



UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

CITATION ON

PROFESSOR JOSEPH MAINA MUNGAI, EBS

ON HIS CONFERMENT OF

THE HONORARY DOCTOR OF SCIENCE

(D.Sc.)

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

AT

NAIROBI, KENYA

ON

30TH NOVEMBER, 1998

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MBChB (Makerere), Ph.D.(London)**

*"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the
shoulders of giants."*

The above statement, which is sometimes attributed to Sir Isaac Newton and at other times to Claude Bernard, can be aptly used to describe one man that the University of Nairobi is pleased to honour today. A man through whom many scholars in this country can claim to have seen further because they stood on his shoulders. A man popularly known by his students as the "Posture of Man." This scholar is Prof. Joseph Maina Mungai.

Professor Joseph Maina Mungai was born on 4th April 1932 in Nairobi. He grew up in Kiambu District where he attended several primary schools; dropping out from time to time to sell sugar cane in the market or run his father's kiosk. In 1942 he dropped out of school altogether to go and become a full time herdsboy for 2 years.

After the two years young Mungai resumed school and in 1949 he sat for the Kenya African Preliminary Examination which he passed and was admitted to Alliance High School Kikuyu. In his final year in that School he rose to Head Boy and was the top student in the Cambridge School Certificate.

Joseph Maina Mungai proceeded to Makerere University College, Kampala in 1954, where he won the Swynnerton Prize for Biology through the inspiration of Professor David Wasawo (the current Chairman, University Council) and other lecturers. In the Medical School he won the British Medical Association Prize for Anatomy followed by BP Shell Exhibition Prizes for other subjects. He excelled in sports breaking the three (3) mile record which he kept for 10 years. He also started the Makerere Medical Journal which is still published today.

In 1963 he proceeded to the University College London where enrolled for his Ph.D. on the cells of the brain. His study proved the theories advanced by his own supervisor as well as a Nobel Laureate in another country wrong. The results of his Ph.D. thesis were analyzed by a mathematical team in Europe and found to be a perfect model. They were also confirmed several years later by an American Scientist working at the University of Berkely California using advanced technology. One of his students recalls a conversation with his external examiner several years later in which he is reported to have said ".....Oh I recall that brilliant young Africn scientist. It is a pity he got lost in administration..."

But it is the creative and long career that he derived out of the Ph.D. study that is of significance to us today. When Professor Mungai returned to Makerere in 1966 he formed a team to study the effects of kwashiorkor on the brain. But soon he was recalled back to Kenya to join the newly started Nairobi School of Medicine.

Professor Joseph Maina Mungai will be remembered as the man who shaped the destiny of medical education in this Country. Together with other founder members of the Faculty of Medicine, Professor Mungai has no doubt proved the colonial powers wrong as they used to say that it would take an independent African Government 50 years to produce one doctor or for that matter one engineer. Thirty five years later, the University of Nairobi Medical school (started by the Government of Kenya only four years after independence), has produced more than 3,500 doctors, dentists and pharmacists.

Professor Mungai single handedly started the Department of Human Anatomy in 1967 becoming its first Chairman and Full Professor. Back then there was no law to enable his Department to obtain human bodies for the study of anatomy. Yet there can be no firm foundation on which to base the study of medicine without the use of this most fundamental teaching specimen. Professor Mungai arranged with Makerere University to supply the requisite materials. But no driver would agree to drive the vehicle to fetch them. He had therefore to do it himself.

Before leaving Nairobi for Kampala, Professor Mungai obtained written authority from the Commissioner of Police and the necessary documents from the Ministry of Health. However, he was warned by the Attorney General that, from a legal point of view, he could be arrested and prosecuted. But for the sake of his professional

calling, he decided to take the risk. This was the only way of starting human anatomy studies, and by extension, medical training in Kenya.

When he got to Tororo at 10.00 p.m. on his way to Kampala he was arrested on the Uganda side for driving a foreign registered vehicle without a logbook. He was miraculously released at mid-night when a new group of soldiers reported on duty and one of them recognised a passenger that he was carrying. On the way back and, now fully loaded, with cadavers he was arrested on the Kenyan side. He was released after several hours of serious questioning about the nature of his "cargo." Some of his questioners thought that they were dealing with a lunatic.

When he got to Chiromo he found that the people there were anticipating his arrival with fear. Word quickly went round that the moment of truth had eventually come: dead bodies on campus. Within minutes there was not a single person on the campus. They had all taken off towards the sports ground behind this Chancellor's Court. Today, the Department of Human Anatomy has developed a strong tradition of research, teaching and service to the community in the form of the mortuary services, thanks to its founder Chairman Professor Joseph Maina Mungai.

Prof. Mungai became the first Kenyan Dean of the Nairobi Medical School in 1969. In 1973 he was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi for

2 years. In 1975 he was appointed to represent Kenya on the Council of the United Nations University.

In 1976, he was appointed Vice-Chairman and Editor of the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies. In 1977 he became the first Chairman of the National Council of Science and Technology as well as the Council of the Kenya Institute of Education. In 1979 he was appointed the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi and in 1980 he became the first Chairman of the Kenya National Examinations Council. In 1982 he was elected one of the Nairobi delegates and Director of the Co-Operative Bank of Kenya where he was also appointed its Vice-Chairman until 1986.

In 1985 Professor Mungai was appointed to be the founding Secretary to the Commission for Higher Education. In 1994/1995 Professor Mungai was appointed to be Chairman of a Presidential Committee on University Education in Kenya. After 13 years of dedicated service as Secretary to the Commission for Higher Education, he has been appointed to serve as a Joint Secretary to the ongoing Commission of Inquiry into the Education System in Kenya.

Despite the above high profile, Professor Joseph Maina Mungai has never lost sight of the fact that "once a teacher always a teacher." He has continued to perform his functions as a Professor in the Department of Human Anatomy.

Professor Mungai has supervised several postgraduate students including Ph.D.s. Additionally he has produced over 600 writings, comprising a hybrid of scholarly, consultative and popular writings. Most of his writings are aimed at educating the public on a wide range of topical issues, with special reference to AIDS. On this score, Professor Mungai has succeeded in demystifying and popularizing science including his subject of Anatomy which is often described as the “mother” or the “queen” of all medical sciences.

This is the humble scholar that the University of Nairobi wishes to honour at this 26th Graduation Ceremony with the Degree of Doctor of Science (*Honoris Causa*) in recognition of his immense contribution to Higher Education in Kenya and in application of advanced knowledge in dealing with educational and health problems in this country.