

## Makerere's Principals: The Men who Built for the Future (1922 – 1970)

Since its humble beginnings in 1922, there have been a small number of visionary and outstanding men – no women yet – behind Makerere's success and tribulation, who have been at the helm of its affairs, serving as its Chief Executive. These are the Principals and Vice Chancellors. These are the men who had and continue to provide the leadership and stewardship which has continued to enhance Makerere's reputation as centre of higher learning in Africa and beyond, even when the sun appeared to have set on its hard earned reputation and fortunes as a centre of academic excellence. Some have even lost their lives in the service of the institution. From 1922 to 1970, Makerere College, and later University College, was headed by Principals. Margaret McPherson has given most of them sufficient coverage in her book *They Built for the Future*, so I will not bore the reader by repeating their stories and their times beyond giving each of them a mention in passing.

### **H.O. Saville**

Makerere's first and founding Principal, H. O. Saville was a civil engineer, who had been working for the Public Works Department before the Governor, Sir Robert Coryndon, tasked him to establish the first Government Technical School on Makerere hill, some two miles north of downtown Kampala. He started the school in 1922 with fourteen boys and five instructors, two of them Ugandans – Matayo Sempala and Erasito Tabyetise. Makerere hill was given to the Protectorate Government by the Buganda Kingdom for the purpose of establishing a college there. Saville is credited for producing the first development plan for Makerere College, which later replaced the technical school.

Besides the technical disciplines of automotive engineering, carpentry and joinery, civil and building engineering, the plan included the establishment of a normal school for teachers, agricultural plots, administrative and departmental

offices, playing fields and a timber plantation. Saville's Administration Building whose foundation was laid in 1923, now houses the Department of Science and Technical Education in the School of Education, near the former site of Kagugube Market. He left in 1925 for a new appointment as Head of Technical Education in the Department of Education. The Colonial Government was compelled to start a technical school in Uganda soon after the First World War, after realising that there was a huge shortage of artisans in its East African territories. It had, therefore, become necessary to train native artisans to fill the gaps. Bombo had been the favoured site, in which case we would have had Bombo College and subsequently Bombo University. However, on the recommendation of a minority report, the Governor, Sir Robert Coryndon, who is credited for having founded the college, settled for Makerere hill.

### **Douglas J. Tomblings**

Douglas J. Tomblings succeeded Saville. A Cambridge graduate, Tomblings had come to Uganda as an administrative officer and in that role, served in many places in Uganda. Besides organising the first college academic programmes, he oversaw the transformation of the simple technical school into a college of higher education in East and Central Africa. It was the only college of its kind in this part of Africa. Due to his efforts, the De Lar Warr Commission of 1936 established the college at such an advanced stage that it did not hesitate to recommend that Makerere College should rapidly advance to the status of a University College.

Tomblings was one of the longest serving Principals of Makerere College. He held the position for almost 15 years, from 1925 to 1939. During his time, it became evident that the simple technical school, which was now transforming itself into a college, needed more land if it was to expand. Buganda was going through a lot of changes, naturally many of them unpopular, and the decision to give more land on Makerere hill to the Protectorate Government turned out to be a very contentious issue.

In 1938, a group of Baganda calling themselves *Baana ba Kintu* (the children of Kintu, the first King of Buganda) were bitterly opposed to giving more land to the college, calling it a sell-out to the colonialists (*abafuzi ba matwale*). It is said that the Governor had given the Mengo administration an ultimatum; either the Buganda Government provided more land on Makerere hill for the college's expansion or the college would be relocated to Kitale in Kenya. In the end, Mengo conceded more land uphill. The *Katikkiro* (Prime Minister), Martin Luther Munyagwa Nsibirwa, responsible for signing away the land was branded a traitor and he later paid for it with his life. He was gunned down by an assassin as he left Namirembe Cathedral after attending an early morning service in 1945.

Fortunately, the controversies had no effect on the development of the school. In recognition of his tremendous contribution to the growth of Makerere as an

academic institution of excellence, the University of East Africa honoured him with a degree of Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) in 1964.

