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Growth as an Academic Leader and Researcher

My first entry into research and academic life after completion of the PhD degree was not in Kenya, but in Ibadan, Nigeria, West Africa. I got a job at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Ibadan. I saw an advert in an international journal seeking postgraduate students from reputable universities. I applied for the post whose duration was going to be two years. Those days, in 1978, letters were sent by air unlike nowadays when e-mail or tele-conferencing are used to transmit such important information.

After about a month, I received positive feedback that I was to join IITA in Ibadan, Nigeria, as a postdoctoral fellow. A Mr Reeves was in charge of post-docs and he was prompt in replying to my request. I accepted the offer and was ready to move to Nigeria and continue to add value to my PhD training. My position as a post-doctoral fellow was in Crop Protection, specifically in Weed Research in the humid and sub-humid tropics.

I received discouragement from colleagues but my brother encouraged me to proceed. I kept my other brothers in Kenya informed of my next plan after the USA. My professor also wanted me to stay in the USA and work with local companies or join assistant lectureship. After some soul-searching, I settled on IITA.

I invited my friends and a few of my lecturers for a low-key farewell party. The dean of students, Dr Richard Merritt, and his wife, Peggy, were so appreciative of me and gave me some nice reading materials as souvenirs. I still have them. My professor, Ilnicki, and his wife, Helen, gave me a small plaque which I still have. Others who joined us were Drs Cecil Still and Roger Locandro with their wives, Delores and Marylyn, respectively.

I got proper briefing and advice on Nigerian lifestyles. I was told about rampant corruption, ethnic wars and all sorts of discouraging information. But I had resolved to move on. All I knew about Ibadan was that it was one of the oldest

cities in Western Nigeria and was inhabited by the Yoruba people. I also knew of the University of Ibadan, the oldest colonial institution of Nigeria. I further knew that the Ibos were the most industrious people who had staged a civil war because they wanted their own country, Biafra, to secede from the Federal Government of Nigeria. To the north were the powerful Hausas who were pastoralists, great traders and rulers. I was vaguely aware of Nigerian culture having read Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

Details of my travel itinerary arrived and baggage allowance was two bags of 30 kilogrammes each. I had not accumulated much except a few books and personal effects. I actually had less weight than allowed.

I relocated from New Brunswick, the university campus, and stayed with my brother and his wife Eleese in New York City for a while before I set out for Nigeria. I was booked to depart from JFK airport to Murtala Mohammed Airport in Lagos. This was the same route I had used to travel to the States much earlier. My brother and his wife dropped me at the airport for my journey to Lagos. I made sure that all documentation was complete including my visa.

The salary was modest and the allowances were generous for a single man. A car was provided, two-bedroom apartment, medical allowances and insurance, free water and electricity. We were paid in US dollars and then would change into naira whose rate then was higher than the dollar. During my time in Nigeria, the naira was more powerful in exchange rate than the US dollar. I had my account in the First National Bank in New York where my salary was deposited. It was a good arrangement since this allowed me to save a substantial amount of money for the two-year period I was in Nigeria.

When I arrived in Ibadan, I found a few post-docs who were already working here. They used to come at different times for various programmes. As soon as I arrived in IITA, Ibadan, I joined others who were on orientation programme and I was introduced to my supervisor, Dr Okezie Akobundu, whom I had met briefly during our Weed Science conferences in the States. He had heard of me and was ready to receive me as his post-doc. This was a good beginning.

I was his number two in the ranks in the Weed Science Section but he was also supervising two PhD students, Ray Unamma and Steve Utullu. We became very close as I settled down. He was very helpful in my settling down. Essentially, we were a team of three scientists with Dr Okezie Akobundu as our leader. We also had technicians, a section driver and field workers. We worked as a team, became very close and the group assisted me to learn the lifestyles of the Nigerian people.

It did not take me long to get down to work. I became a team player and guided the two PhD students during their research, assisting Dr Akobundu. They both worked on weed control in yams and cassava, two major tuber crops in Nigeria. My work was to assist Dr Akobundu in discharging the section's mandate.

He heavily relied on me and we developed an excellent working relationship. Our section was under Farming Systems which comprised soil science, entomology, legumes and irrigation. The overall mandate of IITA was to conduct research in the tropics and sub-humid tropics of Africa. Similar centres were scattered all over the world and were mandated with specific objectives in order to increase food production. Sister centres were unique in their setups but overall mandates differed. Directors-general were the bosses of the centres. Little did I know that later, I would become a director-general of an institute, the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in Kenya.

Our role was to conduct weed research in selected crops of the tropics in a number of states of Nigeria. The major crops were cassava, yam, rice, cowpeas, maize and beans. The three of us worked as a team to find out the best weed control methods for the crops. Ray and Steve were specific on their research pursuits and I assisted them having just graduated in the same discipline.

The trials were spread across Nigeria and I recall having trials in Ikenne in Ogun State (the home of the late Obafemi Awolowo), Mbirri, Umenede, Ahmadu Bello University in Kaduna, Nsukka and Ilorin. I would travel to these sites to set up field trials, collect data and analyse it. I recall meeting all types of researchers during this time and we would discuss the best ways to combat aggressive weed species. The most common weeds included *Eupatorium odoratum*, *nutgrass*, *Imperata cylindrica*, *pennisetum purpureum*, *talinum triangulare*, and *couch grass*, just to name but a few. The weeds affected all crops in arable and waste lands. We had to use many types of control management measures including herbicides for selected crops.

Tropical rains in south-western Nigeria were a major concern during the trials. I carried out extensive work on minimum tillage trials using the already registered herbicides like glyphosate and paraquat, among others. Dr Akobundu and I published papers from the trials and attended a number of scientific conferences in Nigeria and outside the country.

I forged linkages with many university professors from the University of Ibadan, University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University, University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello University and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Comparative trials were important for decision-making and future trials. I recall scientists like Prof. Lagoke from Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) who loved to work on weed control in onions. I learnt a lot from his work although onions are not a major crop in southern Nigeria, the region being too wet and humid. Onions do not do well under such conditions.

I was also involved in organizing scientific conferences in weed research. I remember presenting papers during the Nigerian Weed Science conferences in Lagos and Ibadan. I found these meetings refreshing and reminded me of the ones we used to have in North Eastern Weed Science Society, USA. I did not have any problems presenting and defending the papers. I enjoyed the interactions because they equipped me with wide experience in the scientific world.

As I was conducting countrywide research in Nigeria, I encountered very interesting and different cultures in the various states that I visited. Each trip that I made gave me a different perspective on the rich cultural diversity that is unique to Nigeria. Whenever I was in Ondo State, for example, I had to know if there had been a dead personality who demanded to be buried accompanied by other bodies. In Ondo State, the story goes, when an important person died, he had to be buried along with others who were usually caught unawares, killed and used as such. Normally, foreigners fell victim. I was told to watch for bald-shaven persons, an indication of a dead personality.

To this end, I had a driver and an excellent travel guard, Samuel Olu, who was always with me as a guard and an advisor. I spent a lot of time with him and learnt a lot from him. He later passed on from cirrhosis because of excessive illicit alcohol consumption.

Another incident was when we visited an Igbo home and we were welcomed in the traditional way of Igbo culture. As we arrived at some elder's homestead he would welcome us in the compound, and request us to sit down and bitter berries would be brought to us to eat. Kola nuts were also provided for us to break. I did exactly that, having read Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*. I was at ease with this procedure and enjoyed chewing the kola nuts although they were a bit bitter and quite sharp on the tongue. It was only after this ceremony that one was allowed to talk or declare one's mission.

This tradition was still revered and commanded respect, discipline and hierarchy. This practice cut across several Nigerian states and it was an excellent culture of perpetuating a sense of community among the people. This is part of the discipline that many nations lack.

