Avasali, Avakitsungi, Avakilima and Avamavi.

Mulaguli was regarded as a prophet. He had a special drum for his prophesy. The drum, *eng'oma*, had the ability to produce varying sounds to identify the different circumstances required by Mulaguli for interpretation. It had a special drummer called Machayo. Mulaguli also could predict weather. He had a special clay pot for his meteorological observations called *Inyingu* that contained finger millet. However, the *Eng'oma* lost its power by the year 1920 because of two reasons; Machayo the drummer died and left a gap since nobody else possessed the powers and prowess to play it like him. Then the introduction and spread of Christianity by the first missionaries also impacted negatively on the work of Mulaguli as many people were

converted from cultural activities and embraced Christianity therefore his work as a seer was condemned and branded as “evil”.

Francis Imbuga’s sub-clan was *Avamasero* and the house of *Membe* which originated from the *Avakilima* clan. The Avamasero sub-clan is believed, of all the four clans, to have been the only clan that inherited the prophetic powers from their great-grandfather Mulaguli, it is no wonder it was claimed that Imbuga had a prophetic spirit. They are a closely knit community with people living together as one family and conveniently led by a council of elders in which Imbuga also served as a member.

The Avamasero also consist of almost thirty age-sets describing the years young men were circumcised. Imbuga belonged to the *Ifomu* age-set. This comprise of a group of young men who got circumcised in August 1960. “This is indeed a special group of people in the Maragoli history” comments the Chairman of the Maragoli Council of Elders “It is one group that has produced the highest number of prominent people in this country consisting of professors, great business men and politicians among many others.” The Ifomu age-set followed *Selula* (1952) but came before the *Embego* which had their circumcision ritual in 1968.

What also makes the avamasero clan outstanding among others is the role they played in the spread of Christianity. They are said to be in the forefront in welcoming the first Christian missionaries in Western Kenya in 1902. People like Yohana Amugune are said to have invited the missionaries in western Kenya through Maragoli, who later introduced the Friends Mission Church famously known as Quakers with its first offices being established in Kaimosi.

Early Childhood

When Francis Imbuga was born on 2nd February 1947, his parents Samwel Govoga and Doresi Aireni had no idea what kind of a person the world could turn their son into. He being the first born in a family of thirteen children, showed early indications of a bigger responsibility and heavier burden awaiting the young Imbuga. However, as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* puts it, “a chick that could grow into a cock can be spotted the very first day it hatches”, Imbuga was not a child to be waved a side as many would attest later in life.

Francis Imbuga’s mother, Doresi was the eldest wife in the home of three wives. The practice of marrying many wives in the western part of the country was as natural just as monogamy is to the Western cultures, and a man was allowed to marry as many wives and father as many children as long as he was able to fend for them; a sign of social status. As a matter of fact, monogamy was seen as a sign of poverty and therefore frowned upon. That was the last thing Samwel Govoga could hear of, leave alone being associated with.

Within the Luhya community, the first wife is normally regarded as the “eldest” irrespective of her age; even if the co-wives are older than her it didn’t really count. In Samwel Govoga’s family, the first two wives were legitimate but the third one was regarded as “unofficial” by the rest of the family because her coming was inevitable, although she somehow managed to hang on successfully and eventually became part of the family.

Having been born in the midst of British colonization, Imbuga had to survive the tough and harsh conditions of the colonial regime which was characterized by incessant curfews, betrayals and careless arrests like the rest of his peers. The World War II had just ended about two years back

and his father Samwel Govoga, who had fought for the British Empire in the King's African Rifles, had been promoted from Company Carriers to a foot soldier.

During this same period, the fight for freedom heat was being felt in the whole country forcing the colonial government to be tough on the natives, and the people of Maragoli were not spared either. As one age mate in Wenyange commented, even to the children enjoying the best of parental attention, colonial circumstances presented unique difficulties that often distorted and stunted what could have turned out to be bright careers. Imbuga however, did not fall prey to the predicament.

Although his upbringing had all it took to turn him into a village failure, Imbuga had a resilient spirit, understanding the value of education as instilled by his mother. He therefore remained focused. He never listened to any other voice except that of success. To his peers and even critics, Imbuga learnt the lessons of childhood struggles well, using them to fortify his character. Imbuga's father had worked under a very friendly officer called Davis while in the army such that, immediately Francis Imbuga was born, he decided to name him Davis, after his boss and friend. This indeed is a typical traditional African way of maintaining friendship between people who have been close and also keeping the memories of their friendship alive. Imbuga on his part did not betray his father, unlike other literary legends like Ngugi who later on decided to "throw" the English name back to the "King James'" once they were established, he retained his to grave. Growing up for Francis Imbuga was a fascinating experience, full of exploration as commented by one his childhood friends. First, the notable absence of the father who was away most of the time for duty at the Nairobi City Council provided a perfect opportunity for childhood adventure and mischief.

Imbuga would often times join his cousin Robert Agufa famously known as “kudos” and other friends to go and swim in their favourite River Keveye which was near their home, and go hunting rabbits as they looked after cattle. The boy was an accomplished swimmer and hunter (as attested by another friend) and a good dancer too even though he was not a regular participant.

Dancing those days was also a popular pastime for circumcised youth, and the girls would not resist the charm of a gifted dancer. “Kero” dance for instance, was the talk of the village where young people would meet in one of the young man’s “simba” (cottage) in the village for a night of just dancing. This was a naughty dance and since there was no electricity in the rural areas those days, the dancers could use a kerosene lamp in performing the cultural activity. A typical “Kero” dance had a Master of Ceremonies who would do the introduction by welcoming all the people present before issuing the rules to the audience. The MC who also doubled as a Disky Jockey (DJ), was endowed with all the powers to run the show, including deciding when to end the dance. What was interesting about “kero” was the manner in which it was conducted. First, this was a purely youth affair therefore no adult was allowed, as again this was where potential marriage partners met and socialized. The dance could start slowly then progress systematically, increasing in both tempo and pitch as the audience went frenzy. During the climax, when everybody was breathless, sneezing and visibly sweating (the door is usually locked from inside and the strongest person in the room assigned to man it), the tin lamp could be conveniently blown out, throwing everybody in total darkness. This could take the next half of the dancing session before lights come on again, and the celebration continued.

By then, the youngmen were pupils at Keveye Primary school during the period of 1955 and 1959. In the evenings, after bringing the animals home and taking supper, the two boys would then leave for their grandfather's house which was only a few metres away from their home, to study before going to sleep at around 9pm. The grandfather, Mzee Mugodo had a spacious house that hosted the young men and also provided a conducive environment for study. Imbuga and his partner would then study as they secretly monitored their grandfather's moves, till he dozed off. "The old man never entertained nonsense," comments Agufa. For their entire childhood, the grandfather was irreproachable in every way, "He was determined to instill willpower, obedience and a sense of honour in his grandchildren."

During those nights of study, the naughty boys would quietly sneak into their grandfather's bedroom while he's asleep and steal his local beer (Busaa) in a calabash to go and sip silently as they did their homework at night. Mzee Mugodo would of course suspect whenever he wanted to have his favourite drink and noticed the level of his can slowly going down. "Hey, what has happened to my Busaa?" he would roar, "Nothing *Guga!* Is it missing or something?" one of the boys could respond giving a slow burdened smile. The grandmother was not as much vocal or aggressive, but she was such a fine story teller. She narrated many stories to her grandchildren, most of which Imbuga published later in his life, like "Lialuka lya Vana va Magomere" among many others. She is also the one who introduced Imbuga and others to local traditional foods like *ovoro* (finger millet), *tsisaga*, *mutere* and *tsisindu* (quails). Even Imbuga himself admits drawing a lot from the wisdom of the granny.

Secondly, Imbuga manifested a strong social character at a young age which attracted all manner of friends some of whom had to influence him permanently in life. The friends found Imbuga open, warm-hearted and exceptionally talented that everyone wanted to be close to him. “Imbuga never hid any information from you” one of his friends commented.

While at Keveye Primary school (now Mudavadi Girls Keveye High School), Imbuga displayed his sense of creativity through story-telling sessions in which he excelled and became very popular both to his teachers and peers. Occasionally, the pupils would watch performances by senior schools, “I saw a play by Friends School Kamusinga (High school) when I was in standard 2 or 3” Imbuga recalls in a *Weekly Review* article, “ It must have been *Julius Caesar*. I saw them kill someone and put him in a coffin.....I was thoroughly upset until the end of the play when I realized the man had not died.” The performance ignited a fire in Imbuga that could not be quenched by anything else except theatre itself, and as one of his close friends and fellow playwright, John Ruganda commented, the authentic way in which the performers had “lied” to Imbuga about the fact of death was the germinal beginning of his life in theatre.

However, the period and time of Imbuga watching the play as quoted by the *Weekly Review* is contested by Professor Henry Indangasi, an alumnus of Friends School Kamusinga. He argues that it may have not been possible for Imbuga to watch the plays in the 50s because of two reasons: one is that Friends School Kamusinga started at around 1956 which were about the same time Imbuga entered school. “By that time it would not have been possible for the school to be established and immediately start exposing learners to Shakespearian plays” argues Prof. Indangasi.

Secondly, during the 50s pupils in lower primary schools were usually taught and examined in mother-tongue (Maragoli). As a result, Imbuga must have been too young to understand the plays of Shakespeare; hence he suggests that the most likely period of the Shakepearian plays might have been in the mid-sixties when Imbuga was in High School.

Francis Davis Imbuga's source of inspiration at that time was the granny, who tirelessly narrated stories to them during evenings when all animals were in their shed. Traditionally, no one was allowed to narrate or listen to those stories being told before sunset, when all the animals have come home in their sheds and the chicken entered the house, otherwise if it happened, it was believed one would lose all his wealth including the animals (which was highly treasured by the community).

In Maragoli community, language is precious and eloquence, the use of fine language is admired and highly esteemed in western Kenya just like the rest of the world. This is what Imbuga acquired from his grandmother; the art of narration, "creative influence and inspiration."

However, the mother Doresi Aireni played a very significant role in the life of young Francis Davis Imbuga as well as his other siblings, both socially and spiritually. She was an extremely virtuous woman and her virtue had been legendary and her work habits amazing, always determined to ensure that nobody would ever have grounds to gossip that she had failed to bring up her children properly. She took her children to church where they were taught how to live as good young people; by respecting their elders. The "saintly" mother also taught them how to read the Bible in kiMaragoli (the first Bible written in Luhya).

It was through the mother and her serious commitment to church, that Imbuga came to know of Yohana Amugune; the founding father of Christianity (through the Friends Quaker Church) in Maragoli and a significant part of Western Kenya. Yohana Amugune is a respected name in Maragoli up to the present because of the role he played in the spread of Christianity in the region. He introduced Christianity in Maragoli and by extension, Western region by inviting missionaries when he returned from Mombasa after being converted from being a traditionalist to Christianity. He is said to have owned vast acres of land, some of which he freely and willingly contributed to the community for the establishment of schools like Chavakali Boys High School. He was a farmer and a great leader who liked sharing what he had with other people.

Yohana Amugune is feted for advocating for the rights of women; he worked tirelessly to ensure that women are empowered. Traditionally, the society was not keen on educating girls; boys were always given privileged positions whenever an opportunity arose. Yohana Amugune contributed a lot in the emancipation of women in western Kenya. For instance, initially the women were not allowed to eat eggs or some parts of chicken like *imondo* (gizzard) which apparently is the sweetest part of a chicken. When the missionaries introduced Christianity to the community, Yohana patiently talked to the men and showed them through the Bible how all people were created equal in the eyes of God, and how girls could equally excel if given an opportunity like the boys. Slowly, the society began accepting his ideology and as Christianity was embraced, development started being witnessed in this part of the country.

By the time Yohana Amugune died, the community had been revolutionized. His burial was marked with a lot *Isukuti* dance as the people mourned the departure of a great man and many educational institutions like Friends School Kamusinga had their dormitories named after him as a tribute to him.

Imbuga also alluded to Yohana Amugune in some of his books like *Aminata*, as one of the people who influenced him a lot especially on the perspective of women empowerment. For instance, the character of pastor Ngoya in *Aminata* is inspired by the story of Yohana Amugune who advocated for the rights of women in the Luhya community. These involved issues like the right to inherit land, to eat chicken (Imbuga refers to it as chicken soup) and also participation in key decision making in the community.

In the story, the headman Jumba of Membe who is a staunch traditionalist refuses to honour the wishes of his dead brother pastor Ngoya, who was a reformist and had introduced Christianity in the community. The pastor had instructed on his death-bed that “his grave should not be cemented” (4) and also that his daughter, despite the traditional customs, inherits, “a token three acres of my own piece of land.”(47) Now, it is the latter part of the wish that raises issues with Jumba. As a headman of Membe, he feels it is uncustomary for a woman to inherit land, especially when her brother is alive. Jumba then decides that Ababio inherits the land. However, by doing so Jumba is goes against the customs; not abiding by the wish of the dead brother, and as John Ruganda puts it, “failing to abide by his brother’s request, according to the customary beliefs, would result in the ghost of the dead man pursuance of Jumba in vengeance.”

