

Fragments of Rubadiri: Student, Teacher and Poet

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Abstract

The article explores the intersections of James David Rubadiri's roles as a student, poet and teacher. The article draws on selected episodes, experiences and interviews on his life and work at Makerere University with the aim of addressing silences and gaps the apparent absence of Rubadiri's full auto/biographical work creates. Relying on the archive, the paper traces three stages in Rubadiri's life: his days as a student at Makerere, his time as a teacher at the same university and his career as a poet. I observe that his remarkable abilities and personality as attested to by his teachers during his student days allowed him to transition into a celebrated teacher and an intuitive poet later in his life. I also observe that as a student, teacher and poet, his strengths were anchored in his ability to understand the importance of being human and the shifting boundaries of human experience. Further, I touch on notions of home and exile in Rubadiri's life and poetry, particularly in the context of Makerere University and Uganda, his adopted home. The article takes note of the polysemous yet connected roles and their significance in defining Rubadiri as one of the leading literary voices in the East African region.

Keywords:
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exile, home

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Introduction

James David Rubadiri was born on 19th July 1930 on Likoma Island in the then British Protectorate of Nyasaland, now Malawi. He died on 15th September, 2018 in Malawi's northern city of Mzuzu. He left Nyasaland at a young age to study first at King's College Budo and later at Makerere University in Uganda, a country that was to become his adopted home when he was exiled from his home country.

Rubadiri is a household name in Uganda, with a particularly strong bond with Makerere University, his alma mater. Even though his attachment to Uganda and Makerere is well known, the details of his Herculean ties with Makerere University where he studied and taught for a long time are not widely known. Through the reading of the archive and selected poems, this paper explores aspects of Rubadiri's life at Makerere as a student, teacher and creative writer with the aim of showing how these three aspects of his life are interwoven. In addition the analysis looks at how in Rubadiri's life, the person, place and interests were connected and made the idea of belonging quite complex.

The Student

In a keynote address to honour the memory of his late colleague David Cook, delivered on 7th May 2009 at Makerere University, Rubadiri spoke affectionately of his student days at King's College Budo and Makerere University. He said:

I was a school boy at King's College Budo in what was then referred to as Bud Family. The arrangement was that you started Primary One and ended in Senior Six. Makerere became our target – but most important was that Makerere College became the elder brother! Often I would be united by the Mulyanti family during the school holidays – and was referred to as their Muswahili. [Between] 1940 – 1950 the school Budo had become my home and Makerere had become my elder brother.

Rubadiri's attachment to both Budo and Makerere was to later translate into his affectionate relationship with Uganda the country. After his sabbatical at Makerere in 1991, he wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor William Senteza Kajubi about the warmth and loving care he received from Makerere which "gave me the chance to know that I belonged not only to Makerere but also to a country I have always taken as, also, my mother country in many ways". The confidence, warmth and familiarity with which Rubadiri considered his attachment to Uganda could explain in part why Uganda features more in his own work and in the discourses about him than other places where he lived.

It needs to be acknowledged that questions of nationality and belonging in Rubadiri's life and writing have been a point of interesting debate. For many people in Uganda and probably the whole East African region, Rubadiri was or rather is more Ugandan than he is Malawian. For example, in his essay titled "Rubadiri The Poet: An Overview", Kiyimba (1995), currently a professor in the Department of Literature at Makerere University and one of Rubadiri's colleagues and admirers, calls Rubadiri "Malawian born, but now a naturalised East African... for whose poetry East Africa has taken credit" (Kiyimba, 1995, p.54). Similarly, Mulera, a well known columnist of Uganda's *The Daily Monitor* newspaper, commented thus about Rubadiri's nationality:

We claim him as Ugandan because he grew up in Uganda, receiving his entire primary and secondary school education at King's College Budo, basic university education at Makerere and 10 solid years as a lecturer at the same University. Though he left Uganda 42 years ago, his name is familiar to all who have had contact with African literature, for he is best known for his very accessible poetry and his great novel, *No Bride Price* (Mulera, 2018, p.15).

