

Managing and Transforming an African University

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Managing and Transforming an African University

Personal Experience at Makerere University

1973–2004

John Pancras Mukasa Ssebuwufu



Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa
DAKAR

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Preface

A friend once lamented that one of Africa's weaknesses was that Africans did not write much about themselves, that foreigners write most of what he reads about Africa and the major events shaping the future of the continent. Going by the volume of literature I had seen and read about our continent written by Africans, I thought my friend was unfairly criticising Africans. However, as I approached retirement, I began to wonder how many books had been written about the good and the bad at Makerere ever since it became a national university in 1970. Although a quick search indicated that, over the years, scores of scholars had written a lot about Makerere's glorious past, its fortunes and tribulations, most of this literature was scattered in journals and other academic publications not easily accessible to an ordinary person. With the exception of Professor Margaret McPherson's *They Built for the Future*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1964 and Professor Alexander Odonga's *The History of the Medical School*, published in the early 2000s, and one or two others, I could hardly find any other book written on the university. Neither had any of my predecessors written a full account of their experiences, perhaps understandably so, given the circumstances under which most of them left office, some never to be seen alive again. For that reason, I counted myself among the lucky former leaders of Makerere. I served a long tenure and was lucky not to be thrown out of office unceremoniously. Having been so privileged, I thought I had no excuse to let my long experience as staff and Vice Chancellor go undocumented. I was not only Makerere's student, leader and top manager but also one of its longest serving members of staff. I was there at the beginning of its long difficult years. I was also there when the university began to see some semblance of recovery. That was a rich experience.

Admittedly, I found writing this book an intimidating challenge. In spite of my long years in the academy, all I had ever written were journal articles. I had never written a book. But as luck would have it, just as I was thinking of dropping the idea, I received inspiration in late 2003 from an unexpected source. During an informal interaction with Dr Joyce Moock who was then Associate Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation responsible for overseeing the I@mak.com programme, I discussed with her my ambition to write a book about my long experience at Makerere. She thought I had a good idea and encouraged me to go ahead. Working with Cole Dodge, who was facilitating I@mak.com

and Nakanyike Musisi, Director of Makerere Institute of Social Research, we put together a funding proposal for a small grant, and quickly submitted it to the Rockefeller Foundation. Fortunately, it was approved. Initially, I wanted to confine myself to the period I was there as Vice Chancellor and the I@mak.com experience, but soon I realised that by confining myself too narrowly to that relatively short period from 1993 to 2004, I would not have done justice to the Makerere I had come to know so intimately. I believed there was a lot more about the university which had not been written. I had under-estimated the magnitude of the task ahead of me. In essence, I was taking on a mammoth task that would involve personal interviews and detailed archival research. That meant I could not complete writing such a book in one year, which the Rockefeller had given me. As Professor Odonga observes in his *The History of the Medical School*, the problem with Makerere is the difficulty of finding records and being able to extract the information you need. As files are scattered in many places and most members of staff are constantly busy with their work, progress was inevitably slow and arduous. My young research assistants kept shuttling back and forth between places, and more often than not, could not obtain all the details I was looking for. My relocation to Accra in 2005 did not help matters either. What is contained in the following pages is a personal account of my experience, how I saw it, heard it, read about it and lived it. It is not in any way a professional historical dossier on Makerere. That, I believe, is best left to the professional historians.

Although it is a subject of intense debate in the higher education circles, to many, Makerere is still a premier African university. It has enjoyed a distinguished past and I have no reason to doubt why it should not continue to enjoy that high academic excellence in the future. Although it fell on hard times in the '70s, over the years it has been able to bootstrap itself out of its problems. Makerere is an incredibly resilient institution which, against all odds, has continued to live up to its motto of "building for the future". Makerereians are found all over the world, many with successful careers. It has provided Uganda, East Africa, Africa and the world with high quality professionals in such fields as Medicine, Engineering, the Arts and the Sciences. I am one of those who feel intensely proud to have been a product of this great institution. As a tribute to those who have been at its helm, from its simple beginnings as a technical school in 1922 to its present status as a national university, I have decided to dedicate a few chapters to its principals, chancellors and vice chancellors. I am more than convinced that it is through the tireless efforts, commitment and vision of these men that Makerere has remained an academic force to reckon with all these years. However, I must hasten to add that some of its chancellors were also responsible for its misfortune and its near-collapse.

I am deeply indebted to many people who directly and indirectly contributed to the writing of the manuscript. They made their time freely available so I could formally and informally interview them. I met some of them in many odd places

– airport lounges, hotel lobbies and conferences. Through these formal and informal interactions, they have helped me to validate most of the manuscript. I wanted to interview many more but, for circumstances beyond my control, this was not possible. To those I ought to have interviewed but could not reach, I can only offer my sincere apology. In the same token, I wish to express my gratitude to my former colleagues of all categories at Makerere and at Kyambogo who generously provided me with a lot of useful documents and informative ideas that, no doubt, enriched this account immensely. I know how hard it is to retrieve information in a big and complex institution like Makerere University where archival automation is still in its infancy.