After sitting his Common Entrance exams at Keveye primary, Imbuga proceeded to Chavakali Intermediate School (currently Chavakali Boys High School) in 1960, where he cleared at the top of his class in KAPE in 1963 and earned himself a place at the prestigious Alliance High School. His friend Robert Agufa also passed his exams and joined Friends School Kamusinga. They were to later meet at the University of Nairobi. Imbuga was the first and only member of the family to go to Alliance High School.

Higher calling

Joining Alliance High School in 1964 for Imbuga was a dream come true. He met people like Athur Luvai, David Mulwa, Kaunjuga among other who became prominent personalities. Coincidentally, when Imbuga entered the school and was registered as a student, he was assigned the same house with his kinsman Athur Luvai in Livingstone House. Unfortunately and as fate would have it, this was the same year that Imbuga lost his loving and resourceful mother Doresi in a grisly road accident. This indeed tainted the scholar's excitement of being in such a prestigious school.

To make matters worse, the news of her demise was kept secret since the young Imbuga was busy sitting for his end of term exams. This really hurt him and from then on, it remained a fresh wound in Imbuga's heart up to the time of his death, he never managed to get over the incident. "The death of Imbuga's mother marked the lowest point of his life," confirms Greg Adambo, who was a close ally to Imbuga and acting mate, "the experience and memories followed him like a shadow throughout his life." That showed how close Imbuga was to his mother, that when

she left he felt utter emptiness within, until and up to the time he married Mabel Olubayo who then took the mantle and became his second mother.

Alliance is one place that played a big role in shaping Francis Davis Imbuga as a person. First it, it provided a platform for the exploration of talents by the students given the availability of resources versus the small number of students (the entire school population would be between 250 and 300 students only). This indeed provided every student with an opportunity to exercise his talent. As a result of this, Francis Imbuga turned out to be a good basketball player who featured in the school team as a point guard, a very promising player. It appeared like he was headed for a career in sports, until he made a sudden about turn and took theatre. “I still remember those days,” a classmate confessed, “I could hear the thud of basketballs, the blare of time-out horn, and the shouts of the crowd as the sports warriors fought: Alliance versus Lenana School.” In most cases Alliance won those home matches, but there were other moments when they lost to their bitter rivals with small painful margins.

The second value that Alliance High School instilled in its students under the leadership of L.J Campbell, who was the principal after taking over from Edward Carey Francis, was discipline. The school motto- *Strong to Serve*, spoke it all. During those days, the prefects (who were mainly in Form six) were empowered and worked just as the school administrators; they could punish errant students without being questioned. However, Imbuga did not leave his antics despite being a junior in the new school, in fact by the time he was in Form two Imbuga was already known all over the school.

A notable incident happened when Imbuga one day decided to be naughty while in school. At the time, he was in Form two. Imbuga convinced a friend to play a prank on the prefects during lunchtime break. As a rule, nobody was allowed to cross the quadrangle within the school; everybody had to therefore walk along the covered area, failure of which could attract punishment. Imbuga sat and thought of breaking the rule without being punished. They devised a plan with the friend who was to pretend that he was injured, and then they would quickly get into the square, sit on the grass and leave in the full glare of the prefects! The plan could have worked perfectly well had the friend not laughed in the middle of the prank. The laughter therefore gave the game away and Imbuga and his accomplice were severely punished, but the incident remained memorable to both Imbuga and students who witnessed the drama.

Francis Davis Imbuga later joined the University of Nairobi in 1970 after successfully completing high school and passing his exams. He pursued Bachelor of Arts with Education degree in Literature and English. For the next four years spent at the University, Imbuga interacted with many other students David Mulwa, Wasambo Were and Greg Adambo among many others, but most of all pursued his passion and special interest in drama, forming part of the “campus playwrights”. These were people who took time to write, act and direct plays for the state broadcaster Voice of Kenya (VOK) which later became KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). This was partly entertainment as well as a way of survival in campus during tough economic times. The Literature Department was at the time being headed by Professor Andrew Gurr before he was succeeded by Professor Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in 1973; after working hard to change from English Literature department to the Department of Literature.

When Francis Imbuga cleared his four year stint at the University of Nairobi and got his Bachelors Degree in 1973. He did not stop there but proceeded for his M.A. degree in the same university with the topic of his research being “The Techniques of Improvised Drama” which was supervised by Joe De Graft. He was later attached to Cardiff University College, Wales, to undertake his research in his Masters Degree. With the help of UNESCO sponsorship, Imbuga was able to travel to the drama departments of the Universities of Ghana, Legon and Ibadan. He later obtained his Master of Art degree from the University of Nairobi at the end of 1975. The following year, Imbuga was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Nairobi in the Department of Educational Communication and Technology where he joined the likes of Alice Nabwera (she later left and went to teach at Kenya Science and later Kisii College) who were the young turks at the time.

In 1978 the whole of Education Department was moved from the University of Nairobi to Kenyatta University. This was part of the changes that came with the new regime after the death of President Jomo Kenyatta. The new government took over with zeal and zest, ambushing institutions and carrying out reforms left right and centre. It seemed to have set out to purposely to disappoint its critics. When the Education Department was moved to Kenyatta University, Imbuga moved with it, rising to the rank of senior lecturer and then head of the Literature Department.

Being a man who thirsted for knowledge, Imbuga left in 1988 for the University of Iowa in America to pursue PhD studies in Theatre. His initial desire was to pursue Theatre, but instead the University of Iowa denied suggested that they would allow him do a PhD degree in Drama,

which he got equally obliged. Talking to Professor Peter Nazareth, a renowned Professor of English and African American Studies at the University of Iowa, he confirmed that indeed Imbuga was in that University for his PhD, and as a matter of fact, it was him (Nazareth) who supervised his Dissertation: *Thematic Trends and Circumstance in John Ruganda's drama*.

While at the University of Iowa, Professor Imbuga was a member of the International Writing Program (IWP). The IWP program engaged in inviting published writers in UIA, mostly during the months of August and November every year. Prof. Nazareth also admitted having used Imbuga's plays to teach in his class of African Literature. "Imbuga was a gifted writer and therefore students needed to read his works to draw inspiration from him." was his closing remarks.

When Imbuga returned to Kenyatta University in 1992, he was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor of Literature after acquiring his PhD. Many more responsibilities that followed are discussed later in other chapters on Imbuga as an educationist.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MAKING OF A PLAYWRIGHT

Francis Davis Imbuga was a man who had come a long way in drama that by the time of his death, his name had become such a big image not just in the literary circles but in the entire East and West African region. Tracing the genesis of Imbuga's passion for theatre and drama was tantamount to climbing the *Mugumo* tree of the Kikuyu. It became apparently clear that the man did not find himself a dramatist by default.

Imbuga's creativity came a long way from his time as a child in the 50s while still in Keveye primary school, although his serious and active involvement in drama unfolded and manifested while at Alliance High School. "Oh my God! Imbuga was such a master storyteller," testified one childhood friend and a schoolmate in primary school, "he was always armed and beaming with stories whenever requested by our teacher of English, which would leave the entire class in stitches. He was a gifted young man who was very creative in whatever he did. He had would think on his feet." The youngman was not just good at narrating stories but he also had interest in reading and watching the stories and plays respectively as they were being performed on stage.

Imbuga once recalled in a *Weekly Review* article, "I saw a play by Kamusinga Boys (High school) when I was in Form 2 or 3 It must have been *Julius Caesar*. I saw them kill someone and put him in a coffin.....I was thoroughly upset until the end of the play when I realized the man had not died." The performance ignited a fire in Imbuga that could not be quenched by anything else except theatre itself, and as one of his close friends and fellow playwright, John

Ruganda comments, the authentic way in which the performers had “lied” to Imbuga about the fact of death was the germinal beginning of his life in theatre.

3.1 Best Actor of the Year

It was while at Alliance High School, that Francis Davis Imbuga discovered himself, who he was and what he was created to do in this world, drama. Having lost his mother while at Alliance, Imbuga stayed with the grandparents from whom he learnt a lot concerning the traditional African family life, the dance, the proverbs and general etiquette. In an interview Imbuga himself confesses that indeed it was this background that shaped his perspective in life and in theatre. His growth in drama could be alluded to the Biblical mastered seed which “is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade.” (Mark 4:31, NIV). So did Imbuga begin by taking part in the school’s drama club where he was quite at home with taking minor roles in the club’s productions. During the six years in high school, he actively took part in several plays within the school, among them being Byron Grainger-John’s *Worlds of a Difference* where he played the role of “Oyoo”.

Francis Imbuga made his debut in 1969 when he was in his final year at Alliance. This was indeed a defining moment for Imbuga where, as John Ruganda puts it, his “authorial and acting abilities burst into bloom.” He wrote his first play entitled “Omolo” which was entered into the Kenya National Schools’ Drama Festival in March that year and which he personally directed as well as acted in it. The play “Omolo” was satirizing the post-independence bureaucrats who were so egocentric that they could not acknowledge the intelligence of their servants.

Sadly, the play did not go beyond the provincial level. However, the adjudicators highly commended Imbuga for his acting prowess being the scriptwriter at the same time actor and director that he was awarded the coveted Best Actor of the Year trophy which was at the same time being contested by Greg Adambo from Lenana School. “Although we were rivals at that time for the award of the Best Actor,” commented Adambo during an interview, “but we later on became close friends and worked together in many television productions that followed. We recognized the talent and passion that Imbuga had.”

The play “Omolo” was the one that unlocked Francis Imbuga’s potential as a playwright. When he was elected chairman of the Child Welfare Society, Imbuga used the same play to raise funds for the society by staging it at State House Road Girls (now State House Girls). It was during its production that the play caught the eye of the Voice of Kenya (VOK) television producer, John Tabaria. He was so impressed that the producer decided to approach Imbuga with a proposal to air the play on television in order to reach a wider audience. Unfortunately again, Imbuga had lost the script of the play and did not have time to rewrite, but all these notwithstanding, Tabaria got Imbuga’s contact and they were in constant touch.

3.2 Campus Playwrights

Francis Imbuga entered the University of Nairobi in 1971 for his undergraduate course in Literature and Education and headed straight way to join the University’s Drama Club. That is where he met people like Greg Adambo who later joined television production, Felix Osodo, David Mulwa who became a renowned playwright and lecturer in Theatre and Film studies at Kenyatta University, Njagi Gakunju who became CEO of AAR, Esther Tole who was appointed

Kenya's Ambassador to France, Austin Bukenya who became a lecturer of Literature at KU, Francis Kamau, Oketch and J. Gitau among others, most of whom formed the face of Kenyan theatre. The chairman of the Drama Club then was the late Dr. Ndindiri who later became the Clerk of the National Assembly. He also interacted with lecturers such as John Ruganda, Okot p'Bitek a famous poet, David Rubadiri (who was in exile after being sacked as Malawi's Ambassador to USA by President Kamuzu Banda), Joe De Graft and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o among others.

It was during the first year in campus that Imbuga wrote *Sons and Parents* which later changed to *The Married Bachelor*. The play ridicules African elites for "double faced hypocrisy" as James Muli, a literary scholar, would put it. In the play, the protagonist Denis Agala, who is a Professor of Cultural Studies in the only University in the nation, fails to satisfy all the customary requirements of the circumcision ceremony of his son, Bandi. He neglects the family and hurriedly returns for duty in the city since his teaching job which is so demanding, requires strict punctuality. By putting his career first, Agala flouts the rules of tradition by failing to preside over the burning of Bandi's old clothes. This results in a tragedy in the family; illness and death follow as Bandi dies bringing Agala back into his senses by the awareness of his past.

The play which was performed at the Kenya National Theatre attracted a huge audience including the late Dr. Josephat Njuguna Karanja, who was then the Vice Chancellor of the University of Nairobi before later being appointed the Vice President in President Moi's government. Karanja was the first local VC after the University of Nairobi was made an

independent university. Initially it was the University College of East Africa Nairobi being headed by Dr. Arthur Porter as the Principal.

The play received an overwhelming applause from the audience that at the end of its presentation, the cast was invited for a party by the Vice Chancellor, then later by subsequent parties organized by Okot P'Bitek and Taban Lo liyong who were lecturers in the Departments of Sociology and Literature respectively. As Ruganda would comment later, "the play met enthusiastic response when read at the colloquium on East African Writing, at the University of Nairobi in June 1971." It opened the door to local English plays being screened on television through the effort of Seth Adagala who was the Head of V.O.K at the time.

The Married Bachelor became the first local play to be aired on television in English, apart from the Kiswahili plays the likes of *Mzee Pembe*, *Mama Tofi* and others which were a common feature. The play was performed on December 23rd a day after Imbuga's wedding to Mabel Olubayo, alumni of Alliance Girls who also acted in it.