The most surprising event was when I was taken to a fortune teller in a small town of Shangamwe, a few kilometres from Ibadan on the Ibadan-Benin highway. I was taken by a Nigerian friend and this reminded me of my maternal uncle, Birari, who would perform similar functions.

My friend and I went to this fortune teller, who was a man. He lived in a low lying area, almost similar to a cave. We had to bend to get into his house. We were requested by his handler to carry some 50 kobo (less than one US dollar). We were ushered into his small waiting room, told to hold a live cockerel, and he slaughtered the chicken as we held it. He lifted the chicken and let the blood drain on to a small goatskin which was placed in the centre of the room.

He then let the chicken down, brought a box which was filled with all types of paraphernalia. He poured the contents onto the floor next to the blood to see which item fell closer or farther from the chicken blood. The man told us that we would be great people in our careers. I was sure he must have been told by his handlers that I was a foreigner, a suspicion he confirmed. He said so many things as he concentrated on looking at his paraphernalia. Each item meant different

things to him. We did not talk, but his aide explained to us the meaning and interpretation of the rooster, blood and the items in the box.

We both gave five more naira and crawled out of the shrine. By the way, all this time we were here, we had to kneel on the floor and face the fortune teller. Again, I had witnessed my uncle perform the same tricks when I was a young boy in Kisii in the early 1960s.

Another visit to the Alaafin of Oyo was equally exciting. During my stay at IITA, the spiritual Chief of Oyo State resided in Oyo City, a few kilometres north of Ibadan. He was the chief and spiritual leader of the people. I decided to visit him. He was so famous in the area and entertained many dignitaries that came by to visit him in his parlour.

I drove into his expansive compound and declared my intentions after identifying myself. I was specific about the intentions of my visit and explained that I had heard of him and his generosity to his subjects and wanted to just meet him. It was a Saturday afternoon and his workers were not very busy. They allowed me in. He had an estate to himself. There were several houses built around a large field of about two hectares with the rooms facing each other and having a central meeting parlour.

The centre was open and was used for activities like plays, prayers, meetings among others. His main house was strategically positioned and he was able to monitor all activities within the expansive area. He could also monitor visitors as they came in. He had a number of workers and handlers, wives and many children. I got a chance to go to his parlour, told him who I was, a researcher scientist from Kenya and working in Nigeria. He spoke perfect English; hence communication was not a problem. I actually broke a kola nut with him.

He explained to me the significance of the ceremony as we sipped a glass of palm wine. We exchanged pleasantries and he took me on a guided tour of the compound. There were several well-thatched round huts with one central meeting place. The lawn was well maintained and a clean compound with nice flowers and dome palms surrounding the periphery fence. The chief looked young in his expensive Yoruba attire of 'Shola and Bola'.

I was later told that he had six wives and several concubines. There were several young boys and girls walking about the compound. I returned to IITA and told my colleagues about my visit to the Alaafin of Oyo. Nigerian chiefs command power, respect and authority. This is noticeable even with the present-day chiefs. Many of my friends from Nigeria are chiefs' sons and they command respect and must be addressed so: Chief, Dr, and Prof, Sir, so and so. I find this form of salutation appropriate and sound within the African setup. We all need some titles and forms of salutation.

Post-doctoral fellows had a lot of activities in common. We used to go out together, conduct seminars in groups, and play games together. Dr Lewis Jackai was my closest colleague with whom I shared a lot in common. We used to travel

together and go shopping in downtown Ibadan. He was a meticulous scientist who carried out his research in entomology with ardour.

There were certain behaviours which mesmerized me, especially driving on highways. Despite the many positive attributes that Nigeria is known for, such as being the most populous country in Africa, driving in any of the big cities is a nightmare. While driving in Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, Benin, Onitsha, Sokoto and even small towns, drivers do not give way. A motorist would rather spend a night at a junction rather than give way to a fellow motorist!

Due to inconsiderate motorists, I once slept in Ore City, one of the most densely forested parts of Nigeria. A bridge had given way due to heavy tropical rains. This is a common occurrence in many parts of the world, including Kenya. Luckily, a small section of the bridge could be used to cross the huge river but one vehicle at a time. This small section of the bridge would allow only one vehicle to cross and proceed on. None of those who were in front of us were willing to take turns to go through. There was no such a thing as passing through in turns.

As the morning approached, I noticed one very saddening event which had occurred during the Biafran war. Virtually every house had bullet holes occasioned by the war. The City of Ore was the epicentre during the war, I was told. The Federal Military and the rebels converged there and occasioned the fiercest battle in Nigerian history! Lives were lost, properties damaged and all systems collapsed. That was the end of the secession. I marvelled at the gaping holes on the roof-tops and walls and imagined the number of civilians that lost their lives during the battle!

My driver, a Yoruba man was very eloquent in explaining to me the whole episode despite the fact that I had already read it in the papers. As we drove away from Ore City, I saw some young men and women going about their business in the dilapidated shops. I left Ore with the sad memories of a battle-field.

The reckless driving culture on Kenyan roads is a worrisome affair. The matatu menace is real. The speed limit is not observed both in Kenya and Nigeria. A strange observation in Nigeria, for instance, was the manner in which public transport moved. On a highway, a brave driver would complain that his foot was tired of pressing the gas pedal. He would get out, pick a boulder or some heavy object and place it on the pedal to keep the vehicle moving as he only steered the wheel. The pedal was pushed flat and on motion for several kilometres before the driver would remove the weight from the accelerator; so the story goes.

This may be an exaggeration perhaps, but it demonstrates the serious dangers associated with public transportation systems in Nigeria. I cannot remember how many accidents we witnessed on Nigerian motorways. The traffic police were not bothered as they were busy being bribed. Public transport vehicles were christened *damfo*, which meant '*going to heaven*' or one-way journey. Some long-distance buses were, however, driven by responsible people who behaved better than town touts.

I once travelled to the East and crossed the River Niger at Onitsha City, the home of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, a renowned politician. I saw very modern buses with all amenities necessary for distant travellers. This was a total contrast to what I witnessed in the south-west of Nigeria.

Work Environment at IITA

During my engagement as a doctoral fellow in Ibadan, there were five international agricultural research centres (CGIAR) then. IITA was one of them. Its mandate was to conduct research for the humid and sub-humid tropics. There were several scientists here who were in-charge of various research protocols.

IITA had various working categories, scientists, technical staff, postdocs, administrators and support staff. A scientist's retention in the institute depended on the work output and satisfactory performance before the contract was renewed. The post-docs were on the normal two-year contracts. If one wanted, one could request to be absorbed once the two-year duration lapsed. The absorption depended on many considerations.

I do recall that we were about eight post-docs in different research programmes. We used to have our own meetings to compare the working conditions in the institute. Several of us wanted to be absorbed here. A few of us were not keen on settling here. I was the only Kenyan post-doc.

The research centres were run by a Board of Trustees who were appointed from all over the world. They used to meet once a year or when need arose. Post-docs were known to the trustees and they used to meet us separately at times. In our group, there was a number of Europeans, Asians, Australians and Americans. We worked as a team.

Rifts

Strictly speaking, a post-doctoral fellow is one who has been awarded a PhD degree from a recognized university. The purpose of working as a post-doc is to further excel in one's area of expertise before one is fully engaged in one's career. Depending on who one knew, one could be categorized as post-docs yet have only a Master's degree.

This revelation bothered many of us because the beneficiaries were mainly from the developed nations. No African or Asian post-doc had a Master's degree. We all had PhD degrees. We once cornered the director general, Dr William Gamble, about this discrimination and he was unable to respond. We wanted to know the criteria used to allow persons of lower grade and brand them post-doc fellows.