Whereas Mulera gave an explanation as to why Rubadiri was claimed to be Ugandan, in many cases, Rubadiri was and still is just referred to as Ugandan without explicit explanations. For example, in a letter to Dr. P. Lupoli, dated 8th June, 1990, the then Vice-Chancellor of Makerere University, Professor William Senteza-Kajubi refers to Rubadiri as "formerly a Malawian and now a Ugandan national." The point is not even whether Rubadiri had any formal and official ties to Uganda as a country but rather that he was regarded as Ugandan and professed as such by many people at different levels.

A careful consideration of Rubadiri's life, however, reveals fleeting reference to the tensions of being foreign even though this is couched in a congenial attitude. Rubadiri must have constantly lived with the tensions of dislocation of never quite being able to dictate where he fully belonged. Perhaps, Said's observation of exile is relevant here:

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.

It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted (Said, 2001, p.173).

The state of belonging to two “mother countries” may have come with the challenge of dealing with shared and sometimes competing social relationships and of being divided between certain meanings and values. Therefore, the experience of a divided self may have been a persistent reality. But on the other hand there are things that could be regarded as positive as Said further remarks:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home, exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, awareness that to borrow a phrase from music is *contrapuntal* (Said, 2001, p.186).

Rubadiri so mastered the art of being at home in Uganda where he spent most of his school years that most people did not ever pay particular attention to what nationality he actually belonged to. His attachment to Uganda and to Makerere in particular can be read as a form of subversion. He found a home where he was expected to be foreign. He was a foreigner and yet a ‘home boy’. Perhaps Said’s observation that “exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experiences” (Said, 2001, p.185) becomes pertinent in thinking about Rubadiri’s experiences. His invocation of Makerere as his elder brother indicates his strong sense of kinship with the place and his emotional and perhaps aesthetic entanglements with Makerere. As his “elder brother” Makerere gained a personality in his perception, a place he perceived as an emotional and physical sanctuary with the capacity of guiding him to develop. It was a place that collectively held meaning for him and his contemporaries; a place that inspired confidence and signified goal aspirations.

Records from the Faculty of Arts, Makerere College, indicate that Rubadiri was admitted to Makerere College in 1952 to study English, History, Geography and Social Studies. His tribe is indicated as Nyanja and his father is named as A.J.B. Rubadiri, a civil servant whose address was the District Office Rumpi, Nyasaland. At Makerere College, he was a resident of what was then called New Hall. The records show that he was a Guild President in his third year and a Captain of the

Cricket Team. During his time at Makerere from 1952 to December, 1955, he won the English Reading Prize, the Governor's Prize and the Margaret Graham Poetry Prize.

Rubadiri's abilities and personality as a student are noted in some of the correspondences about him from his tutors which can be accessed from his file in the Faculty of Arts records at Makerere. In a report to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, perhaps to release Rubadiri from the Geography Department, Kenneth Baker, the then Head of the Department communicates very demonstrative thoughts on Rubadiri, remarking: "Your list of preliminary choices of subjects for 1954 shows that Rubadiri wishes to leave geography. The best recommendation we can give this student is to say that if he does decide to drop geography we shall be extremely sorry to lose him!" David Walker, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1960, five years after Rubadiri left Makerere, remarks that the staff at Makerere "had a high opinion of him". The high opinion that Makerere had of Rubadiri even long after his departure meant that he left such an impression on the institution which continued to file newspaper cuttings documenting his achievements long after he had graduated.

Several reports on Rubadiri as a student reflect him as a full character who embraced the place in which he studied and who closely interacted with his teachers and fellow students. In a report dated 18th March, 1954, the Principal Bernard de Bunsen, describes Rubadiri as "undoubtedly one of our most intelligent and capable students" who "has a mind of his own which, if respected, will respond co-operatively and constructively." In the same report, de Bunsen further notes Rubadiri to be "a good speaker" with "a good deal of social poise." Rubadiri is also noted to be "a cheerful person, easy to deal with, possessing a vigorous sense of humour and a capacity of enjoying himself, which makes him a much more generous and rounded personality than most of his contemporaries."

The report cited above is revealing in various ways but the most striking is the observation of Rubadiri's strong will and assertive character which was evident even during his student days. The report further states that:

He is not a ‘yes man’(...). He is very sensitive to the tone and attitude of those who deal with him. The wrong kind of treatment might make him an aggressive African nationalist. He records with some bitterness how, when he was watching a cricket match at Entebbe with a copy of the Odyssey beside him (a set book for intermediate English) he overheard a European saying to his wife: ‘Fancy an African pretending to read Homer!’

