DR. CHARLES OLWENY’S REMARKS AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 2ND

EAST AFRICAN LITERARY &CULTURAL STUDIES CONFERENCE

The Vice Chancellor, Professor John Ddumba-Ssentamu

The Principal, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Edward Kirumira

Dean, School of Languages, LIterature and Communications, Professor Aaron Mushengyezi

Professor Grace A. Musila of Stellenbosch University

Dr. Susan Kiguli, Convenor and Head Department of Literature, Makerere University

Conference Delegates

Invited Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

When I received a call and an email from Ms. Susan Kiguli early last month asking me to consider being Guest of Honour at the 2nd East African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference, my immediate reaction was to say, “No”. I asked myself, “Why me?” “What has my background in medicine got to do with Textualities of Space and Literary Culture?” After considerable soul searching I concluded that medicine is a social science, and on receipt of the official invitation from the Vice Chancellor, I found it hard to say no to a friend , and especially if that friend is Professor John Ddumba-Ssentamu.

I consider it a singular honour to be invited to open this 2nd East African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference. I am a firm believer of the saying, “Thanks delayed is thanks denied”. I therefore hasten to thank the organizing committee for the comprehensive and all encompassing programme. I thank all of you the participants and especially those from outside the East African Region ie. West and South Africa as well as those from Europe and United States of America. I thank the Department of English of Stellenbosch University for agreeing to partner with the Department of Literature at Makerere University in organizing this conference. I note that the goal of the Conference is to encourage dialogue on literary and cultural issues within the East African Region.

In my address Mr. Vice Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have chosen to make some remarks on:-

1. Communication technology and its impact on common text;
2. Culture and its major functions;
3. Languages and especially Kiswahili;
4. I will conclude with a few remarks on Ngugi Wathiogo.

Advances in communication technology have altered the notion of text through out history. The printing press introduced in the 2nd half of the 15th Century liberated written texts from the constraints of hand written documents. Prior to that, common “texts” for community news as well as current issues were not written, but were conveyed by word of mouth or through songs. The introduction of the printing press opened the door for daily newspapers. Unfortunately, for the vast majority in Africa and particularly in Uganda oral history still dominates. Information, practices, values, taboos are passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Nothing is ever written, and this may be responsible for our poor reading culture. A story is not a story until it is told; similarly, a song is not a song until it is sang. You will agree with me that story telling and music connect people to each other and to the past landscape. The introduction of the printing press brought in the concept of editions and editorial reviews began. However, with digital communication technologies, the key elements of textual world was overturned. Digital technology has altered the means of production and distribution of texts. Editorial reviews are becoming things of the past and texts are now available to the entire world within a matter of seconds. In addition, texts have become multimedia entities including video and sounds.

What about culture? Culture refers to ideas, beliefs, ceremonies, codes, customs language, rituals, taboos, techniques, tools, works of art as well as institutions such as marriage. So defined, culture refers to integrated pattern of human knowledge and behavior. It provides us with the capacity for rational and abstract thought. Only humans keep the Sabbath Holy; only humans attend Juma prayers; only humans bother to classify relatives as uncles, aunts and cousins, and only humans prohibit incest.

Culture serves 3 major functions viz:-

1. Culture is the sum total of what binds individuals as a group with roots or into a community in which they think and will together. In other words, culture is what provides human beings with their identity;
2. Culture serves as subtle and systematic device through which the world is perceived. Since cultures differ, the world perception will similarly vary. To work effectively with people, it is necessary to see the world as they see it. This does not mean having identical view of things, but rather it refers to respecting others and accepting them for what they are. Coming together as you have done for this conference is the beginning of cultural dialogue. I hope you will maintain that dialogue;
3. Culture provides us with a link with our past. To understand where we are going we have to cherish where we come from and acknowledge who we are. In other words due prominence must be accorded to our cultural values and background. I am a firm supporter of the practice of pouring libation, and each time I open a new bottle of Scotch, Cognac or Waragi, the ancestors taste of it first.

Western culture underscores individualism, personal happiness and self actualization motivated by personal achievements. Personhood is perceived in terms of an emphasis on autonomy, which encompasses individual rights, self determination and privacy. African culture, on the other hand, stresses “familial self” characterized by intense emotional and family togetherness and interdependence among members of an extended family system. Personhood is defined in the context of ones family, ethnic origin, village or social group. The extended family serves as an intermediary between the ancestors and future generations.

Second, Africans do not nurture grudges for long. This is exemplified by the Mau Mau uprising in 1952. You would imagine that after independence in 1963 there would be no white person in Kenya. The same can be said of Ian Smith and his unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in 1965. Ian Smith remained a free man on the streets of Harare till his death. However, the most telling example of this is Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in prison on Robin Island. On coming out, he preached nothing but reconciliation. These are contrary to the Nazi criminals who after 70-75 years are still being sought after.

Now let me briefly turn to language. In my primary school I learnt Luganda which was taught as a subject. On entering secondary school, I chose Kiswahili as a subject. I am proud to say I got distinctions in both Luganda and Kiswahili. During those days in secondary school if you were found speaking vernacular outside the classroom, you were punished! There is a saying that most of you must have heard. If you have, I beg for an apology and I crave your indulgence to allow me to repeat it here for the benefit of those who may not have heard it. It is said that “Kiswahili was born in Zanzibar, it grew up in Tanganyika, became sick in Kenya, died in Uganda and rose again in the Democratic Republic of Congo”!! In Uganda Kiswahili was regarded as a language of oppression especially during the Idi Amin regime. Yet if we were to take Kiswahili very seriously it would be the unifying factor in the East and Central African Region. I look forward to securing and reading Lutz Diegner and Frank Schulze-Engler book to be launched during this conference.

Mentioning Kiswahili makes me think of Ngugi Wathiogo. Ngugi and I started our degree programmes at Makerere in the same year i.e. 1961 and we stayed in the same Hall of residence viz. Northcote Hall, now Nsibirwa Hall. Two years later James Ngugi, as he was known then, produced his first play at the National Theatre here in Kampala. In the 1970’s he produced popular theatre in Kikuyu. He was imprisoned whether because of his theatrical or political sense I am not sure? He later emerged and begun to write original popular plays in his native Gikuyu rather than in English. This made his works available to local audiences. Are there others in East Africa and especially at this conference who are following in his footsteps? I shared a platform with Ngugi some 10 years ago at the University of Winnipeg. He was still full of vigour and enthusiasm for literature and theatre. I am glad to note that considerable attention is being paid to the works of Ngugi Wathiogo at this conference.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, I seem to have over run my time. I therefore wish all the Conference participants fruitful deliberations. It is now my pleasure to declare the 2nd East African Literary and Cultural Studies Conference officially open. For God and my Country.