Mr Reeves was in charge of recruiting the post-docs. The notion that some fellows amongst us did not deserve the title bothered us. In fact, these young scientists were so well protected that we did not know what kind of research they were engaged in. They even had better packages than the African post-docs. We felt short-changed and therefore dissatisfied.

At one point, we asked African scientists who were members of the Board of Trustees and they were also not able to answer. This caused further discontent. The young fellows were entitled to more rights and privileges than what the African post-doctorates had. A few post-docs who had the PhD degree and were from other developed countries were also concerned about this disparity and sided with us. They equally questioned the rationale of equality without comparable academic credentials.

Notwithstanding this anomaly, I continued working for the organization with conviction. My colleagues kept on complaining about the discrepancy but got no satisfactory explanation.

I noticed one clear operating machination. There was selective conversion of some 'loyal' post-docs to scientists' posts. Those who asked least and never questioned the status quo were awarded full contracts on the expiration of their period. This silenced a number of us. The problem arose when the budget was slashed and not many would be absorbed. One thing I knew for sure was that they needed weed scientists and I would be retained. My supervisor had put a strong case for my retention at the expiration of my two-year term. My stand against injustice, however, remained solid and unwavering.

We requested for a meeting with the trustees one afternoon after their normal morning board deliberations. The meetings of IITA trustees were made public through a newsletter from the communication office. I knew a few of the trustees: Prof. Reuben Olembo, my Kenyan mentor, Prof. Bunting and an Asian whose name I cannot remember. I talked to each one of them separately and later on requested if all the post-docs could meet them for a short consultation. The chairman agreed and asked the director general to attend the meeting. He was actually worried and started to ask me questions and the agenda of the meeting. He was also an employee of the Board of Trustees. The post-docs under my general guidance drafted a memorandum of complaints to hand over to the trustees.

I planned the meeting in such a way that a colleague was to read the memorandum and hand it over to the chairman. I did not consider it appropriate to lead the team and then read the statement. I was only instrumental in arranging the afternoon meeting. They agreed and one of us presented the grievances. It was a jovial meeting but hard-hitting facts were presented. The director general was very understanding and took the criticism positively, and even made changes later. Those of us who wanted to stay were then given a chance; they benefited from the short consultative meeting we had with the trustees. Whatever changes came thereafter were for the good of future post-docs.

Prof. Reuben Olembo and Prof. Bunting were sympathetic about the events at the institute and later on made recommendations which enabled it to acquire more donor funding. Staff at IITA knew that I was behind the negotiations and appreciated it. I, however, did not stay to benefit from the negotiations.

A few weeks later the DG, Dr William Gamble and his wife came to my residence and had a cup of tea with me. We had a pleasant relationship thereafter before they left for another assignment in Europe. The experience had made me resolve never to condone mediocrity because it never builds individuals or nations; instead it destroys nationhood. It pays to point out the wrong happenings.

Culture, Music and Lifestyles

Nigeria's culture is unchallenged, uncorrupted and intact. The traditional attire still persists. The respect with which elders are saluted is impressive. The chiefs, queens, kings, princes, princesses, the royalty and village elders are all held in the highest esteem. Other than some western culture which has taken root through the movie and music industry, Nigerian rural populations still maintain their indigenous and traditional habits. Their belief in *juju*, and juju music is still pronounced. The local artistes perform in both villages and cities but, of course, the youths now tend to go western.

During my stay there, musicians like Sunny Ade and Fela Akintokun used to perform in hotels like Premier in Ibadan. The playing of drums to signify something new was popular, particularly during the harmattan when the weather would be cold and the atmosphere dusty. Late afternoon drum sounds and impromptu preaching was rampant, particularly in the south-western parts of Nigeria. Freedom of worship and association was allowed and I had a chance to visit most churches and prayer meetings during the weekend.

IITA had only one mosque where I occasionally joined our Muslim brothers for Friday prayers. A Seventh Day Adventist Church was near Oyo town, a short distance away. Several branches were established later. Many traditional gatherings converged for worship. When I last visited Nigeria in 2004 and

2006, I was amazed at the number and names of churches that I witnessed in the country. They were all being advertised on large billboards. I took the liberty of counting and recording the various denominations between Lagos and Ibadan. The number reached close to 100.

Religious sects in Nigeria are a big, booming business. This trend seems to have hit countries like Kenya. I saw the biggest and well-raised tents which could easily accommodate 10,000 people. Every village had a church or a section of a religious outfit. The City of Nairobi in Kenya is quickly catching up on these money-making ventures in the name of religion!

The Pride of Nigerians

Despite the negative publicity that Nigerians receive, they are very patriotic individuals who love and cherish their country. Individuals can differ but the philosophy of living in the most populous country in Africa overrides the differences.

I have had a chance to work closely with Nigerians in many international meetings. They come out as very patriotic people. It is through this patriotism that I noticed each of their states has an additional nickname. All states in Nigeria have second names, just like the USA. I took the liberty of recording a few as follows:

- Abuja City – Centre of Unity
- Oyo State – Pace Setter
- Rivers State – Treasure Base
- Ondo State – Sunshine State
- Osun State – State of the Living Spring
- Kwara State – State of Harmony
- Anambra State – Home for All/ Light of the Nation
- Kano State – Centre of Commerce
- Borno State – Home of Peace
- Sokoto State – Seat of the Caliphate
- Yobe – The Young Shall Grow

The naming of states shows a sense of pride and ownership by the inhabitants. Although the idea was borrowed from the United States, the philosophy is commendable and patriotic. Nigerians are united when it comes to protecting their country and national interests. I remember this characteristic during international environmental meetings organized by UNEP. They will push for their rights without relinquishing! They say it like it is and do not care the consequences thereafter!

I actually admire their boldness and love for their country, culture and shrewdness notwithstanding other vices. Many African countries do not display as much patriotism as Nigerians do; except perhaps during games and sports.

IITA, an Interactive Meeting Centre, Ibadan, Nigeria

The mandate of IITA was to carry out research, train scientists and conduct seminars relevant to the humid and sub-humid tropics. Many scientists from various countries used to meet here for either conferences, training, short-term courses or annual research reviews. I had a chance to meet several Kenyan scientists, who frequented the centre. I remember meeting Prof. Reuben Olembo (now deceased) who became very close to me and regarded me as his student.

Prof. Olembo was the first person to prompt me to return home, Kenya. He was emphatic on the request and since he was one of the trustees, I welcomed the idea. I knew he would not support my stay at IITA.

Other scientists whom I met at various conferences included Prof. Chris Karue, who was the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture in the University of Nairobi, Prof. Shellemiah Keya and Prof. Daniel Mukunya who were also members of staff in the faculty. All these good friends encouraged me to return home and take a lecturing

position at the University of Nairobi. In fact I remember Prof. Christopher Karue taking my CV to the then Chairman of Crop Science, Prof. David N. Ngugi.

Prof. Ngugi got in touch with me through a letter asking me when I would be in Kenya next. He also informed another scientist in the department, Prof. Daniel M. Mukunya to follow up my case. My area of expertise, Weed Science falls under Crop Protection which was headed then by Prof. Mukunya. Meanwhile, Prof. Olembo kept on checking on me whenever he came to Ibadan. He was working with UNEP in Nairobi.

I travelled home to Kenya for a short break during Christmas holidays in 1979. I made a point of calling on all those people whom I had met in Ibadan. I went to Prof. Ngugi's office and had an interesting talk on the university setup and courses taught in the Faculty of Agriculture. I later saw Prof. Mukunya who spent a lot of time telling me about the University of Nairobi, the only one in Kenya at the time since 1971. He spoke so proudly of it that he wanted me to join his section of Crop Protection.

