

# A Journalist's Reflection on Lessons from James David Rubadiri's Life

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## **Abstract**

James David Rubadiri was a teacher both inside and outside the classroom. Whenever he opened his mouth to speak, his listeners learned something, almost always, perhaps without his realisation. In this article, I give a journalist's reflection on Rubadiri's life as embodying various lessons for all those that interacted with him. I conclude by noting that Rubadiri was a great teacher whose life remains a classroom for all of us even after his death.

## **Keywords:**

teacher, life-lessons, humanity, Rubadiri, Malawi

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## **Introduction**

Professor James David Rubadiri was a teacher both inside and outside the classroom. He thought and spoke without visible effort and his audience learned something, almost always. In this reflective essay, I describe the lessons that Rubadiri's life taught us. I cite lessons on such critical issues as the balance between courage and safety, dedication to work and patriotism. In addition to these lessons, I discuss the idea of life as a journey, matters of the heart and greatness. The essay is a product of many hours I spent interviewing Rubadiri both on and off the record during 13 years of my journalism career. The essay is, therefore, simply a journalist's reflection of the life of a great academic who served Malawi from as early as 1960.

## **Lesson One: Learn from everyone**

Susan Kiguli, formerly a student of Rubadiri at Makerere University, often tells a beautiful story about her professor. After reading the story in a number of sources, I finally heard Kiguli tell the story at Ryalls Hotel in Blantyre when she visited Malawi to celebrate the life of Rubadiri in March 2018. The story is as

follows: Rubadiri was teaching a poetry class, one day, and Mutesasira, who suffered from a mental disorder, walked into the lecture room. No one moved or ran away, as would have been expected. “We all watched our teacher,” recalls Kiguli. “We had much faith in Prof Rubadiri.” Rubadiri walked towards Mutesasira, handed him a piece of chalk and stood at a distance to watch what would happen next. Mutesasira scribbled mathematical signs on the board. He then put down the chalk, looked at the professor, bowed in gratitude, and walked out of the lecture room. Any other professor would have rubbed off the graffiti. Not Rubadiri. Instead, he used the scribbling to explain how metaphysical poets yoke images together by viewing similarity in different things.

“That moment defined for us Rubadiri’s way of dealing with humanity, be it dictators, mad men or students who were reluctant to study poetry,” says Kiguli. She recalls Rubadiri as a man who handles people with “gentleness, charm, a quest for understanding, a passion for political and social justice and a distinct sense of the dramatic.”

I agree with Kiguli. Rubadiri was a great man and a great teacher. Great minds have an eye for opportunities in every situation, good or bad. Rubadiri knew that Mutesasira suffered from a mental disorder. Yet the professor did not rush to rub off what Mutesasira had written on the chalk board. Instead, he took time to study the scribbling and learned something that was worth teaching university students. Rubadiri teaches us that there is no person too dull to teach us something. Mutesasira suffered from a mental disorder but he, too, could offer some lessons to university students. Rubadiri’s reaction may have been informed by a Malawian proverb “*Wamisala adaona nkbondo*” which Chakanza (2000) translates as “A mad man saw war.” Chakanza suggests that the proverb means we should lend our ears even to those considered simple. He further suggests that the proverb is a call for “recognition, trust and openness” (Chakanza, 2000, p.334). In many ways, Rubadiri demonstrated recognition, trust and openness in the way he handled Mutesasira.

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## **Lesson Two: have courage but stay safe**

The second lesson from Rubadiri's life comes from his interaction with and reaction to Mutesasira. Rubadiri handed over a piece of chalk and stood at a distance. I suggest that there was safety in the distance. Rubadiri was not sure what Mutesasira would do, so distance became safety. As we will see later, Rubadiri was one of courageous men and women who opposed Malawi's dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda in 1964. Throughout his working life, Rubadiri did not change his position. He remained in opposition to Dr. Banda. However, a careful reading of Rubadiri's exiled life shows that he ensured his safety by being away from the dictator. Rubadiri spent years teaching at universities in Kenya, Uganda and Botswana. His life, therefore, teaches us that courage does not mean exposing oneself to danger unnecessarily but knowing where to stand and knowing how much distance to keep from enemies.

## **Lesson Three: love your job**

When the State of Emergency was declared in Malawi, then Nyasaland, in 1959, Rubadiri, a teacher at Dedza Secondary School, and his wife Gertrude, who was expectant, were arrested and flown to Northern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) where they were detained at Khami Prison. (Fifty seven years later, in 2016, when I visited the Rubadiris at their Mzuzu home, the two recalled and narrated the story as if it happened the previous day). Each cell at Khami Prison had one political prisoner. Gertrude Rubadiri told me that the aim was to ensure solitude of inmates and prevent them from strategising nationalism while in prison. One night, David Rubadiri's door opened. The opening of the door in the middle of the night was not strange. It meant either a person was being released or being taken to confess, (most likely to be forced to betray other freedom fighters). However, the case was different for Rubadiri on this particular night. In the corridor, stood a young man in school uniform, a khaki shirt and khaki pair of trousers. He was carrying a wooden bookcase. The prison guard spoke to Rubadiri: "We are told you are a school master. This boy was being nationalist and he is under arrest. However, his education should not come to an end. We want you to teach him, so that he sits

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for examinations.”

