

# Remembering James David Rubadiri: An Introduction

The call for this special issue of *Journal Humanities* read in part as follows:

On 15 September 2018, the academic community woke up to the shocking news of the passing of Professor David Rubadiri, a day after celebrating his 61st anniversary in marriage. Prof Rubadiri was *a celebrated poet, playwright, novelist, critic, diplomat and one-time Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi*. He also taught at universities of Makerere in Uganda, Nairobi in Kenya, and Botswana. His biography and work anticipate the figure and the preoccupations of *a transnational and trans-cultural artist, and visionary leader* (italics in original).

The response to the call for papers was rather disappointing, to say the least, and did not match Rubadiri's stature as trumpeted by the quotation above. One is not sure if this is the way the learned professor would have wanted to be celebrated. But if the man's "crushing modesty" and "self-effacing nature" (Mapanje, 2004, p.5, 4) - despite his lofty status - is anything to go by, one is inclined to speculate that he would not have been bothered by the almost quiet response to the call for papers. He would not have been fazed by this thin volume that labours to celebrate his monumental achievements as a poet, teacher and administrator. For those that knew him well, like some of the authors in this attempt at a remembrance, he would not have focused on the thinness of the volume or on whatever shortfalls herein. His meticulous eye would have been focused on the efforts and little successes each of the authors have made in trying to emblazon his name which is already etched on the skies of eternity. Not that he would have ignored the shortfalls, those he would have pointed out in a manner that dignified and encouraged the authors. Unfortunately, the good old Prof is not here to respond to our little effort. If anything, we can only imagine his "ancestral" smile at our efforts from wherever he is.

Contributions to this volume attest to Mapanje's description of Rubadiri as "the father of modern Malawian poetry in English" and "a legendary teacher of poetry" (Mapanje, 2004, p.3). In his fine analysis of the dramatic in Rubadiri's poetry, Mthathiwa remembers Rubadiri as a fine teacher of poetry at whose feet Mthathiwa and his fellow students learnt to distinguish "poetry" from "worse". Mthathiwa meticulously combs through Rubadiri's poetry to reveal how the poet's

use of language creates a sense of the dramatic that is central to the poetry. Kiguli's passionate auto/biographical account of Rubadiri's life as a student, poet and professor at Makerere University is also anchored in her personal experience of Rubadiri's acumen as poet and teacher. Engaging the archive, Kiguli's paper illustrates that the saying that "a chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches" is true in Rubadiri's life. From Kiguli's paper it is clear that the monumental figure that Rubadiri became had its foundations laid during his student days as attested to by various testimonials by his teachers. Above everything else, Kiguli notes Rubadiri's regard for humanity as pivotal to the man's character; the humanity reflected in his poetry, teaching and life. For Mzati Nkolokosa, Rubadiri's life, referred to by Mapanje as a "dazzling tale" (2004, p.3), is a collection of lessons to all that interacted with him whether in the flesh or through his work. Drawing seven lessons from such a life productively lived, Nkolokosa's account of Rubadiri's life somewhat amplifies Angus Calder's words that Rubadiri's "extraordinary personality had touched and influenced enormous numbers of people" (Mapanje, 2004, p.9).

Rubadiri's tendency to celebrate humanity in whatever circumstances, may sometimes lead us into being blind to the grave issues and suffering his poetry encapsulates. Edgar Nabutanyi's paper reminds us that behind Rubadiri's celebration of the quotidian, there is an underlying melancholic wave. But typical of the man's positivity even in the face of adversity, such painful realities are often masked in his attempt to humanize those that have been dehumanized by whatever circumstances. We cannot help but see Rubadiri's own face in those people whose melancholic experiences he tries to chronicle.

In Asante Mtenje's paper and Moureen Aol's poem, the image of Rubadiri as a literary (grand)father is unmistakable. Both Mtenje and Aol did not have the privilege of sitting at the great teacher's feet as Mthatiwa and Kiguli did. However, both Mtenje and Aol benefited from conversations they had with Rubadiri, albeit in different ways. For Mtenje, Rubadiri was her mother's boss but most importantly, a literary grandfather who took special interest in a 15 year old girl's attempts at writing. In Aol's case, her lessons in poetry had a resounding echo of the name "Rubadiri" from whom she learnt many lessons including "the humanness of humanity". Thus, both Mtenje's and Aol's contributions to this volume read like lamentations of two granddaughters who remain deeply influenced by grandpa Rubadiri. Note though that their lamentations are not without hope: for Mtenje, she is hopeful that the "life-lessons that [she] drew from him" will be bequeathed to "the younger generation of aspiring writers and scholars that [she] meet[s] in class every day." Mtenje thus takes "comfort in the legacy [Rubadiri] left behind which is

told by a multitude of people [like Mtenje herself] whose lives he touched through his writing, mentoring, teaching, listening, (grand)fathering and by simply being him.” For Aol, the pain of loss of the teacher she never met but learnt a lot from as a writer, melts into revulets of hope for she sees Rubadiri’s face reflected “on every poet’s face” guiding their pens and fueling their hearts. Like the proverbial “grain of wheat”, Aol envisions Rubadiri’s rebirth through the work of numerous poets that he influenced, including herself.

In the end, one takes solace in the fact that what matters is not really the volume of songs celebrating Rubadiri’s life. What this issue lacks in numbers has surely been compensated for by the sincerity and passion of each author’s attempt to remember their teacher, mentor, literary (grand)father and above all, their friend.

### Reference

Mapanje, J. (2004). Introduction. *An African thunderstorm and other poems* (pp1-17). Nairobi: EAEP.

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