The above illuminates Rubadiri’s stance in refusing to bow to colonial attitudes about Africans. He was aware of the paradox of his existence, for example, as a student who could play and enjoy cricket, a game associated with the colonial elite then. Poetry and teaching later become the sites where he could handle these disparities. Also reflected above is his character as a person who, quite early in life, knew his mind and worth, qualities that made him stand out in his student days as an able leader and later as a poet, teacher and diplomat.

In yet another open testimonial, K. Ingham, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1955 says that he had known Rubadiri for almost four years both as his history teacher and as his personal tutor. Ingham points out that during that time he was “favourably impressed by the full undergraduate life” that Rubadiri led. He observes that “[h]is academic work has been good, at times excellent, and benefits from a maturity of character and breadth of experience which I have not often met with to this degree at Makerere.” Highlighted here are Rubadiri’s exceptional qualities which are echoed by a number of similar reports. Ingham’s testimonial, like many reports on Rubadiri the student, emphasises his eloquence and a grasp of the English language. Ingham also talks of Rubadiri’s appreciation of history as a living subject “as opposed to something merely to be learnt for examination purposes.”

The reports in general point to his tutors identifying in him qualities that made him blossom as a poet and teacher. Ingham notes that Rubadiri was “an interesting conversationalist, excellent in any company.” He specifically states that

If he wished to take up an academic career, he would do well. But I feel he is right in attempting to pursue a career where his powers of careful thought can also find their expression in action particularly in association

with others.

It is evident that Rubadiri had a constructive and powerful effect on all he interacted with as a student at Makerere and several reports directly explain that. At the end of his long testimonial, Ingham concludes thus: “I should like to add that although this is an open testimonial I would not be prepared to give so strong a recommendation unless the person concerned fully deserved it.”

There is no doubt that Makerere brought out Rubadiri’s best and showed his talents even during his student days. Alan. J. Warner, a Professor of English in the English Department at Makerere College, wrote in 1960 that:

His achievement in English was particularly good. He was the best in the class and his final mark was only just short of an A. Throughout his career at Makerere he showed a marked aptitude for English studies, and distinct literary gifts. He wrote poetry of considerable promise. One of his poems was broadcast in an African series on the B.B.C Third Programme and subsequently published in an anthology (Darkness and Light ed. M. Rutherford. Faith Press 1958. See p.90.)

Evident in the citation above is the fact that the makings of Rubadiri as a teacher and poet of outstanding ability had its foundation at Makerere. Rubadiri himself confirmed in the David Cook Memorial keynote address the link between his literary interests and Makerere. He said:

My first love of drama and Shakespeare was awakened by the wife of the then Dean of Students – Ian Macpherson. His wife Margaret was a Shakespeare fanatic. (...) Margaret Macpherson had seen me in action at Budo during the headship of Timothy Cobb – and I became the annual “trumpeter” for all productions that had become a tradition of Makerere (Rubadiri, 2009, p.1).

To Rubadiri, Makerere was more than just a place of learning; it became a story of his existence and maturity as a writer and teacher. His tutors, for example, spoke of him with admiration and delight as someone who fully integrated in the place and was as important to it as it was to him. They consistently pointed out his leadership skills and creative acumen, qualities that Makerere as an institution

evidently nurtured and promoted. An examination of the available information about his student days shows that Rubadiri had a solid foundation, helped greatly by his great abilities that prepared him for his later roles as teacher and poet.

A Mentor and Teacher

Although Rubadiri's career spanned a number of fields and places, I want to focus on his teaching career at Makerere from 1968-1975 and on his sabbatical from October 1990 to August 1991. The sabbatical was a culmination of intense and personal correspondence which started way back in 1982 between him and the university. The University authorities managed to invite him over for two months to be part of the Makerere University Diamond Jubilee celebrations and to also teach in some of the Department of Literature's courses. What is significant is that most of the correspondence was at the initiative of the University authorities. Makerere University wanted Rubadiri to come to Makerere to share both his teaching and mentorship skills. The University at the time hoped that in addition to teaching and participation in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Rubadiri would help with and coordinate the organisation of "The Second All-Africa Writers Conference" which was started by Rubadiri's late colleague and friend, Okot p'Bitek, formerly professor of Creative Writing in the Department of Literature.