He was very frank and he told me that despite all the praises, staff salaries and remuneration packages were pathetic. He never minced his words. He, however, defended the salaries by comparing them with those of the Civil Service staff which were below what university lecturers earned. A good number of lecturers were expatriates who served on contract. They had very generous packages but had to leave for their countries at some point in the future. Getting a local lecturer was more cost-effective financially than keeping several foreign nationals. This would mean having a stable faculty manned by local permanent staff.

I returned to Ibadan and continued with my work. Deep down in my mind I was considering joining the University of Nairobi despite the low wages. In any case, I was not ready to haggle with IITA administrative staff for permanent employment or extension of contract. I collected my field data from research stations, analysed it and made relevant conclusions regarding the investigations. I wrote a few publishable academic papers on our work.

On a Friday afternoon in January 1980, I received a letter from the Chair of the Department of Crop Science, Prof. David N. Ngugi, informing me that I had been offered a position as a lecturer and that a Mr Solomon Karanja would get in touch with me.

To be a lecturer in the University of Nairobi, one had to have a PhD and possibly some publications. I had both. Within a few days I received the registrar's letter of offer and my starting salary scale, I recall, was K£2,774 per annum plus other allowances. The package was not attractive, and so I decided to sleep on the idea for a while.

I shared the contents of the letter with my close friends, Drs Amare Getahun and Lewis Jackai. They both advised me to make a positive decision and start a career. I also wrote to my brothers who were working with the Ministry of Agriculture.

They advised me to take up the offer and join them in Kenya. Meanwhile, my older brother in the USA, Joel Onami, had also advised me to proceed home and get a career job. But the decision would entirely be mine and it was my right and privilege to make it. I had to seriously consider this option since it involved a big difference in terms of financial rewards.

I had also been approached by Monsanto Company of the USA to work for them in Kenya and South Africa. They called me for an interview in Brussels, Belgium, and I performed well. I was required to man their Nairobi and Johannesburg offices on 50/50 time allocation. I refused the offer because of two reasons: Shuttling to the south and living in Kenya would not serve best of my interests. I could not settle down and make a career and start a family under such circumstances.

Secondly, South Africa was going through the most trying period of apartheid and racial discrimination. I did not want to encounter racial prejudices again which would certainly remind me of the encounters in USA. Little did I know that I would encounter the ugly face of apartheid on my way to the Comoros Islands later. Kenya got her independence in 1963 and so I was convinced that I would settle better here than in South Africa, despite the very good salary package Monsanto offered me. Again, the very final decision was going to be entirely mine.

Relocation into Academic Progression

I replied to the registrar's letter on 30 January 1980. I had spent enough time making a decision, which was in the affirmative. I had been told of the kind of work I would do at the University of Nairobi, which would include lectures, research and service to the community in form of extension work. I was told that all the units which were taught by a one Dutch expatriate, Mr Van Eijeten, would be handed over to me. These were 'Weed Science Courses' and 'Introduction to Crop Production'. I was also told that there were Master's research programmes which had just started and I could start supervising the MSc students.

I was aware of the tasks and started to internalize my roles and demands. I was, however, sure of the basic teaching and research needs ahead of me. I had done extensive fieldwork and collected data to use for advancing my mandate; I was, therefore, qualified to teach as I had relevant courses during my MSc and PhD in research and teaching methods. My MSc course was on Vocational Technical Education from the Graduate School of Education in Rutgers University in the USA. I had taken units in Tests, Measurements and Evaluation of students which became very useful in my teaching and grading techniques.

I wrote a letter of resignation through my section head and personally handed it over to Dr Bede Okigbo, who was the deputy director for Administration at IITA in Ibadan. He looked at me with surprise and placed it on the table. He said this: "So Ratemo, you plan to go back to your home country, Kenya? What has not pleased

you here in Nigeria?” I responded to him politely that I loved Nigeria and my work. However, I had not planned on staying in Nigeria permanently. Instead, I had hoped to secure a permanent job in Kenya after my post-doc. I, however, assured him I would be back in Nigeria someday.

Prof. Okigbo was a competent administrator and very friendly to the IITA staff. He was a well-respected scientist and scholar from Umuahia City in Abia State, Eastern Nigeria. He released me and promised to act on the same. I now had the liberty of telling all my friends that I had resigned and was headed for Kenya within two months from January 1980. This was going to be the beginning of my long-term career in the academic world.

My supervisor, Dr O. Akobundu, was taken aback when I informed him of my last day at work despite having forwarded the letter. We were always very close as we planned the experiments and wrote the results together. He had hoped to retain me at the institute after my two-year contract and was working on that. I had learnt a lot from him. His wife, Regina, was equally surprised that I had decided to leave IITA. We had become close and they always advised me where to stay when I was in the East as both of them came from Umuahia. Dr Akobundu was busy writing his book on ‘Weed Control in the Humid and Sub-humid Tropics’. Since I was his assistant in the weed science section, he delegated some responsibilities to me, and devoted most of his time to writing the book. I guided the research agenda and was able to defend any issues pertaining to weed research.

I learnt from him the techniques he used in writing his book and I later wrote a similar one on the *Weeds of East Africa* with a translation in Kiswahili. My stay in Nigeria had, therefore, been academically and financially rewarding. I kept a good network of scientists whom I met at IITA.

I planned my schedule. I had to sell a few personal effects that I had accumulated and gave some out to my workers who were very kind to me. We had worked as a team and colleagues and had had some memorable times together. I recall an incident with a snake in the bush as we set out experiments. A python crawled into the car driver’s seat and coiled itself on it. It was a hot afternoon and the only shady place was inside the car. The driver had left the door of the car open to allow for air circulation. They readily killed it and roasted it for a meal. Snakes are consumed in Nigeria and my guys had an easy task of getting a ready meal inside the car.

Another incident occurred when I was spraying a herbicide at Ikenne field station. I encountered another medium-sized snake which charged at me. As I ran away from it, my technician, Morana, gave it a chase, killed it, made a fire and roasted it for a meal.

On our final meal together these were some of the memories we reminisced about. The workers loved working with me because I used to take them to the field for research, hence they made extra allowances. I had also campaigned for them to get extra pay whenever we got a new project for efficacy herbicide trials.

My Preparations for Departure

I was supposed to report at the University of Nairobi on 30 March 1980 and start lectures the following week. I banked my money in a New York Bank and changed some to naira for use during my last few days in Ibadan. I cleared my bills and closed the Nigerian bank account. I made sure that all my documentation was in order, including my International Driving Licence which would help me drive around Nairobi once I arrived there.

I knew that the world of academia was different from a research institute and so I prepared all my academic credentials and the CV for presentation to then then Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Joseph Maina Mungai. One assignment I accomplished efficiently was the preparation of my lecture notes. I had been given the course title and topics which were mainly in Weed Science. I utilized my free evenings and weekends so well that when I left Ibadan, I had fully prepared course outlines and the accompanying lecture materials in order under every title.

I consider myself an average but persistent writer. I utilized all the available latest international journals to prepare my lecture notes. IITA, in Ibadan, had excellent library collections. Mrs Braide, the documentation manager, was so kind to me and she gave me several articles on Weed Science in the tropics. She took the trouble to source articles from other sister institutes like International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) CIMMYT and ICARDA and FAO.

I shipped several hard copies to Kenya and made sure that all data on my research slides were documented, arranged chronologically for each circumstance and shipped. My friends had arranged a farewell party for me. They made good remarks about me, my interactions with the post-docs and other staff, my research accomplishments and my love for the Nigerian cultures. I thanked them for their hospitality, assistance and promised to visit them once in a while.

Dr Amare Getahun, a close confidant and former mate in Rutgers University remarked that I should go home to Kenya and start a family. I considered him an older brother. I used to stay in his house whenever he travelled out with his family. His wife, Elizabeth, saw me as a young boy ready to discover new academic frontiers in my home country, Kenya.