The young man was 20-year-old Aleke Banda who grew up to become a successful politician. He held several cabinet portfolios between 1994 and 2004. He was also a big entrepreneur who owned Nation Publications Limited, publishers and printers of *The Nation*, *Weekend Nation* and *Nation on Sunday*. Banda was picked up by police from a school desk on March 10, 1959, in Zimbabwe for acting in solidarity with Malawian nationalists. He was detained at a local police station until night when he was taken to Khami. According to Rubadiri, while in prison, Banda was coached by a team of brilliant teachers: Augustine Mnthambala, Augustine Bwanausi, Willie Chokani, Orton Chirwa and Nyemba Mbekeani. Rubadiri told me that these were some of the brilliant minds of Malawi, then. They were led by Rubadiri, a teacher in and out of prison. Rubadiri loved his job and his life teaches us that we should love our jobs. Put it this way. We should take up jobs that we love. Rubadiri was a teacher in Malawi and in exile in Uganda, Kenya and Botswana. He loved his job and he picked up a job that he loved.

#### **Lesson Four: be patriotic**

There was jubilation in July 1964 when Malawi attained independence from Britain. Dr. Banda became Prime Minister and picked Rubadiri from teaching and sent him to United States of America to be Malawi's Permanent representative at the United Nations in New York. In July 1964, Dr. Banda formed a government and constituted his Cabinet. Three months later, in September, there was a Cabinet Crisis. According to Theroux (2000), Rubadiri joined Cabinet ministers who disagreed with Dr. Banda. Rubadiri resigned from his job at the UN and went to Uganda to live in exile. There, he taught at Makerere University and prospered academically to become professor. Rubadiri knew he was going to lose his job when he joined the ministers in opposing Kamuzu. Yet he went ahead to pursue what he and others believed was good for Malawi. It was clear Dr. Banda had chosen a path that would lead him to become a dictator. It was clear Dr. Banda did not want any debate, let alone opposition to any of his ideas. Rubadiri wanted a Malawi in which there would be no dictator, in which all would be happy to

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participate in a marketplace of ideas. That love for his country, even to the extent of sacrificing his job, is patriotism. Rubadiri, in some ways, loved Malawi more than he loved himself.

### **Lesson Five: life is a journey of seasons**

Life is a journey of seasons, a circle of some kind, formed by cycles of seasons. Life has a way of giving back what we lose unfairly. Rubadiri was headmaster of Soche Hill Secondary School and he was destined to lead the University of Malawi at some point, after independence. When Malawi attained self-government in July, 1963, with Kamuzu as Prime Minister, he had tough choices to make. He needed Rubadiri at home in the education ministry. But Rubadiri was not an educationist only. He was a writer and philosopher. Dr. Banda needed such a fine mind on a diplomatic mission job. So, Dr. Banda appointed Rubadiri as Malawi's first ambassador to the United Nations and the United States. His pictures, featuring a young, handsome Rubadiri, still hang on the walls of the UN in New York to this day. But a year and two months later, Rubadiri lost his job when he supported ministers who had opposed Dr. Banda. Rubadiri went back to teaching. For 30 years, Rubadiri was a man on the move, never settled, missing his home, where Dr. Banda was the dictator. But 30 years came to an end in 1994, when the United Democratic front was voted into power with Bakili Muluzi as Malawi's president.

Rubadiri got back his UN job. He was appointed Malawi's ambassador to the UN in 1995. After five years of service, Rubadiri was appointed Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi, like being promoted from his old job of headmaster at Soche Hill Secondary School. He came back home to Malawi and back home into the academia. Rubadiri completed the seasons of his life. In some ways, life has a way of giving back what we lose, no matter how long it may seem to take. Rubadiri waited for 30 years.

### **Lesson Six: conform but not in matters of love**

If you are a man and have strong feelings for a lady your age or older than

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you, go for her. You will not be the first man to do so; you will not be the last. Professor Rubadiri was 88 when he died in September, 2018. He is survived by his two wives: his first wife Gertrude Uzanda, 91 and his second wife Janet Shalita, 88.

Getrude was three years older than David while Janet was Rubadiri's age mate. Rubadiri did not marry a woman younger than himself. One would have expected his second wife to be a lot younger than himself. Not Rubadiri. He lived a love life against common advice that a man should marry a woman younger than himself. Rubadiri teaches us that in matters of love, happiness does not come from conformity. Rubadiri showed us the way. In an era in which age matters so much, Rubadiri teaches us that age is not an obstacle to love.

### **Lesson Seven: great people are human too**

In my 13 years of newsroom journalism, my colleagues accused me of admiring a number of professors. At the top on the list was Rubadiri. He is human and makes errors, my colleagues would say to me. I did not and I do not regard Rubadiri as an angel because no human being is perfect. In that regard, I know Rubadiri had weaknesses, and they could be many. However, whatever his weaknesses, Rubadiri's life reminds us that when we do our best, our weaknesses do not take away our greatness.

### **Conclusion**

I spent the night of Friday, 14 September 2018, in Mzuzu and I had a plan for the next two days. The plan for Saturday, 15 September, worked. I left Mzuzu for Nkhatabay at 4:30 in the morning. I wanted to enjoy the sight of the sun rising from beyond the hills to shine on the waters of Lake Malawi. I reached Nkhatabay in time for sunrise. I had put my phone away so I could concentrate and take mental pictures. Soon after 7 am, I boarded MV Chilembwe on its chattered journey to Likoma and Chizumulu. I was looking forward to the journey and the next day's meeting with Prof Rubadiri and his wife, Getrude at their Mzuzu house. The couple had celebrated 61 years in marriage two days earlier and I wanted to ask them about their 61 years of matrimony. However, that plan collapsed when I got

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to Likoma and reached for my mobile phone. One of the first Whatsapp messages I read was about the death of Rubadiri that morning. My plan for the following day was shattered. I was not going to meet Rubadiri. He had passed away and I was not going to meet his wife, Getrude, for a chat. She would be mourning her husband. The sun I had seen rise a couple of hours ago at Nkhatabay was setting in the eastern horizon of Likoma Island. But we know the sun sets to rise again. So, Rubadiri died to live in our hearts, and teach us about life, forever.

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