Apart from pursuing academics while on campus, the students were introduced to V.O.K television drama. They engaged in writing plays and acting which provided for their upkeep, especially when Imbuga got reunited with John Tabaria and Seth Adagala from the V.O.K. Imbuga and company were famously referred to as the "campus playwrights."

They would write, act and direct plays for the television station on weekly basis. These strict and close deadlines in a way had a negative effect on the young artists; they were forced to write "substandard scripts" as one critic commended. There were some mischievous students who got

desperate for the extra coin from the national broadcaster that they went to an extent of “copy-pasting” plays from the old European collections in the University Library, only changing a few names and settings here and there to suit the occasion before they hurriedly submitted them for screening at the V.O.K. “One time I was going through a financial crisis in campus,” confessed one former student of University of Nairobi, now a professor “when a friend approached me and asked me why I allowed myself to go through all these business of being “broke”, when I could just simply walk into the library and select any book on European drama, scan through, customize the play then take it to the broadcasting station for screening, which would earn me something within seconds.”

As an upcoming playwright, Imbuga was greatly inspired by the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi, which supported drama by organizing performances in the department. Such lecturers as Joe De Graft, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Okot P’Bitek, Leonard Kibera and Taban Lo Lyong actively engaged in drama. For instance, Joe De Graft, the Ghanian theatre director who was also actively involved in acting, was one time selected to act in William Shakespeare’s play *Othello*. The play was being directed by James Falkland, a white; this was a time when the Kenya National Theatre was run by only whites (mostly those white Kenyans who were allied to the former Attorney General Charles Njonjo.) At the time, the only group allowed to perform at the theatre was the Nairobi City Players. Lucky enough, De Graft also recruited Francis Imbuga and Greg Adambo to take part in the performance of *Othello*.

Imbuga’s contact with de Graft was incredibly life-transforming. The Ghanian was a teacher who encouraged his students to experiment. He never wanted to “suffocate younger and greener”

talent. As attested by Ruganda, Imbuga established a long-lasting relationship with de Graft which culminated in the latter recommending Imbuga for a UNESCO scholarship to further his studies in drama and theatre. He went to on study “*The Techniques of Improvised Drama*” for his M.A. degree at the University of Nairobi.

While pursuing his M.A., Imbuga had an opportunity to travel widely; he visited on attachment the Drama department of University college, Cardiff; the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon; and the department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Apart from that, the entire University administration led by the then Vice Chancellor Dr. Karanja was in full support of the drama club. The creative atmosphere at the University of Nairobi then was “highly charged” and liberating for the young writers who got an opportunity to grow and blossom.

Greg Adambo describes working with Francis Davis Imbuga as memorable, simply epic. “Imbuga was a jolly and generous man,” he comments, “he was a man who was warm and accommodating to anybody including those who ever thought of becoming his enemies.” According to Adambo, Imbuga didn’t have enemies. “Imbuga could not ignore you once you acquaint yourselves with one another. He never forgot people; therefore he did not need to be reminded to know people. “He was a gifted actor,” he sums it all up.

Imbuga was one person who never gave in when convicted to do something. Adambo remembers nostalgically one occasion when Imbuga forced him to kiss on stage during the performance of *Sons and Parents*. He had felt a bit shy and strange especially because of the multitude of audience watching and at the same time; it was being aired live on television. These were the

years when holding of hands in public, leave alone kissing, was not only unheard of, but a taboo that could easily warrant a cleansing ceremony. Again, this happened to be the first local play on television involving kissing in public. Therefore, the character performing it did not believe what he was doing before his eyes, but anyway the play had to go on as planned.

Imbuga's sense of humour could not miss to feature in theatre. For instance he one day forgot his lines while performing on stage and simply said confidently something to the effect of, "potatoes in my garden." This made the occasion memorable as his fellow actors would later burst out laughing after the performance. It was a creative way of covering up the mishap that was only known to the performers, although they still remember it many years down the line.

As a dramatist, Francis Davis Imbuga was incredibly creative and friendly; he liked sharing everything he got including ideas, with others. This culture of sharing and celebrating his achievements with others may have been passed on from the older generation of poets and playwrights like John Ruganda, Okot P'Bitek, and David Rubadiri among others. These veterans were known to share their achievements openly and cheerfully, for instance whenever one of them published a play which was metaphorically referred to as the "birth of a new baby", he would invite others to celebrate through "swallowing" which was a term used to refer a bottle of beer, all in the spirit of Ubuntu (respect for humanity). Interestingly, they would spend every cent got from their performance in the "celebration."

It is without doubt clear that Imbuga established himself in theatre of the absurd. As professor Indangasi would later comment, Imbuga's interest in the theatre of the absurd may have been

informed by the undergraduate course they undertook while still students at the University of Nairobi. The course, Development of Drama traced the origin and spread of drama from the era of the Ancient Greeks all the way to the Yoruban theatre.

The absurdity is reflected in the manner in which Imbuga explored universally human situations with grace and dexterity. His characters had a habit of talking too much but showing little action.

“Imbuga was extra-ordinarily observant,” concurs Mulwa, “he was very keen on small things that didn’t make much sense to most of us.” For instance, when they were out drinking, Imbuga would slowly and quietly sneak out of the pub (he preferred visiting simple, humble places for his “swallow”) and strike a conversation with one of the junior staff in that joint which would go on for a very long time as both enjoyed the talk. He liked talking to “small” people, probably because he knew they had a story that nobody cared to give an ear to, but which was worth the attention. He appeared to belong to the school of Lesley Stephen which took deep interest in “second-rate” lives.

Ironically, that is where Imbuga seemed to derive his inspiration as a great writer; in the pub and from the “small” insignificant people who never appeared to make any significant impact in the society. While on campus Imbuga spent much of his time interacting with the junior staff at the university, or alternatively chatting with friends at the “Kilima” Bar. He was particularly close to one gentleman-Bojana, who worked as a technician in the Education Communication Technology (EDCOMTECH) Department at Kenyatta University, who also interestingly turned out to be the editor of Imbuga’s works. “These people probably were the ones who provided the

raw materials for his writings,” one of his former M.A. students argues in support of why Imbuga treasured spending his time with the “juniors”.

During some of those informal meetings and daily conversations with friends, Imbuga would find himself taking notes on a piece of a small paper, as if intending to use it as evidence against somebody in a court of law, “But it was his nature of being thoughtful about very small things,” Mulwa comes to his defense and gives a quick rejoinder, “Imbuga had a habit of building on most simple things and creating a whole big picture out of them. For example, he makes a whole nation out of the *Membe* clan.”

However, Imbuga was not the only person who made notes during conversations, his close friend and fellow playwright John Ruganda also had the same habit of writing down small notes, but his were usually scribbled on a packet of cigarettes. It is no wonder that they were so close, because they shared a lot in common, including writing their PhD theses on each other, Ruganda wrote his PhD thesis entitled *Alienation and Leadership figures in the Plays of Francis Imbuga* in New Brunswick in 1989 while Imbuga did his entitled *Thematic Trends and Circumstance in John Ruganda's drama* in University of Iowa 1992.

Imbuga was possessed with a spirit of drama, as one would put it. When the spirit of creativity stubbornly possessed his mind and then took hold of right hand spinning him round like a top, the results would leave mouths agape. Imbuga would not take long to write a play; in fact it was pointed out by Makini Gachugu who did research on his plays that the *Bachelor* was written in two weeks, *Kisses* in two or three days “to meet the requirements of a persistent publisher”, and

Trial was written in one night. “This unharnessed creative outflow on Imbuga’s part,” Ruganda comments, “would appear to be a manifestation of the improvisational manner in which the young playwright had been forced, by exigencies of time, to devise his television drama.”

The hurried production of the plays could have probably watered down the quality of his work bearing in mind that to produce any piece of art is real hard work. I do support the view that Imbuga’s hastily written plays would have benefitted a lot more from close editing and proofreading before being presented for acting.

While still staying on the campus of Kenyatta University, Francis Davis Imbuga lived an interestingly unique lifestyle. Apart from associating with the humble, simple citizens, he never rented out his servants quarters (SQ) to make extra cash as some of his colleagues were fond of doing, instead he turned it into his study room where he locked himself and spent more time working on his plays, poems and stories as he quietly consumed his drink. This in most cases took place in the dead of the night when the world was in deep sleep.

There were times when Imbuga would be annoyed, but usually he kept it safely concealed in his throat. In the public eye, Imbuga was that jovial go-lucky gentleman who was always seen laughing in that familiar, deep and contagious laughter(Imbuga’s laughter had a trademark of being the loudest), as he vigorously shook his friends’ hands in typical Kimaragoli style while slapping others on the back.

Imbuga was that kind of a man who did everything in a typically African manner, including enjoying life in the best way he knew how (he drove his car with a crate full of beer in the boot which he generously offered to any soul he met and would find favour in his eyes). However, the easiest way to get on his nerves was do anything touching on theatre or his family.

There were times when he got really mad with people who brushed him the wrong side that one would think of him eating them alive. “During arguments in the Senior Common Room or hot debates in the theatre hall, Imbuga could just be quiet dropping his head foolishly and staring absent-mindedly in empty space on the floor ahead of him as if in surrender. He did not like engaging in arguments,” observed one of his longtime friends, who directed most of Imbuga’s plays.

When annoyed, he was known to talk almost in his throat “swallowing his words,” He did not like confrontation even during disagreements, “Imbuga hated public show,” David Mulwa, a fellow dramatist would comment, “he let his work speak for itself and his intellect manifest through the script.” He hated being viewed as “the man” by the public in spite of his fame.

He was one man who was brutally honest, particularly with friends. Imbuga would not allow somebody deceive him openly, a man of truth. The attribute of being honest with friends is one virtue that made him popular especially among his peers; he had a way of telling a person the truth without hurting him/her. The same extended to his criticism of the ruling elites, he usually gave soft punches.

3.3 Betrayal in the University

However, not everybody was happy with and celebrated Imbuga's efforts and successes. While teaching at the University of Nairobi, he encountered conflicts with colleagues, especially from those who felt Imbuga was running ahead of his time. The most memorable incidence was during the competition for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Cultures (FESTAC) which was held in Lagos, Nigeria, in January/February, 1977. Prior to the departure of the selected winners of the competition, there had been a fiasco at the selection panel's table. Francis Imbuga himself points out in *Shrine of Tears* that despite the immense support enjoyed by many, "*Betrayal in the City*" was destined for doom by some individuals in the university who were against his achievements.

After the play had been selected as the best from the national wide playwriting competition, some influential men and women of letters suddenly felt that it could not be allowed to go beyond the borders of Kenya for the simple reason that it was seen, in their eyes, to attack corruption in high office, nepotism, betrayal and violation of basic human rights. To allow such a play go beyond this country would be tantamount to "washing the country's dirty linens in public."

The group therefore sought to replace "*Betrayal in the City*" with "cleaner linen" as Imbuga would put it. They conspired and successfully went ahead to petition for a second competition in the pretext of allowing more entrants in the competition to increase the quality of work produced for the international festival. But as it turned out, the group was writing their own play which

needed to be given time to be completed, hence the other reason for nullifying the first competition.

In the second competition that followed, several plays were submitted to the drama committee, among them *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* written by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo. The young playwright also submitted the same play to the committee which now constituted of members who were non-Nairobians, although he claimed that they had also been emphatically reminded that the "criterion for their work was patriotism."

When the results for the competition were announced, Imbuga's play *Betrayal in the City* had won again to the dismay of his opponents. Apparently their play was second, and since there was only one entry for the International Cultural Festival, the "masterpiece" was headed for the waste paper basket. God forbid! The "group" quickly converged putting their heads together; they decided to write a letter to the organizers of the festival persuading them to allow two entries from Kenya. To the said group's relief and joy, the organizers accepted the request and allowed two plays in the play category of the festival. The war was now over. But wait.

Before departure to Lagos, both plays had been performed in Nairobi and the audience had shown their preference already. At the time it was being directed by Tirus Gathwe. As Mugambi Karanja also commented, "Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* is a better play theatrically....it lends itself to more dramatic treatment and universal appeal- and therefore likely to have more appeal on a wider audience in Lagos."

When the Kenyan contingent arrived in Lagos, they learnt that according to the programme of the festival, the performances would be run in two venues concurrently. Miraculously, Francis Imbuga's play had been assigned the main hall, the "huge and impressive National Theatre" in the host nation's capital city, while the second play was booked for performance in the other outdoor theatre several miles from the city.

As expected, the "group" emerged again; they were not impressed with the arrangement by the organizers. "How could a play by an upstart," joked Imbuga in one of his works, "be performed at the National Theatre while THE play by THE people for THE people was left at the mercy of the elements?" So the group met secretly at night in the foreign land and devised a strategy. They sent a small but "powerful" delegation to the man who was in charge of the whole programme, to persuade him switch the two Kenyan plays because the main actress in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* had a seminar paper to present back at the University on the particular day of performance. Since Imbuga's play had been slated for performance a week earlier, this was the only alternative available for it to work. The issue of the "dirty linen" also came up, albeit in whispers. The plan succeeded and so it was made clear that Imbuga's play would be performed at the outdoor theatre while "THE" play would be played at the National Theatre.