### **George C. Turner**

Douglas Tomblings was succeeded by Mr George C. Turner, an Oxford graduate. He was Principal of the college during the difficult war years, 1939 – 1945. He was appointed to begin the task of preparing the college's transformation into a college of the University of London under a special relationship. Besides getting the college ready to offer the University of London's general degrees, he focused much of his attention on the construction of new buildings for the college. It was during his time that the current Main Building, which also served as a teaching facility for some time, was completed and the Chapels of St. Augustine for the Catholic community and St. Francis for the Anglicans were erected. Turner left Makerere in 1946.

### **William D. Lamont**

Dr William D. Lamont was the fourth Principal of the college and served from 1947 to 1949. He held a Doctor of Philosophy (DPhil) degree from Oxford University, the first Principal to possess a doctorate. His main task was to kick-start the process of entering the college into a special relationship with the University of London, which was formalised in 1948. Before coming to Makerere, Lamont had been a lecturer in Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University and a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cairo in Egypt. In fact, Dr Lamont was the first true academic to head the college, which transformed into a University College of East Africa during his time. He resigned rather suddenly in 1949 shortly before the special relationship the college had entered into with the University of London was fully operationalised. Unofficially, it is suspected that he resigned over a disagreement with his superiors in the Protectorate Government over staff appointments.

However, according to Margaret MacPherson's account, he resigned because he believed the college needed a much younger person to propel it forward in the next vital years. He considered himself too old for that task. During his short tenure as Principal, he introduced very significant innovations which included staff expansion, properly constituted faculties, academic departments, faculty academic boards, as well as other boards of study. The college was not only truly on the way to becoming a university in its own right, its finances were impressive. As an example, in 1948, the college's annual capital and recurrent budget was a pretty sum of UK Pounds 1,039,097 or US\$ 4,156,388, or Ugx 20,781,940.

At that time, that was considered a very healthy and enviable financial position for the college. In today's terms, it is equivalent to slightly over Ugx 3 billion. This

was also the time Mr Williamson of Williamson Diamond Limited of Tanganyika gave the college U.K. pounds (GBP)50,000 for the construction a new building for the Department of Physics, which remains the department's only building to date. For his contribution to the college's development in such a short time, the University of East Africa recognised him with an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. It was conferred on him at the same occasion as Jomo Kenyatta, who was President of Kenya at the time.

Apollo Milton Obote, who later was to become the first Prime Minister of independent Uganda, twice President of the Republic of Uganda and twice Chancellor of Makerere University, entered Makerere in 1947 when Dr Lamont was Principal. We are told by Kenneth Ingham in his book *Obote – a Political Biography* that Obote who had distinguished himself as an excellent student at school, went to Makerere with the intention to study Law. However, Makerere was not offering Law at that time. He was disappointed, but he did not throw away his chance to study at Makerere, so he reconciled himself to whatever else was on offer. Although History was one of his favourite subjects, it was also not on offer. He therefore chose to study English, Geography and General Studies, a cocktail of subjects that included Sociology among others.

The programme of study Obote chose was for two years and led to either a certificate or a diploma in Arts at Makerere College. Students enrolled on this programme almost invariably ended up as secondary school teachers. However, being a school teacher never appealed to Milton Obote. Again, according to Kenneth Ingham, Obote was equally good in Science but avoided it partly because of the weak grade he had scored in Biology in the Makerere College entrance examination. He thought it might jeopardise his chance of being admitted to a professional course like Medicine. Because he was good in English and Literature, in 1948 his classmates chose him to play Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, a leading role in one of the Shakespeare productions the English Department used to put on every year.

Apparently, Obote's interest in Law never waned. In 1949, when he was about to complete his course at Makerere, the Lango District Council offered him a scholarship to study Law in England. Unfortunately, the Protectorate Government blocked it because it, rightly or wrongly (but perhaps more out of fear), considered Law studies as inappropriate for the African who was to be sponsored with public funds. Sensitive Obote did not take too kindly to what he perceived as an insidious attempt on the part of the Protectorate Government to frustrate Africans from perusing professions of their choice.