They gave me some mementos which I still keep and are in touch even after they returned to their home country, Ethiopia. I bade all staff at IITA good-bye and planned to fly to Nairobi on 28 March 1980 through my familiar Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos. I got the ticket ready to fly by Nigerian Airways.

I was dropped at the airport by an institute vehicle with my two large boxes, and a briefcase stuffed with my certificates and lecture notes. The Nigerian Airways destined for Nairobi took off at night and landed at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in the morning of 28 March 1980. I was ready to embark on my lifetime academic career with zeal at the age of 30.

Academic Life and Leadership at the University of Nairobi

I arrived at the JKIA and there was transport ready for me. Mr Stephen Mwita had a Volkswagen kombi and had come with an assistant registrar who organized for hotel accommodation at the Milimani Hotel in Nairobi. There were no readily available houses for staff then. I collected my luggage and headed for the hotel.

The University of Nairobi was the only institution of higher learning in Kenya then. The staff and student numbers were small compared to the current ones. The assistant registrar discussed various issues as we drove through Nairobi with hardly any traffic to slow us down. As I was being booked at the hotel, I asked the registrar what time lectures started; he told me 8.00 o'clock in the morning.

I knew classes were to resume on 30 March 1980. That was why I had prepared my lectures in advance and got my last pay from IITA in March before I took over my teaching position at the University of Nairobi. It was an excellent idea since I did not have to prepare for every lecture. I had prepared adequately for my two units. The MSc and BSc courses I taught covered 45 hours each per term. I only used half of the materials I prepared.

I made plans to be receiving IITA journals monthly to update my lecture notes and also kept abreast of the research progress there. Messrs Steven Utulu and Ray Unamma eventually completed their PhDs and sent me their graduation photos. I was impressed with their work which I had partly supervised. I wrote back and congratulated them. I was proud of their achievements as I had played a role in their research programmes.

The beginnings of the 1980s were, however, turbulent times both for the country and the University of Nairobi. Students and staff were engaged in national politics. The government detained rebellious staff and student activists were expelled from the university.

Hence, I got into a situation where academic programmes were carried out in a hostile environment with frequent closures. There was interference with curricula, frequent staff exodus for fear of imprisonment or detention. I do recall that there were restrictions on what we taught, the books we used or even research we conducted. This affected staff in the humanities and social sciences. Guest speakers to the university were vetted and at times rejected. The promotions of academic staff were based on political sycophancy. This widespread fear and intimidation adversely affected the quality of university education and consequently inhibited the future development of the country.

Student leaders were regularly expelled and the Academic Staff Union was banned in 1980. The August 1982 coup d'etat attempt forced the government to tighten its grip over the university. The coup attempt resulted in the longest closure in the history of the university. The government closed it down soon after the coup was thwarted and did not reopen it until October 1983--a period

of fourteen months. It was clear that the university administration was being manipulated against their will.

The coup attempt and the subsequent closure of the university had far-reaching implications at the institutional and personal levels. A backlog of students waiting to join the university emerged. It is due to this backlog that we had to introduce a double intake of students in 1987, severely straining the facilities. I chaired the powerful committee which surveyed the appropriate campuses to establish the facilities available to admit extra students. I was directly affected in these circumstances. Many bright students missed lifetime opportunities; lecturers had to double-teach and ensure quality was sustained.

Little research was conducted then and the general public looked at university lecturers and students as rebels. As a member of the academic community, I supported the course of the staff and student unions, and the issues they were articulating. The staff and students were not political in the sense they were perceived by society, but sought continuous improvement in academic standards. You cannot talk about standards without addressing issues of working environment, books, remuneration, infrastructure and trained personnel. This was not politics in the sense peddled by the political establishment and perceived by society.

At a personal level, my ambition was to excel in academic work; hence I engaged little with the politics then. I was in a familiar territory, Nairobi, Kenya, and I started speaking Kiswahili, a language I had missed, with students and staff. I did not need to acclimatize in my own country.

I was picked from the hotel the following day and dropped at the Vice-Chancellor's office, first to report to him, and secondly, to hand in copies of my certificates and curriculum vitae. Prof. Mungai was one of the finest men that I ever interacted with. I arrived at his office at about 8.30 am and he saw me as he walked past the reception. He called me in and we started talking. My first impression of the man lasted in my memory for the duration I was with him. He laughed as he talked, cracked jokes about Nigeria, about the coup d'état and even asked me how I had survived for two years. He asked me about the University of Ibadan Teaching Hospital but

I did not know much about it. I had visited the campus a few times but could not delve into academic programmes there. I, however, knew the main campus pretty well.

I found Prof. Mungai a down-to-earth administrator, respectful and responsive. We became very close later on as I matured in the system. The hearty discussion we had that morning of 30 March served as my interview. He called the academic registrar, Mr Solom Karanja, who took my papers and was instructed to give me a formal letter of appointment with all the details for a lecturer's post. From then on, Joseph referred to me as the Weed Science man from Ibadan. He was so proud of me that he used to assign some duties like chairing disciplinary cases, junior promotion reviews and student complaints.

When I reflect back on my earlier experiences, I realize that humility is a core trait in public relations. Later as an administrator, I always recalled Mungai's humble reception of a young person who wanted to develop a career. I employed similar conduct in all my future interactions with my staff, students and the public. I learnt the art of being obedient, receptive and accommodating to my staff and visitors. I had first-hand knowledge in dealing with very sympathetic cases of minor thefts due to poverty and long-awaited promotions. I made appropriate decisions which many times favoured the junior staff.

I left his office and went to my campus where I would work for over 33 years – my domicile, despite taking leave of absence to work for other institutes. I took copies of my testimonials again to my department chairman, Prof. David N. Ngugi, who became my immediate boss for close to ten years, as a chair and dean.

David received me very well and congratulated me on joining his department. I spent quite some time with him and he was glad that I was ready to take over courses which for a long time were taught by a Dutch lecturer, Van Eijten. Despite having no appointment for a meeting with him, Prof. Ngugi, took the trouble to give me an orientation of the university and its role to society and government. We had tea together. I was also introduced to a long-serving secretary, Ms Jane Mbugua (now deceased). A good number of the staff I met in Kabete Campus were at the rank of assistant lecturers who were pursuing their PhD degrees. Many had also gone out of the country to pursue their PhD degrees. I was therefore senior to them in terms of hierarchy.

Prof. Ngugi again scrutinized my CV and appreciated the publications I had presented. All of them covered various aspects of Weed Science both in the USA and Nigeria. I was happy that both the VC and Chair recognized my efforts in the academic world. Since I knew we would be meeting more often, I asked him, if he so wished, to assign me another staff to take me round. I figured that he was a busy chairman. He declined and instead took me around the campus himself. I thought this was, a good gesture.

We had a quick tour of the campus; saw the greenhouses, field trials, laboratories and a herbarium. He finally showed me to my office and gave me the keys. Apparently, he had reserved one office for me because I kept on assuring him about my joining his department soonest. He made one comment as we were parting that morning to the effect that the other courses I took in environmental sciences would be of use in the future. His words were realized about 15 years later when I started teaching several units on environmental sciences.

He left me with a technician whom I would work with in the Weed Science Section, Mr Francis Kiinjanjui, a former plant curator with the East African Community in Muguga, Kenya. Mr Kinyanjui followed instructions and settled me in my new office which was much smaller than the one I had at IITA. There was a desk, some reference books and an old chair.

The office was in the Faculty of Agriculture and faced nice greenery and beautiful flowers. This was where I spent most of the time teaching and conducting research. After my administrative tour, I returned to the same office in 2006 and shared it with my student, Dr Safary Ariga, whom I had taught and supervised for his MSc and partially PhD. There was also Ms Parin Kurji, who was using the same office as a temporary working station. The number of staff had increased and taken over offices.