However, as things would turn out, Imbuga's play emerged top and got a "resounding overwhelming" success, which confirmed the proverb "truth does not sleep on the way." Out of the sterling performance in the theatre situated at the periphery of the host country, *Betrayal in the City* received many invitations to perform in different parts of the country. Ironically, "THE" play was swallowed up. Worn out by the constant battles engaged in daily, the "group" members

began to lament and openly betray one another while still in Lagos, that's how the secret night meetings came to light. While remembering that incident, Imbuga commented in one of his books, "You can't keep a good man down."

3.4 The National Academy Award

This is another memorable event in the life of Francis Davis Imbuga that cannot go untracked. There was a request to propose names of people who had demonstrated the most distinguished and diversified service to the University fraternity. Now Imbuga's name featured prominently in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the development of the performing arts in general, poetry and painting. He had been instrumental in the establishment and development of African drama on both television and stage and his participation in international seminars conferences and workshops on culture was immense.

Because of all that, Francis Imbuga's nomination had been supported by the entire university including the Registra himself, not mentioning five distinguished professors from various universities including Professor Henry Indangasi from the University of Nairobi who also wrote reference letters in his favour. After holding thirteen meetings by the select committee comprising of a strong team of professors, the results were announced. Francis Davis Imbuga emerged the winner of the prestigious Kenya National Academy of Sciences Distinguished Award.

He was to be presented with a commemorative plaque and a cash prize in a few days, but the news of his success outran the reward; it was all over the newspapers, television and radio.

However, there were still some people who felt Imbuga did not deserve the award. There was this particularly professor from the Faculty of Arts (Imbuga fails to name the person in his book) who felt he had served the university long enough and therefore should be the one qualified to get the award. The good professor made several telephone calls to friends complaining bitterly about the selection procedure as being biased.

Interestingly, days turned into weeks, weeks into months and eventually years, the winner of the Academy award neither got the plaque nor the prize money for the award. When he called the offices of the Academy one year after the announcement, Imbuga was reliably informed, “the American firm which had been asked to design and make the commemorative plaque was having financial difficulties and could not therefore make it.” They however, consoled him that another Japanese firm had subsequently been engaged to do the job, of which Imbuga humorously commented, “if the Japanese took so long to design and make a plaque with a simple African name on it, then they had no business manufacturing cars and other things!” So that is how the case rested in the peace of the organizers to date.

3.5 The Day of Truth

Francis Davis Imbuga’s creativity was outstanding. Some of his friends felt that he had a sixth sense, but Mulwa, his stage director for many years, maintained his stand and argued that indeed Imbuga had more than a sixth sense, “He was extra-ordinarily observant. Imbuga always took notes during conversations and often liked to build on most simple things that we have no business for.”

Back in the village in Wenyange, people believed Imbuga got his prophetic instincts from his great-great-grandfather Mulaguli. He was known to possess such sharp senses that could give the Seers a run for their money.

It was in 1978, when the Faculty of Education had just been moved to KU from the University of Nairobi and Imbuga being part of it, joined the new family. This was happening at a season when the Creative Arts Centre was busy preparing for the “Urns Festival.” The organizers of the festival among them David Mulwa, Kaunjuga, Mumbi Wa Maina and Francis Imbuga were invited to the Principal’s office to discuss on who to invite as the Chief Guest. They unanimously agreed to invite His Excellency Daniel Arap Moi as the main guest, since he had just been sworn in as the President of the Republic of Kenya and was working aggressively to prove his critics wrong on matters to do with leadership and governance. The organizers therefore saw a perfect opportunity to have him as the Chief Guest.

Sure enough, President Moi accepted the invitation to attend the event. The acceptance now introduced another headache, what to present to the Head of State. This slowly started becoming an issue of politics versus creativity. Among the items suggested to be performed to the president was a play, although the committee did not know who would write one. After a session of brainstorming, the team unanimously settled on Francis Imbuga to write a play, which he reluctantly agreed; just nodded his head and said nothing.

Amazingly, Imbuga did absolutely nothing for the months that followed before the festival. At about three weeks to the event, Imbuga still had not written a play. When the organizers of the

event met to work on the final touches of the event and also finalize the program, each person was giving a report of their progress. It then came to the part of play, “Ok, who is doing the play?” the chairman asked, “It is Imbuga,” was the answer from Kaunjuga. “Now Imbuga, what is the title of the play?”

Imbuga slowly lifted his head and said, “I have a play.” Then out of the blues he blurted out, “Day of Truth”. Everybody got down struggling to scribble somewhere on a piece of paper, just to be sure to remember it. “It was that title,” says Mulwa, “that unlocked Imbuga’s creative force.” The truth was, Imbuga had not written any play (he hadn’t even thought about it)! It was on that day, Imbuga later confessed, that he felt inspired and had to sit in the corridors of the Literature Department of KU to write a thirty-minute drama overnight. Apparently, this is the play that was the forerunner of what became “*Man of Kafira*.” It talked about a ruler who had lost touch with his electorates. Imbuga actually based the play on “Nyayoism” which was Moi’s ideology, but in his wisdom reversed it such that it was the people’s footsteps to be followed and not the other way round as was the norm.

The festival which took place on May 18, 1979 was held at the open grounds outside the Creative Arts Centre (now Shopping Centre). The play left the audience in stitches, Moi himself almost rolled with his chair with laughter. He found it hilarious and never bothered to get the deeper message in it. Of course the event then culminated into a political rally where people, mostly the University Academic staff, were recruited into KANU life membership with professor Eshiwani being made the chairman.

The play was so memorable especially to the president that when he went to Kabarnet the week that followed, he remarked, “If you want to do drama, do plays like the one I saw at Kenyatta University.”

3.6 The KNT fiasco

At one time an incident took place at the Kenya National Theatre that woke up the warrior in Francis Imbuga. The play “*Muntu*” by Joe De Graft had just been made a set book in 1981, and the Kenyatta University theatre group decided to perform it for schools in order to make it easier to understand at the Kenya National Theatre. At that time, the KNT was dominated by Western plays while the African ones were frowned upon and regarded less worth than the fly on the wall. Therefore there arose a clamor to do and also make drama African at the KNT since our country was now independent.

As a result, the first African play to be performed at the beginning of the year down at the theatre was “*Muntu*” done by the Kenyatta University troupe (most of whom were former students of De Graft at the University of Nairobi). Since there were no guide books for the set texts, Imbuga and company felt it would be helpful to perform a show to the teachers and students then have a session to answer questions from the audience. They went ahead to book the theatre and invited as many schools for the show as possible.

Unfortunately, there was somebody at the KNT who did not want the play to be performed down there. The said person went quietly and incited the then Minister for Education, the late Hon. Joseph Kamotho, that the play that was about to be acted by the KU team was anti-government,

violent and inciteful to the young innocent scholars. Kamotho having not read the play or researched on it (he did not even know that it was a set book) immediately ordered the show to be cancelled. He then called Professor Maitha who was the principal of Kenyatta University and gave him a strong message to deliver to his staff.

Prof. Maitha faithfully called the organizers of the event; Imbuga, Mulwa and Dr. Kemoli (late) in his office and passed on the strong message from “above” with a conclusion, “Gentlemen, we don’t want to spoil the name of the university.” They all agreed to call off the show, albeit reluctantly. When the trio met the whole cast (which contained people like Chacha Nyaigoti Chacha and Ciarunji Chesaina) and delivered the same message, all the performers unanimously resolved and vowed to proceed with the performance.

Having gathered more courage, Imbuga and his allies entered his “Paulina” and drove straight to the KNT. That same day the trio went straight to the Nation centre and talked to (late) Wahome Mutahi who immediately ran an article on the late edition of the “Daily Nation”. The heading read, “Government stops a set play” then a caption, “Lecturers vow to go ahead.” The paper publicized the play making it host double its capacity.

On the third day of the performance as the play was going on six Special Branch men were sent to observe and confirm if the play was indeed violent and anti-government. After sitting still for many hours and watching the entire play, the gentlemen concluded it was in fact a “clean” play, more so a set play. “By the time the play was over and gentlemen were leaving, we were very good friends!” remembers David Mulwa nostalgically, “we even invited them for dinner at the

Sari Villa, which they gladly obliged”. So the six investigators took a good report to the Minister, who later on in a sudden twist of events, demanded that the play be re-performed since it was harmless, more so it was a set book!

Amazingly, Francis Imbuga and his wife Mabel spent an incredible amount of money on drama and theatre, and as he himself confesses in *Shrine of Tears* which he later admitted was more like his autobiography, “The man loved theatre, it was no secret that he and his wife had spent a lot of their own personal funds for the entertainment of many actors and actresses who had delighted them with their respective interpretations of various plays.”(170).

What made Imbuga’s drama unique from other writers was the manner in which he tackled pertinent issues affecting the society, which is what Chris Wang’ombe describes as the knack of articulating sensitive issues, “subtly without attracting hostility from those he attacks.” Many other writers like Ngugi, found themselves in trouble with the governments of the day, forcing him into exile while Imbuga fought from within using his satirical “caustic barbs”.

CHAPTER FOUR

SECOND PASSION

Whenever the name “Francis Imbuga” is mentioned everywhere I went and all the people I talked to; whether in high academic circles or deep down in the villages of Wenyange and Kisatiru, two things stood out, humour and truth. I remember talking to a member of the University senate at Kenyatta University who was a close friend to Imbuga, and when I mentioned the name to him, the gentleman broke into laughter for a few minutes before we could engage in a serious talk. “That man was funny!” was his opening remark, “one thing he told me was that he didn’t like swallowing medicine, and he would justify himself by concluding that men generally don’t like medicine.” Before we parted, my friend beckoned me and added, “Mzee also liked truth. Although he was aged, he never liked being taken in circles, a very keen man.”

Imbuga had a tendency of creating humour out of any situation he encountered in his world, and as one of his colleagues commented, “Imbuga took life less serious.” His laughter would be heard from far, always above the rest. He also had a tendency of naming his cars funny and interesting names like *Paulina*, *Nancy*, *Safina*.... For instance when Mulwa was narrating about the KNT fiasco and how they were summoned by the principal and told to cancel the performance, he mentions, “Annoyed, we just left the boardroom, jumped into Imbuga’s *Paulina* and headed straight for the Nation office.” When I got interested to know what “Paulina” was, Mulwa laughed even louder almost breaking his chair, before he eventually revealed, “Imbuga’s car!”

Also on receiving the news of Imbuga's death, a saddened colleague at Kenyatta University eulogized recalling their youthful days, "Imbuga was an ardent supporter of AFC Football Club, and I remember we could use his vehicle which he had christened "Paulina" or my Peugeot 504 to go to the stadium and cheer our team." This brought into memory his favourite proverb from his community, "It is only after a man's death that the story of his life is ripe for telling"

Francis Imbuga had an amazing appetite for his drink; famously referred to as "swallow" which to me, was his second passion. It appeared he inherited the habit from his grandfather Mugodo who equally worshipped the bottle as evidenced by the "mrija" and "nyungu" that were always beside him as he sat relaxing under his "omudodo" (fig) tree. The old man would on many occasions sent the boys to bring him the stuff from the neighbouring local brewer. As they did the errands, the boys would not help overcome the curiosity and temptation to know how the liquid tasted like. When they eventually let go of their curiosity on Mzee's *Busaa* that is when, like Adam and Eve in the garden of Aden their eyes were opened for the first time, and as they say- the rest was history. Those were very many years back, long before Kenya got its independence; he never looked back together with his cousin and friend back in the village.

Many years later, Imbuga was now a celebrity to both the sober and those who had "swallowed". The way he describes the reception he would received either at Kilima Bar in Nairobi or Mulembe Bar at Chavakali market, leaves one with broken ribs. He narrates an instance where he visited a pub for a "swallow" one evening. When the people inside the pub saw him, they immediately recognized him since he was a public figure, and everybody hurriedly returned their beers in anticipation for Imbuga's "generosity". "Why are you leaving us so suddenly?" The

woman in bar asked in a bit of surprise but was silenced by one answer she got; the people had seen *Nancy* arriving at the parking bay, a sign that their “Mzee” (boss) had just arrived. So they were preparing themselves for a treat of their life; a flood of beer would flow their way on Imbuga’s bill. They did not need to spend their own money that day, and Imbuga knew it although they were not aware of that or they did not care.

Whenever Imbuga entered those pubs, he would find everybody standing on their feet as each offered him a chair to sit on, reminiscent of a typical clan elder. As it would turn out this became a habit and he got used to it anyway, a man of the people (in the pubs).

Imbuga’s love for his drink was unmatched, blended with his African spirit of generosity he stood out from the rest of his peers. When I asked David Mulwa what he thought about Imbuga’s lifestyle of free-spending and “swallow” he responded, “Imbuga was a man who loved to share whatever little he had with everybody.” He spoke with such a strong conviction on sharing, “those days whatever we got from performing or writing, directing plays, we put on the table and we shared happily as we discussed theatre. It was a culture that was passed on to us from our elders like David Rubadiri, Jared Angira, Okot P’Bitek and so on.” Mulwa then gave a quick rejoinder with a fallen countenance that that culture has slowly died among playwrights and actors.