Coming as it did when the Kisubi humiliation was still fresh in his mind, this was another blow below the belt and, out of frustration, he decided on his own accord to leave before completing the diploma course. Some, particularly his adversaries, have argued that his sudden and unexplained departure from

Makerere was due to academic incompetence. Whereas, it is quite plausible that he left on academic grounds, in my view this was most unlikely. By all accounts, Obote was not an academically poor student. The only plausible reason he could have been sent away on grounds of poor academic performance was because he was neglecting his academic work in pursuit of other interests and one of his passionate part-time pursuits, even in those early years, was attending the debates in the Legislative Assembly. According to Ingham, he would miss lectures in order to go to the LEGICO to listen to proceedings. Could this have contributed to his poor performance? Now that he is dead, we may never know the truth. Inevitably, the misfortunes he went through created in him a strong resentment for Makerere and the British colonial administration. In later years, this had a profound impact on his political thoughts and his anti-colonial crusades.

### **Bernard de Bunsen**

Dr Lamont's unfinished business at Makerere fell on the shoulders of another Oxford graduate, Bernard de Bunsen. De Bunsen, who went to the prestigious Belliol College at Oxford, came to Makerere with a rich career in education. He had been a school master in the Liverpool Public Elementary Schools for four years; an Associate Director of Education of Wiltshire County in the UK for another four years and Director of Education in Palestine. He came to Makerere in June 1949 as Reader, (the equivalent of an Associate Professor) and became full Professor of Education in November of the same year.

When Lamont resigned, he was asked to act as Principal of the college. In 1950, after acting for about a year, he was confirmed Principal, thus becoming the fifth in line. Another Oxford graduate, F. L. Gee became the Vice Principal. De Bunsen was another long serving Principal of Makerere, which had now become Makerere University College of East Africa. The first London degrees at Makerere were awarded during his time, the teaching of which had begun in 1950, the year he was appointed Principal. During de Bunsen's time, the college experienced rapid expansion in buildings and range of academic offerings. Unfortunately, as the new developments were proceeding at a satisfactory pace, in October 1951, a greater part of the new Medical School, which had just been completed and opened, was wrecked by an explosion of unknown origin which caused substantive damage to the new buildings.

It was also during de Bunsen's time that the college had the first taste of a students' strike, which saw the expulsion of some key student leaders – Abubakr Kakyama Mayanja, Joash Mayanja Nkangi and some others. The strike was sparked off by what the students called a poor diet of *matooke, posho*, beans and the sauce which the college was feeding them on. In their memorandum to the Principal, dated August 11, 1952, the students had claimed that the food was not only poor but was also badly prepared. Does this sound familiar? The other

grievance was the College Administration's insensitivity to the undergraduate students' problems, such as the theft of their bicycles.

The students gave the Principal an ultimatum of a week within which they expected him to meet with them and provide some answers to their grievances. The Principal did not respond, insisting that the students had a democratically elected Students' Council and that was the only legitimate organ to speak on behalf of the students. He further pointed out that the Guild Council had a mess committee which should be able to handle matters of diet with the College Administration. Therefore, as Principal, he was not prepared to bypass or sideline the Students' Guild Council. The agitating students were also expected to do the same.

On August 17, 1952, the students met at night and suspended the Students' Guild Council and all its affiliated committees. They also declared a strike, which commenced the following day, August 18, 1952. In a written statement, which the agitating students sent to the Principal, a copy of which was given to the *Uganda Herald* newspaper, they tried to explain why they were resorting to strike action. In part, the statement read, "All undergraduates found it impossible to feed on the food the college provided them. They are now going without food and this has inevitably incapacitated them from attending their lectures and other college activities". The statement was signed by three students; Abubakar K. Mayanja, Joash S. N. Mayanja and I. E. Omolo.