Sharing an office was a humiliating and debasing act which showed the poor management of both the chairman of the department and dean of the faculty and relevant administrative organs. It meant they never cared for their returning colleagues just as much as they did not care for students' facilities and welfare. The non-caring attitude of those in authority was a manifestation of the declining services and academic standards in many public universities.

Kabete Campus is about twelve kilometres from the main University of Nairobi Campus. It is to the west of Nairobi City and enjoys a cool climate all year round. The campus is located on a semi-plateau terrain overlooking Nairobi, Mount Kenya, the Aberdares and Kiambu Shopping Valley.

The greenery which surrounds the buildings makes it the finest of campuses to work in. The two faculties, Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine Sciences are the oldest in the University of Nairobi. The master plan of the campus has catered for a lot of greenery when new structures are being planned. The Wangari Maathai Institute of Environment and Peace is located in the College of Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences (CAVS). This makes the place a perfect environment to work in within the suburbs of Nairobi. Those who work here may not appreciate this scenery until they visit other campuses.

I have spent close to half of my life working in this pristine environment. The beautiful golf course adjacent to the campus offers the largest free open land with well-manicured lawns for teeing. A walk through the 18-hole golf course makes one rejuvenated. Staff enjoy playing golf when they are free. I am a member of the club.

Upper Kabete Campus is located in a high prime land where livestock and crops research takes place. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine is the oldest in East Africa and trains students from the whole region and afar. On my return to Kabete I quickly settled down and started teaching two groups of students: BSc and MSc. I started to question myself what else I could do besides teaching and carrying out research. My departure from Ibadan, Nigeria, was so that I could contribute to Kenya in scientific development and advancement. I knew I would do well in my duties and so why I started to plan. I had a few free days each week when I did not have classes.

I had to devote my free time to conducting research trials in and outside the campus and, at the same time, offer free counselling and advice to young students. I also decided to join local and regional professional organizations. This worked. I applied for research funds from two organizations: the National

Council for Science and Technology, now called the National Council for Science, Technology and Innovations (NACOSTI), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), a Canadian-based research funding agency.

Each organization applied different methods of awarding research grants. The requirements varied from project to project and discipline. The local one, NACOSTI, made me write several elaborate proposals and it funded my research request with KES.11, 000.00 (about US\$1,000). The chief executive then, Mr Starkeys Muturi, ordered me to go and conduct a survey on the occurrence and control of *Oxalis latifolia*, HBK in Kenya. He figured the amount would be enough. I thanked him and did exactly what he directed me to do.

Funding for research was not a priority in Kenya then, hence the limited innovations! The exercise was nowhere close to what I was used to in the USA and Nigeria. I did the work with the aim of applying for more funding. I wanted to keep and continue with my research tempo and habit. I quickly realized that if I did not maintain my objectives, I would easily drift into other social activities which would not benefit me in the long run.

The Canadian funding agency, IDRC, was more generous. In 1982, I wrote a detailed research proposal on minimum tillage for maize production. I had done similar work before in the USA but on wheat. An officer from IDRC, Roger Kirkby, went through the proposal with me, explaining the Canadian requirements in a fundable research proposal. I included all the items necessary to conduct the experiment for five years.

Luckily for me, I had written similar proposals before and had received funding. We had also been taught proposal writing in college. I got handsome funding which included, among other things, a double-cabin pick-up for ferrying research tools. The research covered several stations in Kenya. The vehicle was for use by my collaborating researchers at the site, but I allowed the department to use it also. This was my first research breakthrough in the early 1980s. Just like in Nigeria, I carried out trials across the country.

The trials involved growing the maize crop in partially tilled fields and we used selected herbicides to control the weeds and raise the maize crop under the least disturbed soil cultivation. This would reduce soil erosion in fragile areas. During my fieldwork, I was exposed to many challenges which were unique to Kenya. Weed species differed from location to location. Rain patterns posed a challenge as they could fail in some seasons and farmers would therefore lose a whole season's crop. I learnt the hard way to understand and appreciate the natural climatic changes from one location to another, recognized the variations and had to adapt accordingly. The research grant impacted a lot of staff in the faculty. Staff started applying for funds and a good number of them secured grants.

I trained two MSc students under the project. There were other programs within the Crop Science Department, but of lesser magnitude than the one I secured.

History repeats itself. During my field trials as I was busy spraying my experimental plots in Nyanza, I encountered a huge python in a bush coiled around on the grass ready to attack me! I was quick to retreat and called my helpers to untie the knapsack sprayer I was using so that I could run away. I recall vividly that sunny morning. Unlike Ibadan, Nigeria, where they eat snakes, my staff got scared and we abandoned spraying the site until it was slashed and cleared of the bush. I developed a phobia for snakes and whenever I go near a bushy area, I always look carefully and carry a stick in case a snake appears from somewhere.

As usual, the data I collected was analysed to find out the effectiveness of the treatments. The programme was funded for eight years and I was able to present papers in the Weed Science Society of Eastern Africa (WSSEA) which I was also instrumental in its formation. I was secretary and later chairman of the professional society which existed for about fifteen years and fizzled out when I was appointed Deputy Principal to the Jomo Kenyatta University College of Agriculture and Technology (JKUCAT), the then University College of Kenyatta University. I was bothered that such a regional society which covered several countries could just die off like that.

We met biannually and present proceedings. I was the chief editor for the proceedings. I also helped design the logo and recruit members. The countries included: Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya. We shared a lot in common and meetings rotated from one country to another. The last one I attended was in Kampala and was opened by the then Minister for Agriculture. He praised the society for the good work we were doing. I was also secretary and later chairman of the Kenya Agricultural Teachers Association (KATA). The association was meant to promote agriculture in Kenya through teaching at all levels of education.

The association brought all agricultural teachers together, both secondary and universities. I recall senior members, like Prof. Shellemiah Keya, being a very active chairman of the association. Dr Nathan Kathuri served as secretary for a long time and made sure that the proceedings were produced on time. Kenya Institute of Education gained a lot from the annual meetings we used to have. The secondary school syllabus drew a lot of material from our proceedings.

The last memorable meeting we had was held at Kenya's Mombasa Beach Hotel. We had invited the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi, Prof. Joseph Mungai, to be the Guest of Honour. He accepted the invitation and I was to arrange for his travelling logistics. When I asked him how he wanted to travel, he suggested that we use a train. Mombasa to Nairobi railway transport was very good those days; I saw no reason for us to take a bus. The rest of the team went by road; Prof. Mungai and I were booked in the first class coach to travel overnight. We had planned the travel together and he carried books to read and edit.

This was the time when I knew the type of scholar Prof. Joseph Maina Mungai was. We discussed all sorts of things the whole night. The professor told me stories

of his parents, how he grew up, walked to school, witnessed the resurgence of Mau Mau fighters, his academic progress to the highest. He explained how he studied under some difficult situations before qualifying to join Alliance High School.

He finally went to Alliance High School as a small boy from Muguga Primary School and eventually became the great medic and a vice-chancellor of the highest institution of learning. I got to know him well and deeply admired his intelligence, achievements and determination. He was a down-to-earth scholar who studied in Makerere University College and smuggled cadavers to Kenya to start a medical school.

That was the kind of man I interacted with for a reasonable period of time. In fact, mentors are never short to consult. Prof. Mungai was my mentor when I was a young lecturer and later a VC. I learnt humility and humour from him. I did not think that anyone in the University knew that we had travelled with the VC to Mombasa in the same coach for over 12 hours. I always reminded him of the trip whenever we met.