Imbuga was said to drive around campus with a crate of beer in his *Paulina’s* boot freely offering to his friends whenever and wherever they met especially those who supported his favourite local football team AFC leopards (Abaluhya Football Club *Ingwe.*)

“Surprisingly, I never saw Imbuga drunk!” remarked one lecturer in the Department of literature, “some of our colleagues here used to drink and even sometimes come to class drunk like a sponge, but at no any given time did Imbuga fail to come for duty or come while staggering because of his “swallow”.” She disputed then reluctantly concluded, “Perhaps he normally drank at night. You ask his friends who used to swallow with him.” Unfortunately Imbuga’s passion for beer is what led him to his grave.

4.1 The Philanthropist

Back in Wenyange village Imbuga’s coming would be received with a lot of excitement and celebration like that of a politician. He was not like some other people in the area whose coming and going were the same. He liked arriving mysteriously in the late hours of the night (he preferred driving himself) and sometimes would just sleep in the car, although rumours of the coming of “*Mzee* is around” would spread like wild fire. Then when leaving he bid everybody bye only to be seen again in the morning; he did not go after all. Whenever Imbuga came to the village, he would buy a lot of things for the community. Sometimes they would move from door to door with his wife dishing out household items like sugar and tea leaves, while the other times he would buy second-hand clothes and shoes for the community, then he would organize a small ceremony in the open field around his home where speeches would be offered, jokes cracked and poems recited as he also advised his people.

Then the climax of the ceremony would be marked by the giving out of the clothes and shoes to people. The shoes would be spilled in the open field and everyone asked to pick any that they could find fitting. In most cases nobody picked the perfect pair, they would have one shoe for the

correct foot therefore be forced to look for a partner who has the shoe for the other foot. Imbuga enjoyed watching the people mingle as they looked for their right shoes, which made the event full of fun and memorable.

More excitement would be witnessed at “Mulembe Bar” where he usually went to catch up with his long lost friends. “Whenever Imbuga came,” narrates one old man in the village, “we would meet in “Mulembe” and sing, *Toa Ndugu Toa dada ulicho nacho wewe, bwana anakuona mpaka moyoni mwako*. We sang that song as we contributed money (*sadaka maalum hehee*) to buy more beer to drink as we chatted,” he concluded in the midst of laughter. Ironically, that was a religious song popularly sang in the Friends Quaker church, where most of the family members in Maragoli were born and raised.

To many of the villagers including the old men, the month of August was blessed month, contrary to the common belief by many Kenyans as a “Dark” month. Imbuga liked visiting Wenyange in August, where he would take to them a lot of goodies from the city such as sugar, tea leaves, and roasted meat. There were specific people (Aaron and Jamin) appointed to organize for the celebration by looking for a goat and local brew whenever “Mzee” came home.

Amidst such a busy schedule of meeting his people and catching up, Imbuga remembered and was concerned about his local church especially the Wenyange Friends Church where he was raised, although he did not get time to attend most of the services but he contributed generously whenever there need. “Whenever we had *sadaka maalum* in church,” (church fundraiser) witnessed a member of the church, “Professor would come and ask us how many bags of cement we needed, and then he would offer to buy all of them. If we quoted fewer bags he would tell us to increase but still purchase them.” He also did the same together with his wife when they

relocated to Kisatiru, they decided to renovate the Kisatiru Friends Church that being their home church.

His support for church activities was outstanding; Imbuga could not fail to come or send his support for any church fundraiser, although some people felt that he only did that to churches but avoided other fundraising for the community. For instance, he donated a brick-making machine to Wangulu church and the neighbouring community to empower the youth in that area. He also participated in the repair of the rough road that diverted from Bendera to Kisatiru. In their home at Juja in Nairobi, Imbuga demonstrated the same trend of generosity and open-handedness. A friend testified that he always insisted that everyone visiting his house be served with a little something to eat or drink before they left.

Even as he supported his people, Francis Imbuga embraced the virtue of being truthful to others. There were some neighbours who wanted to abuse his generosity, just like his drinking friends, such that they would want to have Imbuga educate their children on their behalf as they enjoyed their “Busaa.” That is what he loathed, before he could accept to support a student, Imbuga had to carry out his own research to see if the said child was really needy or not. He was particularly close Jethro, a retired teacher who was a family friend and a neighbour.

Imbuga did not entertain rumour-mongering, spreading of malice and gossip. As a man of truth, whenever somebody came and whispered to him that X or Y was telling people “this” about him, Imbuga would simply call the accused in the presence of the accuser, then turn to the accuser again, “Now tell me what you have just said.” He would later confront the accuser then settle the issue once for all; something good about Imbuga was that he never held a grudge against

anybody however grievous the mistake was or he felt, he just confronted the person and that was it.

This is also confirmed by David Mulwa, “Imbuga was brutally honest,” the old dramatist beams, “especially to friends. He would face you straight in the face and say “David you know that is a lie!” then he would begin narrating the events one after the other, until he got you.”

Francis Imbuga’s spirit of philanthropy in away influenced the other scholars and prominent people in Maragoli such that they also began initiating community based projects in the areas like dairy product centres and some set up schools.

Before he died, Imbuga had a desire to transform his community by empowering it; he had wanted to set up a school for the children of Maragoli. The village had not forgotten Imbuga totally after his departure. When I talked to some elders from the area, they mentioned that plans were underway to establish a University in Imbuga’s honour. There is also a secondary school that hosted his funeral ceremony at Kisatiru that may be renamed after him in the course of time.

4.2 Cultural Ambassador

The Luhya community of Western Kenya is famous for its conservatism in culture and keeping its traditions. Apart from keeping the superstitions and tightly holding onto their taboos, the Luhyas also pride themselves in observing laid down rules and laws of the community. This is overseen by a council of Elders who play an equivalent role of the Supreme Court in the current constitution.

Francis Davis Imbuga was a man whose background and general beliefs had been shaped by the culture of his Luhya tribe. At the time of his death, Imbuga was a Luhya elder and a member of the Maragoli Council of Elders which is headed by Joram Lidiolo, a neighbor in Kisatiru village. This council is tasked with the responsibility of educating, advising and offering guidance, counseling and discipline to the entire community. Apart from that, Imbuga was also the secretary of the Vihiga Cultural Society. The group organized activities and events in the region that was aimed at promoting and preserving the Maragoli culture.

Whenever he travelled in the countryside (he liked visiting his home in the countryside), he would organize a small festival where story-telling and goat-roasting would take the centre stage as people sang and danced. Those events would then be recorded live and videos taken which would later be kept by Imbuga himself as he went back to Nairobi, probably to be part of the Oral Literature resources which was his area of specialization.

As usual “Busaa” (the local brew) could not miss in the event, “Eish! How could that miss? Otherwise the whole occasion could be useless and meaningless. That is the “tea” for the elders.” commented one of the elders with finality. Indeed Imbuga was an advocate of the drink and he would not allow anybody to criticize it. He had appointed somebody special whom he entrusted with the responsibility of fetching the drink for him whenever he was upcountry. One unlucky day the messenger was arrested by the police while coming from the “joint” during one of their routine operations. Had the “Mzee” not intervened, the man could have been made a guest of the state.

There is a day Imbuga attended a funeral of a man who had died from an alcohol related incident. All the people who stood to give speeches openly condemned the local brew for being responsible of many calamities in the village and the nation as a whole. Even the chief of the area could not go against the wave, he equally talked negative of “Busaa” and even in conclusion he warned the villagers that soon he would let the law take its course if they didn’t improve, and when it happened, “let nobody blame me.”

The chief then invited “Professor Francis Imbuga who is our own son from this very village to address the mourners, *karibu sana Profesa.Wapi makofi ya profesa Moja!Mbili!Tatu!*” he concluded as he stretched his right hand for a handshake while the left one held the microphone. After exchanging a few pleasantries with the mourners, Imbuga veered into the debate of the day. Funerals in Western Kenya are normally breeding grounds for budding politicians and any aspiring leader in the society. Everyone fights hard to be recognized by sitting on the “high table” and being told to “say something” in such gatherings or at least be just mentioned that he or she is present and therefore to just “wave” to the crowd. It means a lot politically.

Imbuga defended the drink with a passion, he dismissed those who were condemning it, “so long as you know the effects of alcohol and are fully aware of the alcohol you take, nobody should condemn you when you take Busaa for your own pleasure. I began drinking as a small child and will continue doing so, till I die.” He did not allow the supporters to clap and cheer but went ahead to conclude, “because of that, I announce a meeting with *wazees* this coming Saturday in my home in Kisatiru, mara moja!” Ululations followed as everyone knew what that meant; he did not need to tell them to keep time. “That day Professor talked like a real “musagulu” (elder)

of the Maragoli and his word was like a law in this village,” affirmed one elder who attended the ceremony that day.

After “greeting” the people, the church took to the podium and the burial service began in earnest. When I visited the area years later, I observed that majority of the men in Wenyange treasure the drink than any other thing- from young to the old, young people would be seen singing as they staggered home or those touting at Chavakali junction or carrying people on motor cycles; everybody is excited twenty four hours a day.

Apart from enjoying cultural activities, Imbuga also loved and enjoyed cooking the local delicacies like ugali (made from millet flour), mtura (meat from boiled animal intestines). He was also fond of recycling food for example when he came across the left- overs of ugali and omena, he would take time to show his nephews and nieces how to preserve it, a skill he got from his grandmother. Then of course the following day he would ask for the same food during breakfast. “If you really wanted to meet uncle’s full wrath,” one of the nephews confessed, “try to throw away left -over food and he finds you. He really hated waste.” Perhaps this was because of what he had witnessed when growing up in the village, while interacting with fellow teenagers who could not afford three meals a day, or what he acquired from his God-fearing mother Doresi.

One of the values that Imbuga stood for and respected was dignity of work. Even small children knew it, such that whenever he arrived in the village in his “Safina” a Toyota Corolla KAV*** S, every child in the homestead immediately became busier than the ants; they had to be seen

“working” otherwise they would miss a reward by being idle. “I specialized in washing Mzee’s car,” reveals one nephew who was still young then, while another boasts of how swift he was in fetching cold water for “Mzee” to swallow his medicine, “Whenever mzee wanted water to swallow medicine, all the four of us would dash to our respective houses to fetch it. The first one to bring water would be given twenty shillings.” Unfortunately Imbuga developed some health complications like High Blood pressure earlier in life, which were later on followed by diabetes, forcing him to be on constant medication (he hated swallowing medicine!)

Interestingly Imbuga’s visit to the village was incognito. He usually arrived at odd hours; sometimes people would be preparing to sleep after dinner when a messenger would knock on the door, deliver a kilo of meat with instructions from “Mzee” that they prepare for him as he is on his way coming. Some other times he came silently in the dead of the night and slept in his car outside the house in Wenyange, only to wake up in the following morning and ask for water from the “siongo” (pot) to swallow his medicine.

On the day of his burial, there was a long queue made by local brewers which ran from Bendera junction, snaking its way down Kisatiru primary school, past the Friends Church then finally up to his gate. They were indeed celebrating the life of their hero (and customer). There was colourful display of their products (charm) making it look like a trade fair and for the first time in the history of Wenyange, the police officers walked past the brewers without scaring or harassing them or even demanding a “license.”; a case of a cat walking close to and sharing a meal with a rat.

As a Luhya elder and a cultural Ambassador at that, Francis Imbuga made a wish, “when I die let my grave not be cemented.” That was a request that was honored on his burial day; his grave was not cemented in order for him to remain close to and part of his people. Imbuga loved simplicity unto his death, which is why he wanted an ordinary send-off; many people would really have wanted him accorded a state burial (remember he had a Order of the Grand Warrior (OGW) award by president Moi in 1996)

On the day of his burial, a memorable thing happened that left many people in shocked. Just before Imbuga was laid to rest, a weird man appeared from nowhere scaring the people near the grave side and entered into the grave where “Mzee” lay. The man then opened the coffin and adjusted the corpse to face the opposite direction before he closed it slowly and jumped out disappearing in the crowd reminiscent to the “egwugwu” in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. After he had left, somebody whispered aloud, “*Huyo ana wenyewe.*” (That one has his owners). And so the ceremony continued.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE EDUCATIONIST

Francis Davis Imbuga was an amazing scholar who had real thirst for education and this is evidenced by his achievements in this life. At the time of his death, he was a distinguished professor of literature at Kenyatta University (he was the only professor in the Department after the departure of professor Muigai wa Gachanja), having written and published many books ranging from plays, children literature to critical works and poetry some being published posthumously (like *The Green Cross of Kafira*). Some of the books that made Imbuga really famous include *Betrayal in the City* (this was his magnum opus and what placed Imbuga on a pedestal), *Man of Kafira*, *The successor*, *Shrine of Tears*, *Game of Silence* and *Miracle of Rimeria*. The books were (and still are) intellectually fulfilling and stimulating such that some of them are used in schools and universities as set books and course books respectively.