After declaring the strike, which its leaders called a hunger strike, the Principal, Mr de Bunsen conceded his original stance and decided to meet the striking students. He persuaded them to call off the strike, but his efforts came late and to no avail. The students refused to end the strike. The following day, the Principal decided to close the college a week before the end of term. He said the students were sent home for refusing to attend lectures; and added that, by picketing and preventing those who wished to eat the meals provided by the college and go for lectures, the striking students violated the principles of free society.

Students had to receive by post, letters informing them individually whether or not they would be re-admitted to the college the following term. Abubakar Kakyama Mayanja who was accused of masterminding the strike was among the students who were not re-admitted. Joash S. Nkangi must have counted himself lucky. Although he had also signed the memo the students sent to the Principal, he was re-admitted. Abu Mayanja, the troublemaker, was given a Uganda Government scholarship to study History at King's College, Cambridge in the UK, the Governor's alma mater, after which he studied Law at the Grey's Inn in London, graduating as a Barrister.

It was alleged that Governor Cohen gave Mayanja the scholarship to study at the prestigious Cambridge University, because in the Governor's opinion, if he were going to have an African opponent, and Abu Mayanja was likely to be such an opponent, he had to be well educated. On the face of it, it was as if the

Governor was rewarding Mayanja for leading the strike at Makerere and for his other misdeeds, but I strongly believe that the Governor's unofficial reason was a wise one. Apparently, even at Cambridge, Mayanja continued to be an outspoken student and a political animal. I was surprised in 1977 when, after knowing that I came from Uganda, my PhD external examiner, Professor Evelyn Ebsworth of Edinburgh University, who was also a student at King's College at the time Mayanja was there, asked me if I knew a man by name Mayanja whom she described as a Ugandan student who was politically active.

Indeed, in the later years, Abu Mayanja became one of the leading and most controversial personalities of Ugandan politics, and remained so for over half a century. But above all, Abu Mayanja was a brilliant student and denying him the opportunity to complete his university education would have been a flimsy excuse and a terrible waste of talent. I guess his dismissal from Makerere was a blessing in disguise.

For staging a strike at Makerere, which was considered to be the finest institution of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa, Abu Mayanja and his fellow student leaders were heavily criticised. A Kenyan politician and trade unionist, Tom Mbotela, wrote a long letter to the editor of the *Uganda Herald*, which was published in the issue of August 30, 1952. He had only harsh words for the striking students. He accused them of despising African food, in favour of a European diet. He also reminded them that they were the future leaders of Africa and, by staging a strike on such a simple issue, they were setting a bad precedent for Africans aspiring to be leaders. He also criticised the Principal for a rushed decision to send down some students and for the premature closure of the college.

The *Herald* in its editorial of August 19, 1952 had no kind words for the striking students either. The paper, in its editorial, condemned the students' strike action and reminded them that the college had been developed at the British taxpayer's expense. The African students were getting the education the college was providing, next to nothing. It recommended that all ring leaders should be sent down for ever as a deterrent to others who may be contemplating a similar action in future.

That was the first strike at Makerere and the first time the college had closed prematurely. This strike was also to act as a catalyst for the future strike actions. One also needs to remember that the strike at Makerere coincided with the beginning of the *Mau Mau* rebellion in Kenya, and indeed the British colonial administrators not only in Kenya, but even in Uganda, were getting jittery. The *Mau Mau* supporters had started killing British farmers in the Kenya highlands together with some African chiefs who were perceived as collaborators of the British colonialists in Kenya. They feared Uganda would follow suit. The strike was also seen as a direct challenge to the British authority at Makerere and

someone had to pay for challenging that authority. The ring leader had to go. I am convinced that if such a peaceful strike happened today, it would not have led to the automatic dismissal of strike leaders unless it had become so violent and involved extensive damage to property and loss of life. Although Abu Mayanja was sent down as a punishment for leading a rebellion, the students' menu at Makerere was never the same again. The typically monotonous Ugandan diet was replaced with European meals until the turbulent times of Idi Amin. Indeed, when I joined Makerere as an undergraduate in 1970, *matooke*, sweet potatoes, *ugali* or *posho* and beans were not on the menu. The typical students' diet then consisted of Irish potatoes, steak, chicken, bread, eggs and occasionally rice, among others.

