

MAKERERE UNIVERSITY CELEBRATES PROF TIMOTHY WANGUSA @80

It was a literati affair on Friday 8th July 2022 at Makerere University as the men and women from different spheres of life gathered to celebrate the homecoming of the eminent octogenarian poet, novelist and teacher, Professor Timothy Wangusa. The Department of Literature in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS) organized the event as part of the University's rallying activities for its centenary celebrations on course this year.

In his remarks, the Acting Vice Chancellor, Professor Umar Kakumba was pleased to recognize and celebrate Professor Timothy Wangusa as "one of Makerere's treasured literary sons" whose academic journey was "remarkable and arresting". He described the event as an acknowledgment of the university's "rich heritage and the people who have worked resolutely to build its indomitable strength in its century of existence."

The Head of the Department of Literature was in a buoyant frame of mind and demonstrated his pride in the event by adorning a t-shirt with Wangusa's portrait. He also declared that he was a conflicted man who did not know whether to celebrate Wangusa as a fellow Mumasaaba that had faced the knife at the foothills of Mt. Masaaba or the literary giant that made the name of the Department sound beyond Makerere's gates.

Further setting the mood of the afternoon, the Dean of the School of Languages, Literature and Communication, Dr. Sauda Namyalo amused the audience by presenting a toy giraffe to "Baby Tim" through the "youngest" member of the Literature Department Professor Abasi Kiyimba. In a jovial mood, the Principal of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Professor Josephine Ahikire remarked that "Many times, we never get the chance to celebrate the life and work of our icons while they are still with us in flesh and blood. It is therefore a great honour and privilege to celebrate Professor Wangusa today, with the icon himself in our midst."

At eighty years of age, Professor Timothy Wangusa cuts the figure of a distinguished and accomplished person. Born in Bugisu, Wangusa was educated at Nabumali High School and King's College Budo before joining Makerere University for his Bachelors' degree. He then moved to the University of Leeds for his Masters in Literature before returning to Makerere University as a member of staff in 1969. A man of many firsts, as the Vice Chancellor described him, he pursued his doctoral studies in literature graduating in 1975 as the first Ph.D in the Department of Literature, and one of the University's very first two since becoming independent in 1970. He was appointed Professor in 1981, just twelve years after joining the University's faculty. At the time, the University boasted of not more than five African Professors. Having served the University in various capacities as a Teaching Assistant, Head of Department and Dean, he retired from Makerere in 2001. He has since served as the Vice Chancellor of Kumi University and played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Department of Languages and Literature at Uganda Christian University. He also previously served briefly as Minister of Education in 1985-1986 and later as a member of the Constituent Assembly in 1994-1995.

A panel comprising speakers with an excellent understanding of Professor Timothy Wangusa, his works and literature enabled the young and old in the room and online, to gain a deeper understanding of Professor Timothy Wangusa, his life as an academic, scholar, writer, social person and as a human being. The panel moderated by Dr. Susan Kiguli comprised: Professor

Arthur Gakwandi, Dr. Okello Ogwang, Ms Elizabeth Kharono, Mr. James Amatre and Mr. Deusdedit Kansiiime.

While Professor Abasi Kiyimba who chaired the keynote address, acknowledged that Professor Wangusa is a big name because of his writing, he argued that this was not the real reason for the enthusiasm the Department, the College and the University injected in organizing an event of the kind. Alluding to critical comments on D. H Lawrence as a “fine man of letters but a terrible human being to deal with”, the real reason for the enthusiasm, the Professor Kiyimba pointed out, was the person himself. His comments echoed those of the Chairperson of the organizing committee, Danson Kahyana, who described Professor Timothy Wangusa as “a wonderful teacher, a selfless mentor, a supportive colleague, a loving comrade and a caring friend”.

In his keynote address, the equally renowned Mwalimu Austin Bukonya, who had specifically returned from an event in Zanzibar for the event, described Timothy Wangusa as a man of the word and the world, who “has always been ready and willing to engage the wide world society of politics, public administration and many other activities.” In pointing out that the excellent communication skills that are the hall mark of all Professor Wangusa’s operations as a man of the world were acquired through linguistic and literary education, the eloquent scholar was adamant in his belief that there is no discipline that is useless. Whereas the scientific disciplines are important in skilling people in technical operations, the humanities, he pointed out, make people agents of humaneness. Indeed, his description of the humanities as human sciences speaks to the balance he envisages between scientific and artistic disciplines.

Referring to a Kenyan dramatist who likened prioritizing the one over the other to trying to walk along with one foot, he warned that the disparagement and degradation of the humanities would result in “a country of dumb, uncultured, rude and crude philistine robots, with neither desire nor ability to communicate with fellow human beings.” He challenged his audience to use the tools Professor Wangusa had armed them with to “fight for the value and validity of the humanities which sensitise, train and guide all our people in the true values of *ubuntu*, *utu*, *obuntubulamu*, that enable civilized human society”. This, Mwalimu Bukonya reasoned, was the best present his audience could give to a man who according to him had “pulled down the Holy Trinity from the exalted heights of heaven to the soil of our fields, with a word”.

Described by one of his students, poet and teacher, Dr Susan Kiguli, as a living example of irony being “so slight of build yet he effortlessly carries around a mountain of achievements”, Professor Timothy Wangusa was as witty as ever in thanking his audience for bestowing such honor upon him. As if picking up the thread of his colleague, Mwalimu Austin Bukonya, he located himself in arithmetic terms “equidistantly” between his alma mater, Makerere University, which celebrates a century this year and his country, Uganda, which marks 60 years of independence this year. He informed his audience that both his teaching and writing careers point to and emphasise the “mutual importance of the spoken word and the written word especially in their being used creatively”. Both careers, he said, were informed by his discovery of the significance of the economy of words.

The event featured performances of the Professor Wangusa’s poems by the Third Year Poetry Class 2021/2022. It was also marked by Professor Wangusa’s family led by Ann Ayeta Wangusa spearheading the launch of Mwambu Cradle Publishers and four new publications from the Professor which included: *I Love You*, *You Beast*, *Pathfinder’s Footprints*, *Niyaanga*

Nelaliila and *Lost in Wonder*. Professor Timothy Wangusa's published literary works include *Salutations, A Pattern of Dust, Anthem for Africa, Africa's New Brood, Bilomelele Bye Lukingi Masaaba (Poems of Mount Elgon), The State is my Shepherd and other selected Poems, Upon this Mountain*, and *Betwixt Mountain and Wilderness*.

The Professor was presented with among other gifts-Mak@100 souvenirs, nine (9) books published by Makerere University Press, and poems from FEMRITE and the third year Poetry Class 2021/2022 represented by Pharis Kateregga.

This year (2022), Professor Timothy Wangusa born on 20th May 1942, celebrates 80 years. To celebrate his 80th birthday with the Makerere University family, Professor Wangusa received a cake baked by Mrs. Sheila Gowa who is 93 years old. Professor Wangusa cut the cake amidst applause from the audience and befitting birthday melodies.

The Deputy Principal of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Eric Awich Ochen closed the event and lauded Wangusa for holding the torch up high for the young scholars from the College to emulate.

The event, sponsored by Fountain Publishers, Uganda Communication Commission, Femrite, Soft Power News, , Next Media, and The Edge Uganda, comes at a time when the country is polarized by the debate over the fate of letters.

Written by: Lazarus Okurut