He was once the main contributor to “Sunday Nation’s” satirical column, *Masharubu’s World* which dealt with contemporary issues in Kenya. As Ruganda testifies, Imbuga withdrew his contribution when the editors started being critical and petty about his satirical “barbs”. He then shifted his energies to the “Daily Nation’s” cartoon-strip *Nyam-Nyam* which he did for sometime before he again abandoned due to pressure from the ruling elites at the time who would hear nothing of the social criticism.

Imbuga therefore decided to concentrate on drama, although he had also written some poems which were published in *Boundless Voices*, an anthology of Kenyan poems published by Heinemann Kenya in 1988 and edited by Professor Arthur Luvai. Commenting on the anthology

he edited, prof. Luvai described Imbuga as a fine poet who could successfully bring out humour in his poems, “It is very difficult to bring out humour in a poem especially a short poem, but Imbuga could do it with a lot of ease. He was able to see through the inside of a character.”

Through his passion and commitment to drama and Literature, Imbuga was honored with many awards which included the prestigious Order of the Grand Warrior (OGW) by Head of State in 1996, Kenya National Academy of Sciences Distinguished Service Award in the Arts Division in 1986, the Distinguished Service Award in Appreciation of Outstanding Contributions in Literature by Tennessee State University in 1995.

Although simple and down to earth, Imbuga had made a name for himself and was indeed an institution not only in the academic circles but also in the local community through his involvement in the community activities and advocacy for education as a tool for empowerment. For instance while carrying this research in his village; nearly ninety percent of the people in across all ages in Wenyange knew “our professor”. I was mesmerized when one old man produced a copy of Imbuga’s book, *Lialuka Lia Avaana ba Magomere* (The initiation of the Children of Magomere) published in 1986, from his hut and waved it to my face as he bragged that it was given to him by Imbuga himself, “professor did not send a person, he brought it personally to me! Personally!”

One thing that stood out about Imbuga was his passion for knowledge. Having worked hard through tough circumstances to achieve such a revered status in the society, Imbuga felt that he should also do the something for his community. He supported countless needy children in the family, from the area and outside who had not been able to proceed with their studies due to lack

of fees, (although only a handful came back to say “thank you” like the ten lepers healed by Jesus in the Bible). He also did the same while at Kenyatta University.

The old man was so strict with education that whenever he visited the village in August, any child who came to greet him had to carry a report book from school in their hands. As usual Imbuga did not disappoint, any child who was top of the class earned him or herself five hundred or one thousand shillings cash as a token. The other positions could only earn between ten and twenty shillings as a motivation to work harder next time. This was meant to instill a spirit of hard work and determination in the next generation, which worked for the good of Wenyange because since that time, the enrollment of students to national schools and universities has steadily gone up.

The worst mistake any of his little nephews and nieces could make was to play truancy in school. That can be attested by no other person but Humphrey Mudanya. The nephew one day ran away from College and went to drink in the neighbouring villages. When he came back late in the night, the security personnel manning the gate stopped him and wanted to deny him entry back into the college. The young man went ahead and fought the security man injuring him, before he ran away back to Wenyange.

When his uncle got information that the youngman had run away from school (Imbuga was paying his fees), he advised them to stop wasting their airtime calling him but instead let the police arrest the boy and lock him up immediately. Imbuga later came home and summoned the youngman in his house in Kisatiru, “I am giving you only ten minutes to be back in college,” was

the ultimatum given. He later went to college to confirm the boy was in school before he took a flight back, leaving nothing to the naughty boy.

While at Kenyatta University, Imbuga rose through the ranks by sheer hard work and focus. His swift rise could be attributed to Imbuga's clear and systematic intelligence; the confidence in himself; the capacity to work long hours and the happy knack of arriving in the right place at the right time. He had passion in whatever he did, as one staff at the Senate office at the university attested, "Professor Imbuga was old but very thorough in whatever he did. In fact he took time and went through each of his documents keenly checking every detail before he could approve or sign. This was a rare quality especially for some of the other professors of his age"

Apart from being a thorough worker Imbuga was good team leader, "Everybody wanted to work with him in his office," confessed one of his former Administration Assistants in the Department of Quality Assurance, "he always made sure his staff are comfortable, he would ask them if there was any issue disturbing them then try to solve, even if it meant giving them an off from duty to go and rest, he would do it."

His students had a lot to say about Imbuga, but what came out clearly was that he was professional in his work, whether in theatre or class Imbuga maintained social distance. One former student who later on became a professor in the US wrote an article on Imbuga mentioning him as one of the very few drama teachers who never got involved in relationships with students (popularly known as the "Man of the people business.") This was confirmed by some of his colleagues in the literature Department in KU. "Imbuga was purely professional," said a lady

lecturer in the department who served with Imbuga for many years, “I have been here for long but I never heard at any time even a rumour on that, whether involving students or even the staff. No. Never”

Talking about academic work, Imbuga was amazing; every student wanted to be supervised in his or her project or thesis by him. That was a time when students were allowed to choose their supervisors, but later things changed. “We scrambled for Prof. Imbuga!” remembers a student who was being supervised by the professor at the time of his death. I then went ahead to inquire deeper why many students wanted Imbuga for a supervisor, “Imbuga had a heart for his students,” another of his former students explained, “He wanted to see us excel and that is why we all ran to him. His corrections were genuine and he was like a father to us, very keen but yet encouraging.”

It also turned out that Imbuga was greatly inspired by his students in the literature Department, from those taking undergraduate courses all the way to those doing PhD. Some of the people he supervised in PhD included Michael Wainaina, Egara Kabaji, Mbugua Wa Mungai, John Mugubi, Wasambo Were and others who are now distinguished scholars and researchers in various institutions both in Kenya and outside. The rest who were in undergraduate and Master’s Classes are uncountable.

A notable feature in Imbuga character, which was pronounced in him, was the sense of time. It was witnessed that Francis Imbuga never came late to his class, and he rarely missed the seminar presentations in the Department, especially by his students. On such days, he could be in earlier

than even the person having the key to the seminar room and be patient waiting like the rest of the students. During the presentations he would actively participate in the discussions but then leave thereafter without contributing in giving the verdict to the students.

It was only after being promoted to become Director of Quality Assurance in the university that he started failing to attend the presentations due to commitments. Prior to his appointment to the post, Imbuga served in different capacities first as Chairman in the Department of Literature for four years (1984 to 1988), and then he became the Dean, Faculty of Arts in the same university after returning from the University of Iowa for his PhD and being made an Associate Professor in 1991. Imbuga was elected Dean in 1992 for two terms of two years each before moving to Rwanda at the Kigali Institute of Education where he again served as Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

However Imbuga's life in the university was not a bed of roses; there were issues and memorable moments that make life what it is. For instance, once while serving as a lecturer he differed with the then Vice Chancellor the late professor George Eshiwani and was summarily dismissed from work. This was accompanied with an eviction notice from the university staff house, lucky enough he had just completed his own house in Juja. The bone of contention was that the senior lecturer had applied for a sabbatical leave which was given without question, allowing him to go to Kigali Institute of Education as a visiting professor, and after one year elapsed, he was expected to come back to the university but he lingered and instead went ahead to apply for another leave (unpaid leave). This was illegal according to the university regulations. Imbuga

therefore adamantly refused to stop applying for the unpaid leave immediately after he had been given a sabbatical leave.

This warranted the Vice Chancellor to sack him and accordingly evict him from the university premises. On asking one lecturer about the incident he simply said, “What else would the VC have done? He was tied by the University regulations.” So Imbuga had to leave and go back to teach in Kigali where he rose to become Dean of Faculty, but had vowed never to come back to KU until another Vice Chancellor was appointed. And true to his word, when Professor Everett Standa was appointed to head the institution as VC, the drama scholar came back for his job and continued to serve diligently. Indeed luck smiled on him.

The Kenyatta University Management set up the Centre for Quality Assurance in 2003 which was meant to assist the university achieve its mission of providing quality education and training, promote scholarship, services, innovation and creativity, and inculcate moral values for sustainable individual and societal development. Francis Imbuga was therefore appointed the Director of Quality Assurance, a position he held till the time of his demise.

It was also during the same time that his play, *Betrayal in the City* was selected as a set book for a second time in Secondary schools in Kenya (a dream every creative writer nurses in their hearts). In fact at the time of his demise, Imbuga had just revised *Betrayal in the City* for reappearance on the KCSE syllabus.

It is unfortunate that despite his great effort and huge sacrifices while at the University of Nairobi as well as Kenyatta University, the institutions have never had a seminar or workshop in his honour. On enquiry about the same at Kenyatta University I was told that the university had been very busy of late that they could not remember such an event, while others senior administrators commented that they were still looking for well wishers to sponsor the event.

The only institution that still remembers and celebrates Francis Imbuga is Masinde Muliro University where he served as their external examiner. It hosts an annual event in his memory which is spearheaded by Professor Egara Kabaji (Imbuga's former student).

CHAPTER SIX

FAMILY MAN

The family unit is one institution that plays a key role in molding a person into any nature in the society. It provides the ingredients on which nurture factors thrive during growth and development. Francis Imbuga had reserved a special place in his heart for his family. He did not like talking a lot about it in public, and in a way, he successfully kept the family out of his theatrical activities, even though at times he hosted some members of the cast in his house. As Dr. Wasambo Were a colleague and his former PhD student commented, “Imbuga loved acting, but it never affected his duties as a lecturer and family man. He treated them as separate entities all together” He was one person who managed to compartmentalize the respective roles successfully without creating a mix-up.

Francis Imbuga met his wife prof. Mabel Olubayo who hails from Bunyore and the two got married through a church wedding on 22nd December, 1973. Together they were blessed with five children; Doris Mbugua, Adrian Imbuga, Bridgette Imbuga, Betty Mbatha and Louisa Imbuga. At the time of his death, Prof. Imbuga was a grandfather to four grandchildren; Elaine, Elicie, Dante and Nolan.

The professor loved and cared for his family beyond explanation. He loved and supported the children in their studies; he allowed the children to grow up on equal ground whether boys or girls, an attribute he may have acquired from Yohana Amugune (he liberated the females from the jaws of patriarchy in Maragoli and the larger western part of Kenya through Christianity.) According to Imbuga, the days of boys and girls were long gone. He gave his children liberty

and respected the choices they made in life; the reason they chose and pursued diverse careers in the family with the goodwill and full support of their parents.

Unfortunately, I could not succeed in interviewing the family members because of some intricacies. I remember visiting his widow at her home in Kisatiru when she had just come from the burial of prof. Egara Kabaji's father and we exchanged a small chat. But soon after introductions her mood changed and we found ourselves in an impasse. I was utterly unable to persuade her to accord me an interview and after one last supreme attempt was rebuffed, I drove away.

However, from a passing glance of the home and a glimpse of the numerous pictures and paintings displayed on the wall in the house, it was no doubt Imbuga loved and was committed to his family. There was one enormous photo of him at the centre of the wall, followed closely by another equally large photo of the wife, then not far from the two was another larger framed photo of the couple before being followed closely by a family photo comprising of Imbuga, his wife and the five children. On the far end of the wall were a few oil paintings on canvas displayed which may have been done by Imbuga himself (he was an artist). The paintings depicted a beautiful colourful landscape on a bright sunny day.

When I had made a reconnaissance tour to Wenyange and Kisatiru earlier in the year, I got prompted by the natural human curiosity, that feeling, like the urge of an itching ear, to know who or what lay behind the dark and closely knit fence surrounding the late professor Imbuga's home. That is how it all began.

CHAPTER SEVEN

POLITICAL BUG

Kenya is one of the countries in Africa and the world over that thrives on politics just like an equivalent of its staple food. The issue of politics dominates our television screens on a twenty four- hour basis and that is one of the reasons why writers sub-consciously find themselves entangled in the political web, just like all other issues affecting the society. Chinua Achebe also admits when he writes that any writer who engages in issues of his (or her) country and fails to address political issues is like a man who dashes out of his house that is on fire and pursues a rat that is headed for the bush.

This could be the reason why Francis Davis Imbuga at a certain point in his life made an about turn and all of a sudden became concerned about the state of affairs in the political scene in Kenya. Initially his works had focused on such themes as love, morality and cultural confusion. But when he recognized that the traditional African society was disintegrating, he suddenly made an about turn and began, in James Muli's words, "satirizing the social evils of contemporary political regimes." As Ruganda comments, "while he retained only those aspects of his grandparents' lore- such as elliptic similes, metaproverbs, parables and hyperboles- Imbuga's thematic focus dramatically shifted from the chauvinistic, but by no means insignificant, concerns of the village to the horrendous political praxis of the national ruling elite."

Imbuga therefore was concerned with the Kenyan politics through the pen, but using what critic Mirriam Kahiga described as "stinging wit and pithy humour which did not detract too much from what is good entertainment with a surprising sting-in- the-tail."

