

## Profile – Prof Chris Wanjala



By Shad Bulimo, March 8 2011

Out of the undulating valleys and hills of Bungoma looms Prof Chris Wanjala, a literary sphinx that has dominated the world of literature in East Africa and beyond for nearly four decades. The word, as in written, has it that the 67-year old Christopher Lukorito Wanjala from Kimilili shows no signs of retiring any time soon. He is busy with a number of projects lined up including authoring books and implementing the national cultural policy. Perhaps this explains his longevity in a world that has seen many stumble and fall by the wayside who dared retire to unfamiliar pursuits. A fierce literary

critic, author and poet, Prof Wanjala reveals himself as an avid scholar, conscientious of the pitfalls of neo-colonialism that have plagued the intellectual scene on the continent. His approach, which has won him accolades and scathing barbs in equal measure, is syncretism; creating a literary fusion of rural and cosmopolitan, the cultural with modernity.

Prof Wanjala's worldview is influenced or, at least informed by the history of colonialism in Kenya, and in particular, the British exploits in Western Kenya, the land of his ancestors. We get a sense of the character of his people, the Bukusu from a description by CW Hobley (the Luhya called him Obilo), the chief architect of colonial rule in Luhyaland. Writing in his anthropological memoirs, Hobley referred to Babukusu (then called Kitosh) as 'a powerful tribe same as the Wanga but with a strain of Hamitic blood.' Hobley's observations were to later prove prophetic. When he tried to extend colonial hegemony to Bungoma, he encountered the raw fierceness of Babukusu.

First he attacked Lumboka, a Bukusu walled fort but had to back off after fierce resistance. Humiliated and furious, he called in reinforcements of British and Sudanese legionnaires who eventually overpowered Babukusu and brought down the walled village (lukoba). The Bukusu warriors retreated to Chetambe fort in Webuye but here too Obilo deployed even more firepower that finally brought to an end Bukusu resistance to colonial rule in what came to be known as War of Chetambe (1895). An exploration of the historico-cultural disruption of Luhya social order by imperial invasion is the subject of a Prof Wanjala's much awaited chronicle entitled *INGWE* (leopard) for which he has been compiling material for the last 30 years. The book is due out before the end of this year, he assured this writer.

Born to the late Timothy Lukorito (1901-1994) and Ayasi Nekesa (1922-1988), Prof Wanjala received his early education at Kamusinde FAM School and Chesamisi Intermediate School in rural Kimilili between 1952 and 1961 before proceeding to Bungoma Secondary School where he sat for his 'O' Levels in 1965. He passed with flying colors and was admitted to Friends School Kamusinga for 'A' Levels in 1966 and University of Nairobi (then University College) in 1968 in the Faculty of Arts to study English, History and Education. He dropped two subjects to major in Literature, a subject for which he qualified so well he was fast tracked to a doctorate program.

Prof Wanjala who enjoys a meal of *obusuma* (ugali) and traditional vegetables known as *saka* (*solanum pseedocapsicum*) got a teaching job at the department of Literature in 1973 and juggled

between his teaching duties and a PhD program on a part-time basis graduating in 1978. In 1985 he was appointed a Senior Research Fellow and director of the Institute of African Studies (IAS) and returned to the Department of Literature as Associate Professor in 1985. In 1990 he moved to Egerton University as a full professor where he started an undergraduate and master's program before returning to University of Nairobi in 2000 where he remains until today. In addition to academic load, Prof Wanjala has also served as a director of Kenya Airways.

Where his ancestors fought enemies with an arsenal of spears, bows and arrows, the tenacious literary warrior has taken the war on ignorance to the national and international arena using academic tools. As chairman of the National Book Development Council of Kenya (NBDCK) his task is to create an enabling environment that encourages creativity and book authorship in order to promote literacy and a reading culture in Kenya. The council brings together publishers, writers, literary critics, adult and continuing education experts, librarians and government representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture and National Heritage. In 2001, Prof Wanjala founded the Kenya Non-Fiction and Academic Authors Association (KENFAA) on whose board he still sits but has delegated executive duties to other officials to concentrate on the more demanding NBDCK.

