

The Word of a Man of The Word About the Word

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In a recent article about Prof Wangusa I described him as the man who pulled down the Holy Trinity from the exalted heights of heaven to the soil of our fields, with a word. The power of that word is in his three-line portrayal of the Three-in-One as: “the Father in the root – the Son in the shoot – the Spirit in the fruit”. The Prof read the article and got back to me with the wry remark, “Only you, Austin, could have come up with such a statement.”

In a startling and incisive response to my little piece called “W-w-woman”, the Professor suggested that I had, somehow, written a Shakespearean sonnet for the www (worldwide web) age. I called the Prof’s critique startling because I was not aware of what I had done, until he pointed it out, with glaring textual evidence, as the excellent critic that he is. I did not that I could be that clever.

Incidentally, this is the last time I will be mentioning Shakespeare in my communication, and I will not quote a single line from his works, much as I know that the Professor and I like and admire the bard and his work. I will not refer to him because I want to disabuse you –that is, clean your mind –of the claim that literary study is about idle people reciting to one another the works of this poet. This is a backward, primitive and ignorant assumption, unworthy of any educated person. Literary study is about much more than that.

Anyway, the gist of what I have said so far is that Professor Wangusa and I have, throughout our long acquaintance, recognized each other as galley slaves of the word, and respected each other for it. When I say long acquaintance, I mean since 1969, when, as Tutorial Fellows, Prof and I shared that first house at the junction of the Makerere Hill Road and the Edge, just above the Arts Court complex.

The house was at that time the residence of the late Professor Asavisa Wandira, but he and his family were on an extended study leave overseas, and since we, junior staff, were not entitled to official university housing, we were accommodated there as “caretakers”.

I will not, for obvious reasons, ask you what you were doing in the late 1960s. But Prof and I were lively young men then, from our university studies, he from his MA in Leeds and me from my BA in Dar es Salaam. Our publications were few and thin then, but our innocent adventures and escapades many and various. Prof, however, was always a serious and focused man and he soon started a family, while I roamed off to overseas studies in Britain, like him.

But enough of this narrative temptation. After all, we have all the details in Prof’s own words in the Autobiography we are privileged to be launching today. Let us get back to the word with two final examples, one about me and one about our octogenarian Professor.

Professor Wangusa once told me that Literature students in the late 1990s and 2000s had nicknamed me “The Word”. As is often the case with such nicknames, I never heard anyone call me by it to my face. But I was mighty pleased about it because, indeed, I love the word in all its forms. My favourite Bible verse is John 1: 14. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”. Incidentally, Prof Wangusa and I, in our varying faiths, are lovers of the King James version of the Bible, largely because of the beauty of its language. You can imagine our distress at the suggestion that it should be consigned to the flames because it mentions the “Holy Ghost”.

Anyway, the students' nickname for me, I suspect, derived from the enthusiasm with which I lectured on "the word" on the first-year Language Use course, especially on my return from my two-decade exile.

The hiatus meant that I missed Prof Wangusa's supreme live manifestation of his commitment to the word. This was his professorial inaugural lecture, "A wordless world" (1994). This for me, as I got acquainted with it in print but also from my conversations with the Professor, gives me two impressions. The first is Prof's deep and firm conviction that the word, as a synecdoche for language, is the supreme power that defines us humans and enables us to operate as societies and communities in the world.

Secondly, it underlines the fact that "TW, Uncle Tim", to use his students' nicknames for him, is a man of not only the word, writing and teaching literature. He is also a man of the world, who, much more than most of us his colleagues has always been ready and willing to engage the wide world society of politics, public administration and many other activities. Wangusa has served as a Vice-Chancellor, a minister, a Member of Parliament and a Presidential advisor.

My belief is that in all these roles and many others, his "man of the word" education and training has stood him in good stead. In other words, the linguistic and literary education he acquired at Mwiri, King's College Budo, Makerere and Leeds equipped him with the excellent communication skills that are the hallmark of all his operations.

The moral of the tale is that there is no discipline that is "useless", as some chauvinists are trying to deceive us. Certainly anyone who will come to me and tell me that the linguistic and literary disciplines, which are the backbone of communication skills, are useless "arts" subjects, I would dismiss him as mad. We need scientific disciplines to skill us in technical operations. But we equally need the humanities to make just that, human and humane agents.

I used a Kiswahili slogan for that balance between technical competence and cultured decency: "*akili na adili*" (skills and ethics). Actually "*adili*" closely resembles in sound one of the Arabic words for "literature". This brings me back to what I said earlier, that Literature is not about reciting passages, as the ignoramus imagine. It is about skilling us in competent communication and decent and civilized relations with our fellow human beings. There is a "*shenzi*" (primitive, greedy, selfish) tendency in all of us, and however well-skilled a person is technically, that person will not be useful and successful in society unless that "*shenzi*" tendency is taken out of them. I call this process of civilizing our society "*deshenzinisation*", and only the human sciences, like Wangusa's Literature, can achieve this.

Prof Wangusa has striven the most part of his life to perfect his own "*adili*" and to share it with his colleagues, students and readers. The best present we can give him is to fight for the value and validity of those human sciences, the humanities, that sensitise, train and guide all our people in the true values of *Ubuntu, utu, obuntubulamu*, that enable civilized human society.

In these days of the strident din about "STEM" (science, technology, engineering, maths), with the corresponding disparagement and degradation of the humanities, we cannot, and we will not, allow Uganda to become a country of dumb, uncultured, rude and crude philistine robots, with neither desire nor ability to communicate with fellow human beings. This is the fight on our hands and I suggest we should wage it in his honour, with the main tool with which he has armed us, the word.

Gayaza

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