



Tribute

## Christopher Lukorito Wanjala (1944–2018)

Peter Amuka

One of Professor Chris Wanjala's wishes for me that I never fulfilled was to publish a book in my own name. It wasn't good enough for him that I habitually "hid" my name among other authors in collections of essays and stories. He and the late historian William Ochieng' chided me many times for being an "intellectual coward" who dreaded standing and facing the world on my own feet. A few years before he passed on, he invited me to co-edit an anthology of short stories titled *Memories We Lost and other Stories* (2016). I did not join him owing to distractions related to my administrative duties at Moi University. My name would have come first as was his wish, but I missed the privilege. I failed him and he told me as much.

I have deliberately started off this tribute by evoking Wanjala's wishes for me because his mantra was that a good teacher must always dream for more from his favourite students. When he taught me modern English poetry in 1973, I found myself becoming a fan of T. S. Eliot, and imagining I would one day become a Nobel laureate like the great poet. I tried to write poetry, which I shared with Wanjala, but it wasn't publishable. I was sorely disappointed to learn through him that Eliot had been a bank clerk and that being a literature student would not necessarily turn me into a creative writer.


There was, however, no harm in aspiring to be like my literary idol. With his encouragement, I wrote a novella titled *Two Shillings*. He read it and cautioned me to research before undertaking the "hazards" of creative writing. In retrospect, I must say that I benefited from his brutal frankness as a literary critic. (Against his advice, I did not revise the novella, nor do I know where it is today!) A good critic, he said, should be honest and truthful enough to the creative writer and help him/her produce quality rather than quantity. He should necessarily collaborate with the poet, novelist, essayist, and playwright in order to read deep between the lines but may unearth nuances the creative person does not see. Thus, the critic is, more often than not, intellectually superior to the bard or storyteller/writer: he does not only retell the poem, play, or story, but also offers insights the artist may not grasp. Wanjala's other way of putting it is that an efficient literary critic is an arbiter/judge who weighs the pros and cons of a work of art and arrives at a fair and reasonable evaluation of its form, content, and social worth—which leads to the issue of reading a literary text beyond itself. As is virtually the case with everybody else, some of his opinions and standpoints were riddled with contradictions. That is (was) typical of most, if not all, intellectual environments and need not detain us here. In a newspaper commentary article, he once accused the historian E. S. Atieno Odhiambo of refusing to recognise the difference between fact and fiction and therefore mixing them up when analysing and critiquing literary texts. Yet he himself was not one of those puritanical conservative voices within the literati who consciously shunned history.

In an informal conversation I had with him in 2018, he cited Karanja, a character in Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), arguing that he was a representative of many types to be found in Kenya, even in contemporary times. He made fiction sound like fact: he referred to compatriots who, to date, are dying to speak and write English as if they were British. They argue and believe that great literature can only be traced to Shakespeare and Tolstoy; they are "stuck like leeches" to literary theories and ideas bequeathed to Kenya by the British coloniser and refuse to view the country—not as a post-colony—but as an entity whose decolonisation was a horrendous mistake. Thus, like Karanja, they persist in believing and arguing that Kenya cannot be a normal nation-state without British culture and habits of thought couched in nothing short of the Queen's English.

Recalling Wanjala's remarks in regard to the "made-in-England" critics reminds me of his being an Africanist and also a postcolonial critic who ironically never tired of being sceptical of what postcolonial theorists really

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stood for. I told him, and personally believe, that one may be practicing and illustrating a theory in his scholarship totally unaware one is doing so. Chris, as he was fondly called, was one such scholar. I can vouch for his sensitivity to history by citing many more examples worth a whole book.

One such case is the much-debated controversial issue of the Mau Mau liberation war in Kenya during the 1950s. While some of his colleagues thought he underrated and belittled the freedom fighters, Wanjala argued he was merely critiquing portraits of the imaginary heroes as represented in creative works. He argued that the history of the Mau Mau struggle was *constructed* or *created* by writers as a figment of their literary imaginations. At a seminar at the University of Nairobi in the late 1970s or mid-eighties, he told his audience that the production of knowledge in the Humanities, including creative literature, called for and subsisted on debate rather than ideologically slanted intellectual dictatorship and grandstanding. I was there and remember two very vocal detractors present at the talk who literally turned the academic activity into a political rally.

As for the tensions between the left and the right at the University of Nairobi in general, and its Department of Literature in particular, Wanjala argued that those who mouthed ideologies uncritically and refused to accommodate opposing views were injecting scholarship with sterility by peddling “youthful dogma”. He was right because such behaviour persists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nairobi and beyond.

As already implied, Wanjala had positive wishes for his juniors in scholarship. I conclude by stressing that I was, and still am, one of those juniors. We often chatted, via the phone, about literary scholarship almost every other late night or every early morning until his death. Debate and oppositionality were the stuff he said literary study was made of and he carried this across into the mass media with relish when necessary through his newspaper articles. In his later years, when Professor Egara Kabaji, a younger colleague, accused him of slackening and virtually disappearing from the world of literary activity, he readily admitted “intellectual menopause” but remained productive all the same. In truth, Professor died with a youthful, active mind that listened, tolerated, and interacted with Modern and Postmodern ideas and brains in equal measure and without the vain and empty condescension of some of his peers.

Fare thee well, my teacher!

### Works Cited

- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *A Grain of Wheat*. Heinemann, 1967.  
Wanjala, Chris, ed. *Memories We Lost and Other Stories*. Moran, 2016.