Although literature is Prof Wanjala's passion, it is only a component of his overall mission to put indigenous culture on the national agenda. His name (Wanjala) implies he was born during a hungry season. His hunger for matters cultural was not lost to stakeholders and in 2004; he was appointed by the government to coordinate drafting of a cultural policy for Kenya by the Department of Culture, Ministry of Gender, Sports and Culture. Among other things, the committee recommended and the government approved the establishment of a cultural center in every county. The 47 centers envisaged around the country will be responsible for identifying cultural monuments like the kaya shrines of Miji Kenda at the coast and collating information on artifacts of cultural significance.

In Luhyaland, such centers are planned in Kakamega, Vihiga, Busia and Bungoma. Among cultural monuments to be preserved include Chetambe and Lumboka in Bungoma, king's tombs in Wanga, Mungoma caves in Maragoli, the *ikhongo murwi* crying stone in Isukha, among others. Establishment of independent cultural centers is a major step forward in the cultural revolution of the people who have so far been beholden to political patronage where annual cultural festivals exist such as Maragoli, Samia and Bunyala.

For Prof Wanjala, it will also be a personal triumph of sorts for he has crusaded cultural emancipation for more than three decades. For instance, in 1982, together with Dr Simiyu Wandabba, he organized a conference which recommended the establishment of Chetambe Cultural Centre in Webuye. Despite the apparent victory, hurdles remain before the proposed CCC is realized. The Tachoni are resisting attempts by the Bukusu to claim Chetambe and Lumboka. “We have sought an engagement with Tachoni leaders like Webuye MP, Alfred Wekesa Sambu and have managed to reconcile our differences,” he says. “The only bottlenecks remaining are individual families living on the historic sites who do not want to move but we keep talking to them.”

An intellectual of no small measure, Prof Wanjala is also deeply traditionalist with a brood of 18 offspring from several marriages. His first marriage was to Everlyn when he was still a student at Friends' School, Kamusinga and it gave him 5 children: Rose, a graduate of Egerton University now a librarian at Laikipia University College, Levi, working with Kenya Airways, Oliver and Giverne, working in the building industry in Nairobi and Christian Bernard, a medical laboratory graduate of Mount Kenya University. Everlyn's home is in Makuselwa village in Ndivisi Division, Webuye.

His next wife Sarah is a retired secretary with Uzima Publications while his last wife is Dr Ruth Kibiti, a former lecturer at the University of Nairobi now attached to the UN Southern Sudan Peace mission. With Sarah who lives at Mabuye Village in Lwandeti Location, Lugari, Prof Wanjala sired seven children - five sons and two girls. The first born son is David Wanjala who is married with two children. The second born is Michael, then Alex (teaching in Literature Department with his father), Caroline working with Safaricom, Catherine doing masters at Daystar, Emmanuel, a design and communications expert and Barnaby, a third year university student. With Dr Kibiti with whom Prof has set up home in Soysamb Village, Tongoren Division, Bungoma, Prof Wanjala is blessed with five sons: Martin, a lawyer, Gavin a 4<sup>th</sup> year Commerce student at Catholic University, Andrew who just qualified at his 'O' Levels and is awaiting to join university, Nelson a Form Three student at Sunshine Secondary School in Nairobi and Timothy a Form One student also at Sunshine. Prof Wanjala also has a daughter, Millie, a human resource manager with an international company in Mombasa, from a short-lived marriage to Eunice.

Prof Wanjala has sixteen grandchildren. His son Levi is married to Hellen and their children are Wema and Frieda; Caroline is married to Nathan Makokha and their union has produced Lisa and Sophia; Michael is married to Mary and they have three children: Yanis, Nisa and Andrew. David is

married to Anthea and their matrimony is blessed with Nathan and Sarahjane; Rose is widowed but has Elmadam and Aggrey while Giverne's children are Don and Andie. Oliver is blessed with three children - Keith, Hillary and Lamech. His son Alex wedded Annabelle in December last year while Catherine also married Neto last year. Both offspring are yet to beget grandchildren for the professor.

Prof Wanjala, from Bakwangwa lineage of the populous Batukwika clan has three siblings: John Lukorito, the eldest who is a farmer in Kimilili, Richard Wanyonyi Lukorito, a retired headmaster and Rosemary Nanyama married in Uganda.