The high opinion that Makerere University had of Rubadiri when he was a student was strengthened further when he became an academic at the university. In a letter to the Vice-Chancellor dated 23rd January 1990 requesting for a sabbatical leave appointment for Rubadiri, the Head of the Department of Literature, Augustine Ejjet wrote:

The renowned poet and scholar, Professor David Rubadiri, who for a long time was an *outstanding member* of the teaching staff of Makerere's Department of Literature, has applied to be invited to take his sabbatical leave here from Sept. 1990 to Sept. 1991. Quite obviously *a scholar of this stature is an added asset* not only to the Department of Literature but to Makerere University as a whole (emphasis added).

This letter that accentuates Rubadiri's eminent academic service got a very

enthusiastic response directly to Rubadiri from Professor Senteza-Kajubi, the then Vice-Chancellor, declaring that Rubadiri's intention to come back to Makerere was "very good news indeed".

It is evident that Rubadiri's relationship to Makerere was monumental. He was perceived as an active and progressive academic, a view that his sabbatical at Makerere further entrenched. He fully engaged in the teaching as well as in the activities which promoted literary creativity outside the teaching timetable. He, for example, delivered the Okot p'Bitek Memorial Lecture organised by the Department of Literature, took part in the activities of the Creative Writing class run by Augustine Ejjet, and was fully involved in the events of The Uganda National Cultural Centre and in matters of the literary fraternity in Uganda. In another letter to the Vice-Chancellor on 4th September 1991 giving a brief report on Rubadiri's performance during his stay, Ejjet comments:

As a lecturer on the poetry course Prof. Rubadiri did a *superlative* job. Students registered for the course in droves when they heard it was going to be taught *by a celebrity of Rubadiri's calibre*. I know that many other students not officially registered for the course asked to be allowed to attend. Some of them did not even belong to Literature but came from other departments and faculties (emphasis added).

Rubadiri's presence at Makerere created an intellectually robust environment that was appreciated by the students, staff and the larger community. He played an important role in reviving vibrancy in the Department of Literature that had suffered, just like the whole of Makerere, from the tumultuous periods of Idi Amin and the immediate post-Amin years. In the aforementioned letter Ejjet concludes:

All in all we have benefitted from Prof. David Rubadiri's being here. His unfailing courtesy even to young people he taught while here in the 1960s and 70s is something we shall all miss. His humility is very touching. His genuine love for Makerere and Uganda makes him a welcome guest should he ever decide to come back.

Rubadiri's humane way of dealing with others seemed to penetrate and transform other people's view of the world. He understood others' emotions across a variety of experiences.

There are quite a number of stories around the mutual attachment between Makerere University and Rubadiri (see the introduction to *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*, 6-9). In an article commenting on the 2007 public lecture Rubadiri delivered in Blantyre, Malawi, Kabwato (2007) remarks:

Legend has it that at Makerere, Professor Rubadiri had a special relationship with Lecture Room 4 so much that the university students named the room after him. (...) The professor himself confessed on Thursday, “I *love* that room. It has so many memories. I used to *love* teaching in it (Kabwato, 2007, p.2, emphasis added).

Demonstrated in the quote above is Rubadiri’s emotional connection to Makerere, a bond from which he seems to have derived deep satisfaction. This may explain the repetition of love, a verb of affect. Makerere was thus truly an “elder brother” that evoked positive emotions for him. It was the central setting for Rubadiri’s growth from a student to an esteemed professor. He deeply identified with the place evoked in his fond identification with Lecture Room 4 where students of Literature had most of their classes. The room is no stranger to evoking strong emotions. In 2013, I witnessed Ngugi wa Thiong’o express, with teary eyes, a similarly deep bond with the room, saying that the literary discussions and the friendships he formed there were a solid foundation for what he later became. The Ugandan journalist Dennis Muhumuza gave a detailed account of Ngugi’s visit to Lecture Room 4 on 28th June, 2013 when Ngugi pointed out the exact spot in the room where he sat when he first began to write his novel *Weep Not Child* (Muhumuza, 2013, p.23).