He stayed in the conference for a week and contributed a lot during the discussions. We travelled back by the same mode but, this time during the day. It was fun listening to the professor who told me the weirdest stories he could remember. He later wrote his autobiography and cited his past experiences.

As a vice-chancellor, Prof. Mungai witnessed some of the worst students' riots of the time. He was brave and very articulate in his speeches during functions like graduation ceremonies. I learnt a lot from this great man who steered the University of Nairobi through the most turbulent times in the 1980s. Little did I know that I would be a vice-chancellor later! My association with Prof. Mungai gave me some insights on how to run a university. He viewed me as his younger brother who needed his counsel to manage a university.

Later on, I worked with him at the Commission for University Education after his tenure as a vice-chancellor. If there is anyone I remember as my mentor, Prof. Mungai is the one.

Student Training

As a lecturer and researcher, my role was to train as I taught. I took this practice as the living Bible. I convinced myself that I had to train and supervise MSc and PhD candidates to completion. Even now, if I accept to undertake student supervision, I ensure that they complete their work successfully and on time.

One promise I made to my colleagues was that I had a role to mentor the youth and upcoming lecturers. During my tenure as a lecturer and later senior lecturer, the following students completed their PhDs.¹ I was sure of one thing during my supervision: my research agenda would proceed uninterrupted. I would keep up with the latest in science and technology and would publish research findings in the

process. I also knew that the graduating students would run future universities and government ministries. I was not far from the truth.

I cannot at this point fail to emphasize the importance of research and teaching. One translates what one researches on into theory and practice. Continuity is therefore vital to keep abreast with new frontiers in science and innovations. I continued to receive newsletters from the local and international weed science societies to which I was a subscribing member.

We were very vibrant young scientists in the department. Many lecturers had projects for research. The number of students was small and each course had about 80 students. The quality of teaching and students' interactions were better than what we have now. Postgraduate students were also few, about ten per cohort. I trained more students during the 1980-1990 period than in the years 2000 to 2014.

The teaching load was heavier in later years. I knew more students by name and academic interest than I do now. Lecturing was carried out seriously and we had more time to prepare, plan, examine and deliver lectures than we have now. It was more prestigious to be a university don in the 1980s than it is now. The frequency of rioting was, however, more pronounced then than it is now. I will cover some of the causes and consequences in later chapters.

In 1985, I was promoted to the rank of senior lecturer at the university on the basis of teaching, research and publications. After three years, in 1988, a position of associate professor was advertised and I considered myself qualified and suitable candidate based on my qualifications. I had added more publications and students' supervision. I had further attracted research funds from the FAO on a project that I brought to the university. In addition, I had attended numerous conferences where I presented research papers. Two of us vied for the post, Prof. Kimani Waithaka and myself. We both passed the interview and were promoted to the position of associate professor.

After six years, in 1994, while serving as Principal of JKUCAT, the position of full professor was advertised in the University of Nairobi, where I was still a staff member on leave. I had by then consolidated all my research work and published in local and international journals. My FAO book on weeds had been published, and several other proceedings on the subject to which I was an editor. I had also represented the university in several conferences. I was fully involved in community service in Kenya and Eastern Africa as an administrator and an external examiner. I secured Commonwealth funds which enabled me to lead a team of scientists to conduct research in Malawi, and we came out with a publication.

My promotion to the position of full professor was not easy. I went through all the requirements and had to pass the interview, whose panel included selected professors of the university, with the chairperson of Council chairing. I consider those earlier interviews more demanding, rigorous and of higher standards. I recall my panel members as Prof. John Kokwaro, Fred Onyango (deceased), among others.

These days, requirements for promotion are often flouted and non-deserving cases get promoted while deserving ones are left in abeyance for long periods depending on one's networks and inclinations. There is also a lot of variation in the appointment of staff to senior positions, especially associate and full professors across the Universities, such that an individual qualifying as full professor in one university may not even qualify as a senior lecturer in another university.

This is because current practices, especially in the newly established Universities do not apply strict academic criteria for promotion. Some are politically influenced, while others lower the criteria to favour friends. The worst scenario is when members from one ethnic community are hired or promoted to a home institution without regard to their qualifications and academic track record. Chairpersons of Councils who are the appointing authorities are sometimes misled, and they allow or use the most ridiculous appointing criteria. Some are ignorant about university requirements and universities take advantage of this ignorance.

In extreme cases, some Vice-Chancellors, using political networks, become so powerful that Council members do not freely participate in Council discussions especially when they have divergent views. Suffice it to say that appointments to senior university academic and management positions in Kenya are still flawed and influenced by sycophancy, political and ethnic networks.

My Inaugural Lecture

Inaugural lectures are normally delivered by scholars on topical issues which they consider important. Having grown in academic ranks from Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor and Professor in the University of Nairobi, I decided to share my experiences through a public lecture. I had attended a number of such scholarly talks and admired them. These were academic discourses in one's field of study and they were the ultimate academic initiations. I chose to write on an environmental topic because it was a concern to many Kenyans who saw the rot in our environmental management. Despite my busy schedule and frequent travels, I was determined to accomplish my target.

My topic was "Environmental Degradation and Pollution: Let us Reverse the Trends" delivered on 9 September 2004. My area of expertise was Weed Science and Environmental Pollution. This was therefore an appropriate topic cover to my peers at the University of Nairobi and for the general public. It was easy for me to gather primary and secondary data since I was fully engaged in environmental matters. I had delivered several speeches during conferences and it was not difficult for me to compile data for my lecture. My idea was to bring to the attention of the public that we were destroying our natural resources and polluting our country at a speed which could render Kenya highly degraded.

Our rivers, lakes, wetlands, coastal marines, parks, urban areas and air were targets of pollution. Solid wastes were a major concern in the urban areas,

especially in major cities where population was increasing day-by-day. I realized that we were losing our plant species and microorganism without a care for the future generations. Urban slums were on the increase as poverty continued to bite. A few people cared about the future, including some NGOs and a group of concerned individuals. My 30-page booklet defined pollution as “*the presence of contaminants in the environment in quantities, characteristics and duration such as to be injurious to human, animal and plant life or which unreasonably interfere with comfortable enjoyment of life*”. I further defined degradation of land and ecosystems as “*the loss of productivity – qualitatively and quantitatively*”. This could be due to mismanagement as a result of various human activities which include physical, biological as well as chemical processes.

I considered that scholars who may not be in the same discipline as mine wanted a simple and clear definition of the terms “pollution”, “degradation” and “*polluter-pays-principle*”. I cited very many live examples, both in Kenya and other parts of the world, which impact directly on the environment. My staff in NEMA, especially the Public Relations Office, went through the manuscript before I submitted it to the University of Nairobi Press to print the required 500 copies. I made sure there were no mistakes in the booklet.

I saw the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Crispus M. Kiamba, who graciously accepted to officiate the event. Normally, the Vice-Chancellor would introduce the speakers. The University statute stipulates so. I was a University of Nairobi staff on leave of absence. This was a university function. He was delighted to host me. The public relations office of the University and that of NEMA worked together for publicity. They printed posters indicating the title, date, time and venue of my public lecture. It was also posted on the internet for wider publicity.

This was one lecture for which I prepared very well. I almost memorized the whole text to make sure that I did not make any mistakes during my speech delivery. I covered all areas which I thought the audience would be interested in. I knew well that issues on electronic waste, chemical disposal, raw sewer discharge and climate change would feature. I therefore did not limit my speech to the specific topic but covered a wider area than I had indicated. As usual, I went through my speech several times before the D-day.

The delivery was not like the graduation speeches which I would make and nobody would challenge me back. This was scholarly, high-level speech in front of the most learned group of people from Universities and the public. I had to excel. I knew this kind of lecture happened once in a scholar’s life. I did not want to disappoint my peers and colleagues from NEMA. A good number of staff from UNEP also attended the lecture.