Initially he did not like politics such that whenever colleagues and friends persuaded him to think of running for an elective post, Imbuga would cynically answer them, “I have strictly left politics to my political characters and to the real politicians of our time.” Imbuga would then go ahead to lecture his comrades on the difference between a writer and a politician. “You see, some writers deceive themselves that they can be creative writers and practicing politicians. I don’t trust them because there is no fence to sit on. And I have come to conclusion that I could never be a politician. I am a writer.”

However, despite the serious and almost-swearing denial by Imbuga, his works slowly drifted into politics and he started satirizing the social evils of the political regimes. There even emerged a debate in numerous forums in the literary circles on the sudden change of his view point, but Imbuga defended himself that it was as a result of his stay at the University of Nairobi which exposed him to interaction with radical faculty colleagues and students such as John Ruganda, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and Okot p’Bitek.

Then in a sudden twist of events, Francis Imbuga got himself totally immersed into the “siasa mbaya maisha mbaya” bandwagon as retired president Moi would use refer to Kenyan politics. This was in the 2002 General elections when he felt inspired to run for the post of Member of Parliament (MP) for Sabatia constituency. Motivated by the desperate desire to see things change or perhaps, as one of his former students articulated, “He heard the voice of his people urging him to vie and felt convicted that it indeed it was the voice of God.” David Mulwa adds laughingly, “Perhaps Imbuga saw that sitting on the fence and complaining consistently would

not help make things better, he therefore became aggressive and decided to plunge into the waters headlong.”

He was determined to oust the incumbent Member of Parliament who was Wycliffe Musalia Mudavadi because he had, (or he thought he had) what it took to do that. To begin with, it was the people who approached Imbuga and requested him to throw in the towel in politics. They even went ahead and collected more than one thousand signatures in support of him. However as it turned out, there were too many candidates eying the same post and as the race gathered momentum, it dawned on Imbuga that things were not as smooth as he had thought; a lot of money was involved in the whole process and as one old man told me, “Mkono mtupu haulambwi,” meaning one needed cash to constantly oil the hands of his supporters if he was to be assured of any victory whatsoever.

But there were yet more hurdles to jump than he had estimated; the first and biggest one was the nomination. One had to strategize himself (herself) by using the party that was popular at the time; in this case that party was Ford Kenya since it the era of coalitions and other parties like Narc Kenya, SDP, DP and LDP had ganged up to form the National Alliance Party of Kenya (NAK). In Kenyan politics, the nominations are as crucial and equally charged as the main elections because of the common euphoria at the time, with the exception of few, if one secures a place through nomination in the favourite party; the person is as good as elected in parliament.

Francis Davis Imbuga therefore braced himself for a race of his life. On funds he felt somehow comfortable since he had some money from his teaching stint in Rwanda, he had also hoped to

raise some reasonable amount from the readers of his famous books that were indeed numerous (they would actually sponsor an entire presidential campaign for Imbuga if they all co-operated!) However, the readers had a different opinion; some of his ardent readers argued that they had already donated to his kitty by simply buying his books.

Before going to the nominations, the candidates got busy campaigning from village to village, and Imbuga was no exception. However two things seemed to work against him, one was that they were two candidates vying from the same clan which put the opponent at an advantage; another gentleman who came from the neighbouring village but a “Mumasero” also stood and adamantly refused to step down in favour of Imbuga in spite of pressure from the clan elders.

Yet another theory was that there were some people who had a bad attitude and felt bad (or were made to feel so) that Imbuga had already made a lot of wealth from his own achievements as well as that of his family; theirs was a home of professors, therefore to the poor uniformed villagers they felt he wanted to “sit” on them. A member of the clan also shared that Imbuga chose the wrong people as his political think tanks and campaign agents in the village.

Whenever he sent his agents to meet the people (who consisted mostly of drunkards), they misrepresented him by not giving out any “pole”(condelence) if it was a funeral gathering or “tuko pamoja” (we are together) in fundraising meetings. Instead they would absent-mindedly say “Professor, as you know is busy held up in Nairobi but he is aware of this function. So he will communicate. Let us be patient.”This therefore made him look like a real “mkono mtupu” in the eye of the public.

In fact, some critics felt that his continued absenteeism in Harambees in the villages was his greatest undoing politically. The most memorable was one in which president Moi came to Chavakali to preside over a Harambee, and Imbuga was conspicuously absent. Fortunate enough, Moi helped the people of Maragoli raise over three million shillings. As usual, his rivals took advantage of his absence to gain their political mileage.

One scholar who comes from the region had argued that the issue of religion also played a hand in the politics of Sabatia that year, although that is contestable. That in the previous election Hon. Musalia Mudavadi had won since he was a Quaker and the region being predominantly Quaker was definitely a plus for him. But when the second term followed, there were other religious groups like Pentecostals who also felt they needed to be represented and that is when Hon. Moses Akaranga (a Pentecostal minister), had to sail through. (He is said to have moved from church to church selling his manifesto to congregants.) Therefore there was no way Francis Imbuga could have succeeded him being a Quaker himself.

After failing to secure a seat in politics, Imbuga once stood up in his first in Wenyange, in the presence of his family and kinsmen and vowed never to run for any seat again. He later on bought a lot of beer and “Busaa” for the audience to “celebrate”.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LAST MOMENTS

*The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me,
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow
Then I called on the name of the LORD:
“Oh LORD, save me!”*

(Psalms 116:3-4, from New International Version)

Death is an emotive issue that is normally shunned by all means from our day-to-day talks and normally discussed under low tones. If death were a person, he would be the loneliest human being ever alive. Just like what the writer of *Appointment in Samara* puts it. The writer imaginatively narrates how a servant runs away from Baghdad to Samara with the hope that he is running away from death. Unfortunately, Samara turned out to be the actual place for the appointment with death! He just found himself at the right place at the right time. This story teaches us to accept death as a reality as human beings and therefore be prepared for it anytime it comes knocking.

Imbuga's last moments were in a way veiled such that nobody had a clue that the playwright's day was hastily approaching. A colleague working with him in the department confessed having only seen Imbuga's back as he left the department that Friday, the last moment he was seen on

campus. Whereas it is true that Imbuga's death was inevitable, "there were signs that pointed to our fears; we were not to be with him for long," a close neighbor on campus added.

During those last days, Imbuga's health had greatly deteriorated; he now appeared a pale shadow of his former self. He could not carry out his duties as an administrator and lecturer as efficiently as he had initially done. Due to his failing health, Imbuga could not supervise his students' projects or even attend the seminar presentations.

According to many, Imbuga knew his days were numbered. A colleague even confessed that he had drastically reduced in size physically, although Imbuga himself argued that being thin was a matter of being healthy. But in real case he was trying to manage pressure, and many people started commenting on social media; on Blogs, about his drinking habits when they noticed his health.

Francis Imbuga had suffered two strokes already in a row; one was during the wedding of his son Paul, which made him miss an important occasion in the family. The next attack which almost took away his life occurred while Imbuga was in the bathroom. He had gone to take a bath; luckily he took his phone with him. When the stroke struck again, Imbuga fell in the bathroom, but after a while he managed to get hold of his phone and scroll through. The first name that appeared on his screen was Professor Mary Gitui, a colleague whom he called and she responded swiftly in turn by calling Professor Mabel who then organized for an ambulance to pick the Professor.

After suffering the first two strokes, Imbuga highly suspected the third one to be deadly but he hung on courageously. On the fateful day, he had just come home from the University and was

relaxing with his family on the balcony in Juja. Apparently he had been drinking beer with his friends who included Professor Mbaabu from KU and when he came home that evening, he switched to taking wine as he relaxed.

Imbuga then suddenly said to his wife casually, “I think my time has come, I should now go.” She in turn objected and encouraged him that he was strong. Then he stood and entered the house. Francis Imbuga did not come out; he got another severe attack of stroke which took away his life immediately. By the time he was arriving at the Kenyatta University Clinic, Imbuga was already gone. Francis Davis Imbuga therefore died on the night of 18th Nov 2012 (he was already dead by the time he arrived in hospital), but the Kenyatta University Health Centre confirmed his death on 19th which later became the official date of his death.

Preparations now began for transportation of the body to Wenyange Village for burial. According to the Luhya culture, when a respected man in the community dies, the body takes time in the mortuary before it is buried. They believe that is a way of honouring the dead and also allowing him to be with his people for the last time before finally resting in his eternal home. The burial of Imbuga was hurriedly done and some people, especially elders were not happy with the organization. They felt that such an elder and respected member of the Maragoli Council of Elders deserved to be given time for all to honour and mourn him well.

However, since every funeral has its own issues and challenges, nobody is allowed to hold a grudge against another, and so goes the Luhya proverb, “In a funeral people mourn carelessly.”

IN LOVING MEMORY

Professor Francis Davis Imbuga was finally laid to rest on 24th November, 2012, in his home in Kisatiru, Maragoli West. Prior to the burial day, another service was held in his honor in Nairobi at All Saints Cathedral on Thursday 22nd November, 2012 where speeches were delivered by Professor Mabel, Doris Mbugua, Adrian Imbuga, an uncle, representatives from KU, representatives from JKUAT, Henry Chakava (publisher), and Richard Kemoli (on behalf of the community).

On his burial day, there was a multitude of mourners who thronged the village that Imbuga's home could not contain it. As a result of these, the venue for the funeral ceremony was moved to Kisatiru Primary School which is just a few metres away from the home. The Masters of Ceremony of the day were Professor Egara Kabaji and Mr. Evans Mugarizi.

There were many guests in attendance forcing the programmer to be strict with the program; but since a lot of speeches had been delivered in Nairobi, only few people were made to give their remarks.

As a tribute to the late Professor Imbuga, many platforms were created on social media in his memory; Professor Egara Kabaji's tribute on Facebook page *In Memory of Prof. Francis Imbuga* ran: FRANCIS IMBUGA- A SPECIAL GIFT TO KENYA, AFRICA AND THE WORLD. The *Standard Media Digital* newspaper also posted the EAEP Editor (now CEO) Kamau Kiarie's comments:

Professor was humble, sharp and was able to incorporate satire and irony into his work and bring out the serious socio-political issues that affected the society. He was the kind of person who usually listens to opinions from anyone without discrimination and incorporates them in making his work outstanding."

Other sites that contained information on Imbuga included; *World Online Obituaries* and *Kenya Memorials.com*.

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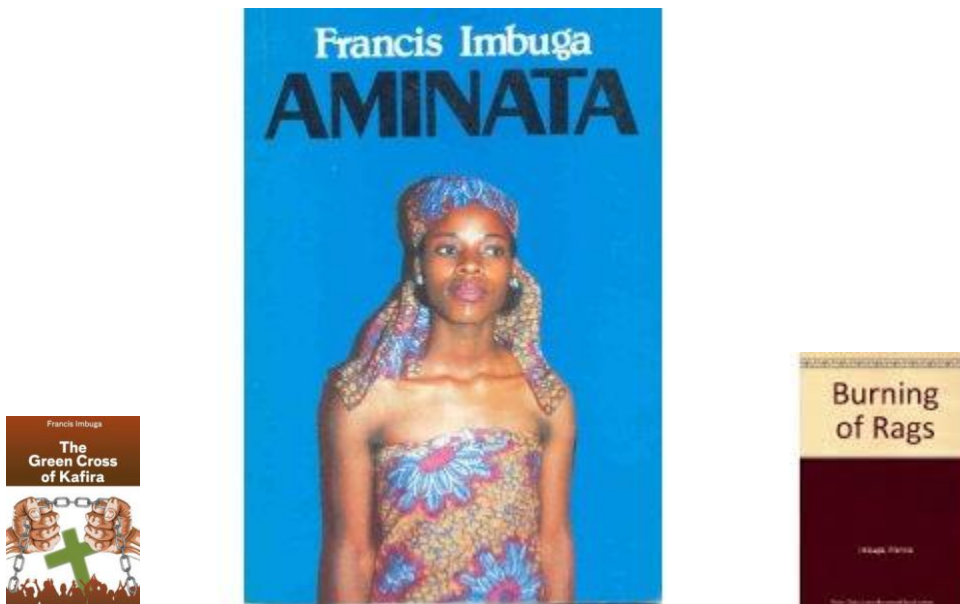
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APPENDICES