As we have seen earlier, Makerere severed its link with the University of London in 1963 and became a constituent college of the University of East Africa. As one of the common services shared between the three states that made up the first East African Community, the headquarters of the University of East Africa was based in Kampala. Professor Bernard de Bunsen became the first Vice Chancellor of the new federal university but served for one year and handed over to Professor James Cook from the University of Exeter. Besides being a seasoned administrator, Bernard de Bunsen was a good fundraiser too. Lincoln House is a good example of this attribute of his. Lincoln House was built in 1957 at a cost of US\$ 70,000 solicited from the Ford Foundation, a USA philanthropic organisation. Back then, it was rare for an American charity to fund projects in the British colonies. He was also concerned with the recruitment of Ugandans and other Africans to the college's academic staff.

Brilliant African academics such as David Wasawo, a native of Kenya, were appointed to the college staff during de Bunsen's time. Emelio Mwai Kibaki who had achieved an excellent academic record as a student was quickly spotted as a potential member of staff and sent to the London School of Economics on a scholarship solicited for him by the college, to read for an honours degree in Economics in preparation for his appointment as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Economics. Mwai Kibaki was one of the very few students at Makerere to have passed the London general BA degree in First Class division. Besides being a highly brilliant student, Kibaki had a bit of reputation as chairman of Kenya Students' Association, for leading students' agitation in the college. One would have thought that despite his brilliance, Sir Bernard de Bunsen would not have been keen to have him on the staff of the college. On the contrary, he encouraged him to join the college's teaching staff. Kibaki left Makerere in 1961 to engage in politics in Kenya, and is now President of the Republic of Kenya. For his services to education, Bernard de Bunsen was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1962.

## **Yusuf Kironde Lule**

Makerere had waited for an African Principal for 42 years. The long waiting ended in 1964 when Yusuf Kironde Lule was appointed as Principal of Makerere College. Lule came to Makerere with a varied background in education and administration. He studied Science at Fort Hare University in South Africa on a Uganda Government scholarship he won in 1936, graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1939. The same year, he returned to his *alma mater*, King's College, Budo as a science master. He remained at Budo until 1948.

That year, Lule struck luck again. He was awarded another Uganda Government scholarship and went to Bristol University in the UK to study for a Diploma in Education. Some three years later in 1951, he was on the move again, this time to the University of Edinburgh in Scotland for a Masters degree in Education. On his return to Uganda, better things were awaiting him. In 1955, the year Sir Edward Muteesa returned from exile in England, Yusuf Lule was appointed Minister for Rural Development in the Uganda Protectorate Government, as part of an effort to put Africans in senior positions in the Protectorate Government. Before then, the majority of Africans in the Colonial Administration were confined to menial and low-level clerical jobs.

A few years later, Lule was made Minister of Education and Social Development in the Protectorate Government, a position he held up to the time of Uganda's independence in 1962. In that same year, he was appointed Joint Deputy Chairman of the Public Service Commission. After the inauguration of the University of East Africa, Lule was invited in 1964 to take up the position of Principal of Makerere University College, thus entering the annals of Makerere as its first African and Ugandan Principal. He served as Principal for six years.

In 1970, Lule left Makerere and went to London from where he joined the Association of African Universities as its first full-time Secretary General. Those who were close to Lule have narrated the difficult working relationship he had with the then Minister of Education, Dr Luyimbaazi Zaake. It is probable that this was because the two men belonged to different political parties. However, during his time, Makerere continued to grow. Lule had to perform because he had to prove that Africans were competent administrators too. The extension to the main library was constructed during his time. He is also credited for designing and constructing the all-red-brick Vice Chancellor's Lodge. For his excellent public service record, he was conferred with the Commander of the British Empire (CBE) award by the Queen of Great Britain.