On the material day I went to the Vice-Chancellor’s Office to gown and join other professors to escort me to the venue of the lecture. I must admit, I was a bit nervous. I recognized several renowned scholars of the University of Nairobi.²

After an elaborate introduction by my Vice-Chancellor, I was given one hour to deliver my speech. I remember it was 2.30 to 3.30 pm, a time which I adhered to. It was a hot afternoon and my gown, cap and hood did not allow for free air circulation around my body. I had dressed in a navy-blue suit. I later left the podium sweating. It was not an ordinary class lecture where I could talk for several hours without getting tired. It was a hard talk in front of scholars who would later on engage me in discussions and critique the talk.

Immediately after my speech, I got a standing ovation. Everybody present clapped their hands and I was relieved of the burden of talking on a subject that was so dear to me.

Two distinguished scholars took to the podium immediately after my speech. The first was Prof. David Wasao who I thought was going to throw a salvo at my inaugural speech. He instead called me up the stairs, raised his hand and shook mine in accolade for a well-executed talk. He was the chairman of the University of Nairobi Council and a renowned world academic. I was glad and my fears were assuaged. He actually said, "*Young man, well done and keep up the good work!*" These are seldom remarks from scholars.

The other scholar who was equally impressed with my talk was Prof. Canute Khamalla, who was my NEMA Board Chair. He had kept nodding his head during my talk. He looked straight into my eyes and thanked me. He was most touched by the practical examples I cited during my talk and wondered when I had gathered all the data I presented. He was visibly happy and proud of me. He told the audience that as his director general at NEMA, I was a man of class and substance who could drive the environmental agenda to higher heights. I was elated to get such good comments from my seniors. The 500 booklets were circulated and I never got extra copies for my friends. I could tell the happiness of my family members who had been equally nervous when I was speaking. My wife, Esther, later congratulated me and told me that I had made a great presentation.

The whole function lasted for 2 hours and by 4 pm the Vice-Chancellor and his entourage retired to his parlour for a cocktail reception. My wife Esther and children joined me at the reception where we stayed for one hour before going home. It was an excellent inaugural lecture and I felt satisfied to have successfully delivered it when I was 56 years old! This was my ultimate academic ascendancy and recognition. I later learnt that many upcoming lecturers were using my booklet for lectures. It had covered several aching environmental problems in Kenya which needed urgent attention.

I had seen myself through the ranks. I had experienced the odds and rough terrains during my services. I became a lecturer on 30 March 1980. I was then promoted to senior lecturer and subsequently an associate professor. I thought this was good enough, but I had another hurdle of being interviewed for the full professorial appointment. In all these promotions, proof of published work, research, student

supervision, service to the community and fundraising were the prerequisites. Managerial skills were also considered then.

I then took on administrative roles. I was the chairman of the department, but was then taken out of the classroom to assist in the establishment of the 5th Kenyan public university, JKUAT. After a while, I was appointed the Deputy Principal (Academic) and later elevated to the Principal of the then University College. The elevation of the University College to full university status saw me appointed as the founding Vice-Chancellor of the new University, JKUAT. I was now fully converted from a lecturer, and researcher into an administrator, leader and advisor. I did not, however, give up my academic undertakings. I still taught and supervised MSc and PhD students as I carried on with my demanding administrative roles. I still published papers and my first Weed Science book of which I still have a few copies.

My administration acumen became more prominent when I was appointed to chair one of the largest agricultural research parastatals, KARI. There, I worked with dedication and acquired over 100 title deeds of parcels of land which had been grabbed by powerful persons in Kenya. These were large tracts of land meant for high-level, advanced research, especially plant and animal breeding. I became an enemy of a few but a darling to many. I was also appointed to assist in several other quasi-government bodies like the National Council for Science and Technology.

The establishment of African Institute for Capacity Development (AICAD) and revitalization of the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA) were other tasks that I took on and saw them succeed. I am proud of the two sister institutions of East Africa which are complementary in functions. All these undertakings involved negotiations, persuasion and fund-raising. As a manager, I had to utilize these skills. The programmes saw the continuous involvement of donors locally and internationally. Good networking and public relations played a major role in the establishment of the institutes. I utilized these strategies during my administrative tenure in NEMA.

The inaugural lecture culminated in the final achievement in the academic hierarchy. I had done my 13 years as Principal and Vice-Chancellor and I knew that there were no any other academic promotions. The only scholarly work left was teaching, research and publications. These have no end. One can carry on for as long as one is alert and capable of communication. Another role which I considered vital for me was service to the Kenyan community. I continuously helped those who needed my assistance and made appearances either in the press or public meetings.

I was awarded several accolades both locally and internationally. As a Principal, I was decorated, with State commendation, the Shining Star (SS) by the Head of State, President Arap Moi, which I considered a great affirmation of the contribution my work had made to Kenya's educational and societal development.

I was again, later on, honoured with another one by the same Head of State, the Elder of the Burning Spear (EBS). The honour was awarded to me when I became

the first Vice-Chancellor of JKUAT. I very much appreciated the kind gesture from the Head of State who genuinely recognized the good work Kenyans were doing.

During the same period, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) also honoured me by awarding me a certificate for their best programme that I undertook. I had successfully supervised a number of JICA-sponsored projects. I was among the 21 prominent persons worldwide who were honoured by the president. I am still the patron of the Japanese Ex- Participants of Kenya (JEPAK).

In 2003, my Alma Mater, Rutgers University, USA, honoured me as a Distinguished Alumnus who had done exemplary academic and administrative services to my country, Kenya. During this occasion, my wife, Esther, and I joined world movie celebrities, Flockhart Hart and Harrison Ford in the event. Flockhart was my college-mate and she was also being honoured at the same time for her exemplary role as an actor. She was in the Mason Gross School of Performing Arts.

These accolades did not come easily; they carried a price tag of hard work, bravery and risk-taking. I had to make bold decisions and stand by them for the benefit of institutions. That was the prize I got for the work. The academic and leadership trails are not the same, but highly complementary.

The rise in hierarchy from lecturer to Vice-Chancellor follows a specific trend of events. I used a lot of past mistakes, errors, omissions, commissions and regrets to arrive at decisions. Did I allude earlier that institutions have no blood? They just drain without giving back. I also indicated earlier that institutions are images of their chief executives. Conversely, chief executives are seen in the same light as the institutions they run. The names evoke the true character of that head. We all know that fish starts to rot from the head, so do institutions. If a head is corrupt, so shall be the lower hierarchies and appendages. For a long time, JKUAT and NEMA became synonymous with my name. The influence and responsibility that I set forth laid firm foundations for the two institutions.

Notes

1. Dr Pihri Sibuga Kalunde now a Professor in Sokoine University, Morogoro, Tanzania; Dr David Kamweti, (deceased) a Private Consultant, Dr Safary Ariga, currently a lecturer at the University of Nairobi; Dr Leonard Wamocho, currently a lecturer and Dean of Students at Masinde Muliro University and Dr Wariara Kariuki, a lecturer at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology. Others include Ben Kisielo Wanjala, James Ongusi Bango, Joseph Oryokot, Boniface Ita, Fridah Kiriri, Jowi, Olang'o, Lucas Ngonde, Mr. Balaa and James Baraza, just to name but a few.
2. Great academicians like Professor David Wasao, Prof. John Kokwaro, Prof. Canute Khamala (my NEMA Board Chairman), Prof. Shem Wandiga, Prof. Joseph Nyasani, Prof. Florida Karani, Prof. Daniel Mukunya, Prof. Lucia Omondi, Prof. Geoffrey Muriuki, Prof. David Ndetei and a host of lecturers, senior lecturers and the public.

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