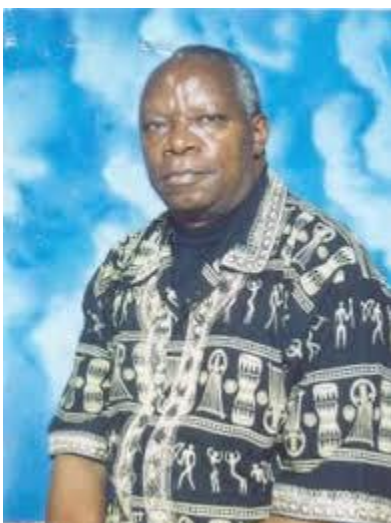
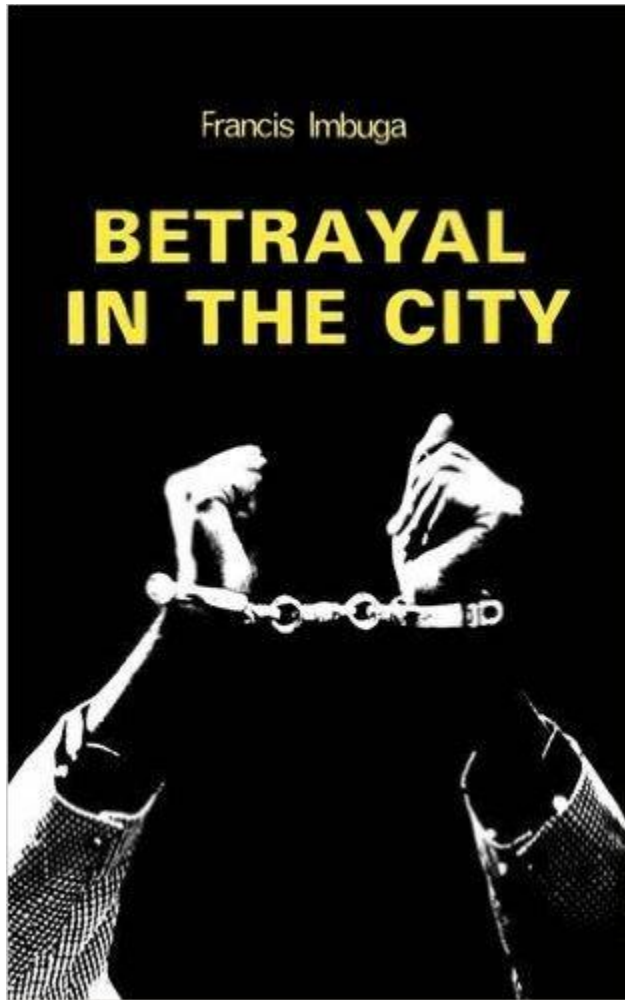
LIFE AND TIMES OF PROF. FRANCIS DAVIS IMBUGA



The department of Literature at Kenyatta University where Imbuga worked as a lecturer.



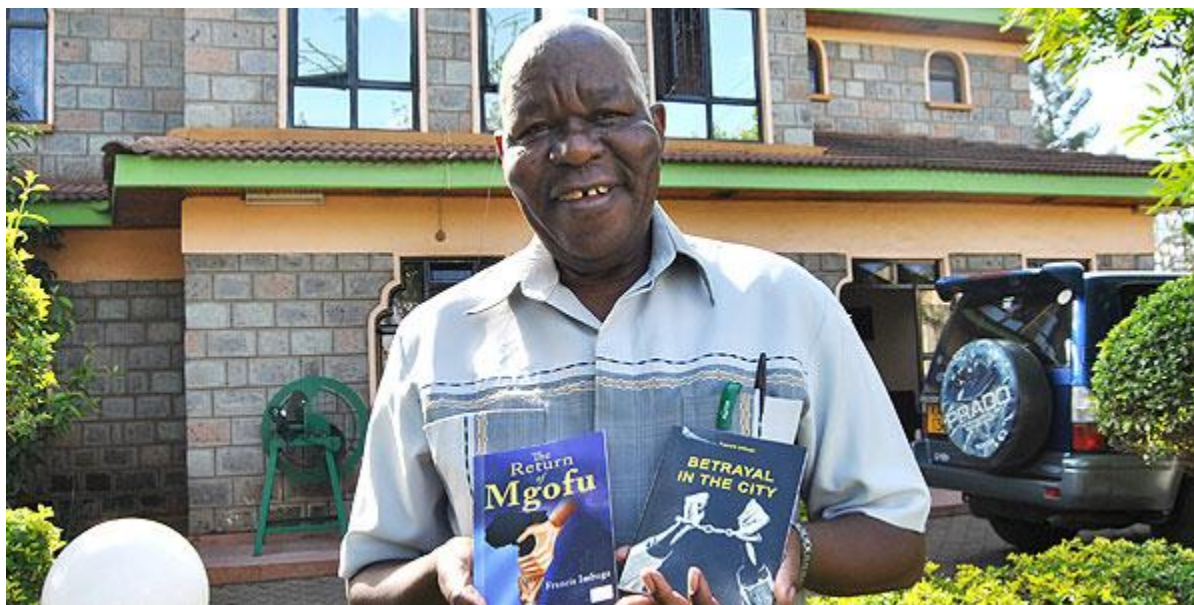
Some of the books written by Imbuga



Imbuga's friends and colleagues from Kenyatta University: David Mulwa and Dr. Kisa Amateshe during his burial ceremony



The ground that hosted President Moi at KU in 1979 where Imbuga's play *Day of Truth* was performed.



Prof. imbuga with two of his favourite books. On the background is his "Paulina"



Francis Imbuga's home in Nairobi.



Prof. Imbuga on his appointment as Director of Quality Assurance in KU. Right is his wife Prof. Mabel Imbuga.

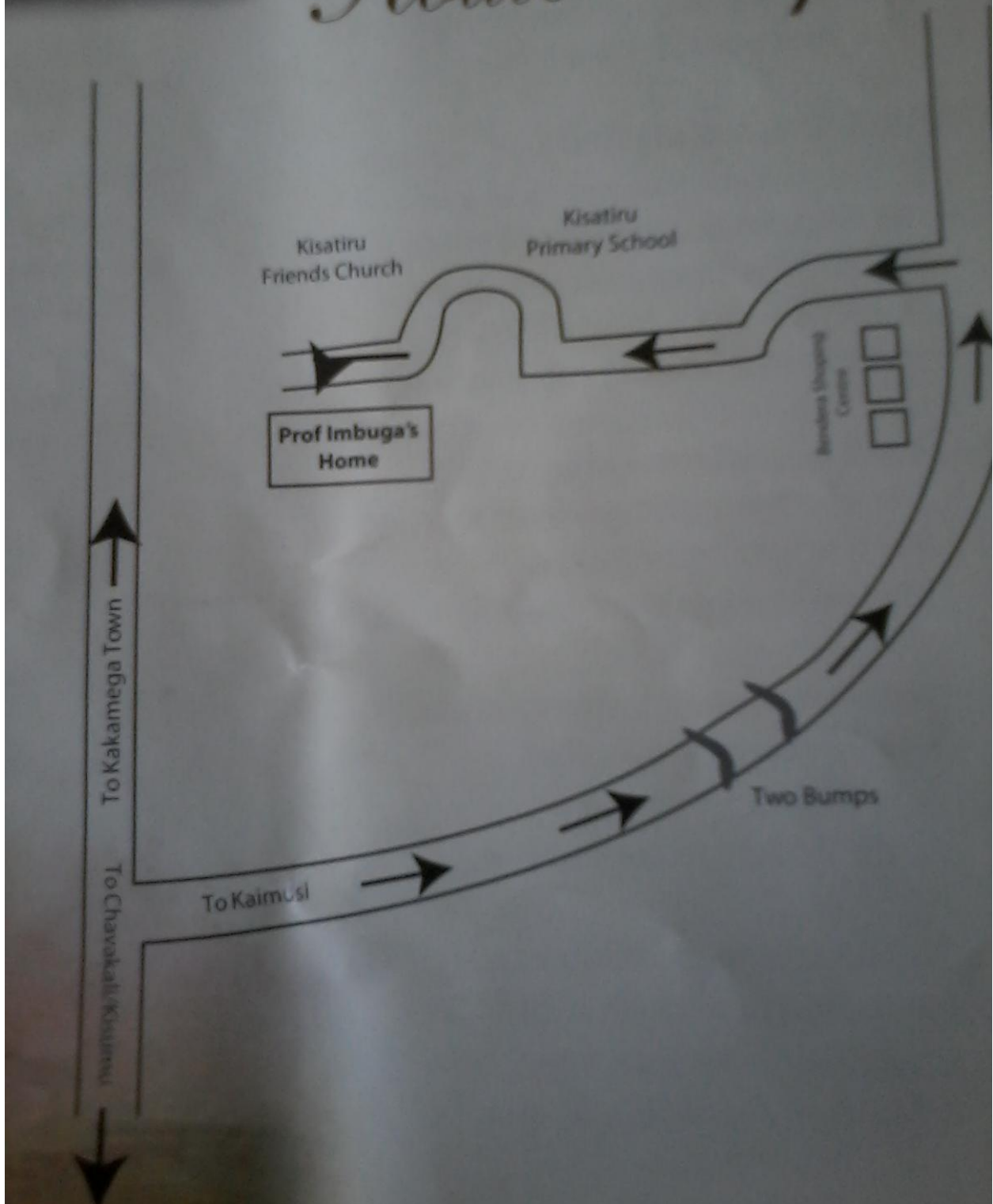


Imbuga's home in Kisatiru village.



Imbuga's favourite radio in Wenyange for listening to local stations.

Route Map

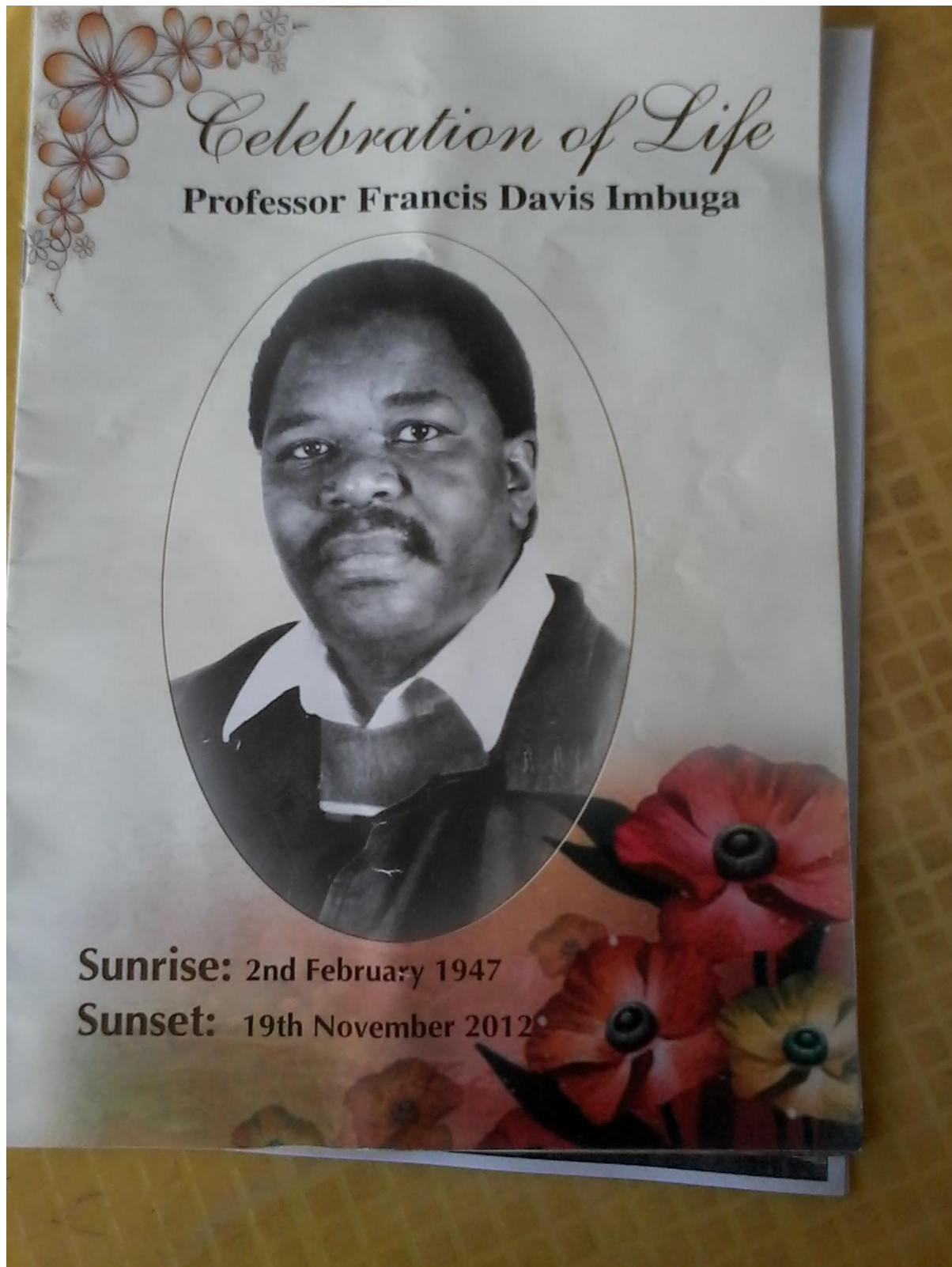




Imbuga's first house in Wenyange village where he grew up.



Mulembe Bar in Wenyange Village the meeting joint for old friends



The burial program for the Late Prof. Francis Davis Imbuga in 2012