In the course of writing this account, I was assisted by Annet Nakabiri Okoth, Doreen Kiconco, John Kateete and Sifa Nakiyaga. I am grateful to them for the legwork. Above all, I am extremely grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for the funding, which made it possible for me to concentrate on writing this account and for their exceptional patience and understanding as deadlines came and passed and I was still nowhere near the end. I am also grateful to Dr Joyce Moock for supporting the idea of documenting this story, and for going out of her way to source for funding for me; as well as Dr Nakanyike Musisi and Cole Dodge, who assisted me so much during the funding proposal writing. As Director of Makerere Institute of Social Research, Dr Nakanyike Musisi kindly provided working space and facilities for my research assistants. A special ‘Thank you’ to my wife, Alice, for constantly reminding me that the work was yet unfinished, and that I ought to get on with it; my sons, Michael Kavuma and Martin Mwanje, for their efforts in constantly browsing the internet for good material; and my daughter, Cathy Sanyu Nabulya, for checking and filing the research material in a logical sequence. I am also grateful to my Ghanaian colleagues, in particular Vera Doku, for editing the entire manuscript.

Although I have tried to verify the facts and events documented in this book, it is practically impossible for a story of this kind, about events and people, to be absolutely error-free. I am the first to admit that this account is no exception. I also know that due to memory lapses, I may have inadvertently left out a lot of exciting events which happened at Makerere and Kyambogo during my time there and which deserved mention. As the popular saying goes: time is memory’s worst enemy. I take full responsibility for all factual errors and inaccuracies.

Let Makerere continue to build for the future!

John Pancras Mukasa Ssebuwufu

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About the Author

John Pancras Mukasa Ssebuwufu was born in 1947. He attended St Peter's Junior Secondary School Nsambya, Namilyango College before joining Makerere University, in 1970, for a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry where he was retained as a staff development fellow. Soon after, in 1974, he was admitted to Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, initially for a Master's degree, but after one year it was upgraded to a PhD which he received in 1977. In the same year he was appointed post doctoral fellow in the same department for two years (1977-79). It was during this period that he made an outstanding discovery, which the journal *Nature* – one of the most prestigious and influential scientific journals in the world – published in 1983. John Ssebuwufu's discovery won him and his postdoctoral supervisor a gold medal and diploma.

He taught Chemistry at Makerere from 1979 as a lecturer, rising through the ranks to full professor in 1990. He was later appointed Principal of the then Institute of Teacher Education Kyambogo. After heading Kyambogo for three years he was transferred back to Makerere University as its Vice Chancellor – a position he held for nearly eleven years from 1993 to 2004. As VC, he and his colleagues innovated many new things and introduced several changes, including the semester system which is now used in all universities in Uganda; Makerere's Internet and Intranet running on a 15 kilometre optical fibre backbone; Management Information Systems such as the Academic Information System (ARIS) and others that enabled the university automate its management systems; a Wilken radio-call based security system; a training FM radio station for the Mass Communication Department; several new academic programmes; international partnerships; and several new and renovated buildings.

After retiring from Makerere University in 2004, he went to Nairobi where he briefly served as a consultant to the Kenyan public universities Chancellors Committee during which time he worked out the terms and conditions of service for the Vice Chancellors of Kenyan public universities.

In 2005 he joined the Association of African Universities (AAU) based in Accra, Ghana where he spent eight years as Director of Research and Programmes and returned to Uganda in December 2013 as Principal of Kisubi Brothers University College (KBUC). In 2015, KBUC was transformed into the University

of Kisubi and Ssebuwufu was appointed its first Vice Chancellor. He also serves as Chancellor of Kyambogo University and Kampala International University respectively.

Outside of higher education, John Ssebuwufu served as the first Chairman of the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology; as member of the first Appointments Board of Uganda Martyrs University and as Chairman of the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA). He has also served as Chairman of Uganda Management Institute Board of Directors; as Chairman of the Taskforce that planned Mutesa One Royal University and the return of Masaka Technical Institute to Buganda Government; as Chairman of the Board of Directors and Non Executive Director of Citibank Uganda, which is part of Citigroup New York, USA for twelve consecutive years; and as Chairman of the Board of the UbuntuNet Alliance – a regional ICT network covering Eastern, Southern and Central Africa with its Secretariat in Lilongwe, Malawi.

He is a recipient of three honorary degrees (*honoris causa*), namely: Doctor of Education (EdD) from Ohio State University in USA; Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) of the University of Bergen, Norway; Dr of Laws (LLD) of his alma mater, Queen's University Belfast; amongst other awards.

He is married to Alice Evelyn Nalwadda Ssebuwufu and they have four children.