His interests in oral and written literature spans not just East Africa but also South African Literature, Japanese Literature, Performing Arts and Creative Writing (Poetry, Drama). He is also involved in spearheading intellectual property rights for artists under the aegis of the Reproduction Rights Society of Kenya (Kopiken) on whose board he sits.



In Kenya, however successful you are in whatever field, the ultimate prize is political power, or so the trend seems to indicate. The allure of high profile political office did not escape Prof Wanjala either. In 1997 as secretary of Kimilili KANU branch, he unsuccessfully forayed into the political area. "But the people of Kimilili told me that I was using the wrong vehicle," referring to KANU party whose dominance in Kenyan politics was finally vanquished by a coalition parties under the

umbrella National Rainbow Alliance (NARC) in 2002. Since then any fire for political leadership got extinguished but continues to glow in the form of Bureau of Political Research and Analysis (BUPRA), an organization which he chairs.

Through BUPRA, Prof Wanjala has initiated efforts aimed at creating Luhya unity among politicians. Working with politicians he has released two documents spelling out modalities that might help in this mission. The bureau also recognizes input towards Luhya unity by people like Musa Amalemba and Dr Daniel Wako. “We need to capture their contributions towards Luhya unity lest people forget,” he says. “I am talking to Julius Khakula, the lawyer because I believe we as professionals can work with Luhya Council of Elders towards achieving the elusive Luhya unity.”

On Luhya literary resources, Prof Wanjala hopes his forthcoming book; *INGWE* will reconcile earlier works by Luhya scholars such as Prof Gideon Saulo Were, Dr John Osogo, FE Makila and foreign anthropologists like Prof Walter Sangree (Tiriki) and Gunter Wagner (Bukusu and Maragoli). “A more comprehensive approach to capturing Luhya history and culture must start first and foremost with research and analysis of clan structures,” he says. Reliance on official reports and administrators often yields less than original insights into clan lineages, migratory history and sub tribal formations. Specifically for Bukusu, Prof Wanjala says he has authored a film documentary produced by Brutus Simiyu Sirucha on *Kumuse* funeral narration as well as *sikhebo*, the circumcision festival staged every two years which highlights the importance of these two vital elements of Bukusu cultural resources.

In his capacity as chairman of Book Development Council of Kenya, Prof Wanjala is facing one of the most serious challenges to the written word - electronic media channels powered by the internet. This, he agrees with a chuckle but for now he says, printed matter is still in heavy demand. Still the council has not totally ignored the threats but has launched efforts to factor an electronic component into the publishing industry. “It’s true the electronic age is influencing style and composition of literature but there is also the challenge of *sheng* from urban youth,” he says. “Some of these challenges we try to address by partnering with youth literary groups like KWANI to encourage creative journalism.”

Prof Wanjala’s first trip abroad was to Moscow to represent Kenyan writers at a literary festival but since then he has travelled widely around the world primarily to attend conferences and book fairs

but also when he served as a director of Kenya Airways. He cites Ngugi wa Thiong'o as the person who has the most profound effect on his professional development; first as his lecturer at the University of Nairobi and later as a colleague and friend. "We worked very closely, often under a hostile academic environment to create the Cultural Revolution that happened at the University of Nairobi," he says. Ngugi is now a professor at the University of California having been detained and hounded out of his University of Nairobi job by a jittery Moi government. That is now all in the past as academic freedom has improved tremendously under the Kibaki administration, says Prof Wanjala. "Nowadays, we express ourselves freely without fear of being arrested for alleged subversive activities," he says.

The tenacious literary warrior whose easy-go-lucky mien belies his enduring fighting spirit, has travelled a long path from his rural Kimilili village to sit at the citadel of academic excellence. Now in his twilight years, he has become a voice of reason in a country convoluted with vices of ethnocentrism and negative ethnicity. He has a word of advice to the youth. "If you who want to succeed in your career, you must first be firmly rooted in the culture of your people," he says. "This gives you the leverage to excel because you cannot judge let alone appreciate other cultures if you don't know your own." It's this appreciation that has strengthened African scholars like Chinua Achebe of the *Things Fall Apart* fame and Wole Soyinka. "Young scholars must appreciate local in order to appreciate international values," he advises.

Shad Bulimo is the editor of [www.abeingo.org](http://www.abeingo.org), a portal for the Luhya community.