Rubadiri felt a heightened sense of safety and security as far as Makerere was concerned. This sense of place bonding was twinned with loyalty to teaching and poetry. In 2007 he is quoted to have remarked:

I’ve lived most of my life in the classroom not only as a lecturer but as a student as well. I don’t know any other life. The book is sacrosanct to me because each time I re-read a chapter, I begin to understand myself and also the God who made us in our own different ways, giving us unique capabilities to create and write (Kabwato, 2007, p.2).

To say Rubadiri knew no other life apart from the classroom may sound a little exaggerated considering that he also served his country in other capacities, as Malawi's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations in 1964 and 1997 and also as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Malawi (2000-2003). However, the hyperbolic claim serves to emphasise the importance of his teaching career to his perception of life and his overarching bond to the classroom as a place where he felt a sense of "cognitive freedom" and self-restoration (Scannell and Gifford 2010).

Rubadiri first taught in the Extramural Department and then moved to the then Institute of Education before fully joining what had then become the Department of Literature, Language and Drama. He was drawn to the department because of the prospects of being fully involved in creative work confessing that the prospect of being part of the Department of Literature, Language and Drama "swept him off his feet" because he was greatly attracted to being part of a department that "had a human and vivid approach to a subject that encouraged high levels of creative energies" (Rubadiri, 2009, p.4). Rubadiri's enthusiasm to be part of the life of the Department is consistent with what his teachers had observed while he was a student. For example, in the testimonial cited earlier, Ingham notes Rubadiri's "greatest interest" in English as a subject because "it offers a variety of fields of interest, as for example, drama in which Rubadiri has played a prominent and entertaining part." Recurrent observations from his teachers about his, "unusual ability in English", as Professor Warner put it, were linked to his creative abilities.

In the 2009 keynote address referred to above, Rubadiri gives us a taste of his full participation in the creative energies of the Department. He recalls with a lot of devotion: "I shall always treasure and live the experience of my involvement in the three Travelling Theatres I was in charge of. It was an experience which took us around, covering Uganda and Kenya." Rubadiri's contribution to groundbreaking efforts to establish literary creativity in the Department is encapsulated in the seemingly timeless poetry anthology, *Poems from East Africa*, that he edited with his

senior colleague David Cook.

Rubadiri was passionate about teaching and about his students. He followed up on his students and encouraged them to pursue their passions. After reading a newspaper article that Austin Bukenya and I wrote eulogizing Rubadiri (*New Vision*, 24th September 2018), one of his former students commented that we said a lot about the man but left out his great ability to reward students' originality and creativity while exacting appropriate punishment for sloppy work. Rubadiri was a very devoted teacher who expected his students to match his enthusiasm for the subject he so loved and the institution he deeply respected.

Two memories stand out for me as his student in 1991. First, when he noticed how much I loved poetry and my efforts at writing it, he encouraged me greatly in big and small ways. When we finished third year and were about to sit our final examination he gave me a typed copy of an unpublished elegy he had written in memory of his great friend and fellow poet Okot p'Bitek. It was signed in his handwriting with the date he handed me the poem. He told me that the poem was precious to him and that he gave it to me as a gift because he realised how priceless poetry was to me. I still have the poem and when Prof. Rubadiri passed on, the memory of this gift vividly returned and I took out the poem and set it as coursework for my students, who have made profound interpretations of the poem. It is these seemingly small gestures that made the man such a model teacher.

Second, he noticed that I spoke a lot about my mother and he suggested that I should take him to meet her and the rest of my siblings. My siblings and my mother never forgot that visit and often talked about it. This compassionate treatment of his students was widespread. Pastor Simeon Kayiwa recounted a similar experience:

Professor Rubadiri was my family friend. He was also my personal tutor. He taught me how to write prose and poetry. He liked me so much he even supported me financially in my academic projects. He always took me to National Theatre to watch drama. Professor Rubadiri was a deep thinker and a play critic. He was an inspiring, penetrative, cutting and incisive poet and prose writer. He was also full of love and explorative of

talent in young artistes (cited in Mazinga, 2018, p.32).

Many people know a lot about Rubadiri as a person of exceptional abilities but as one of his former students, I would say he was, above all, very human and if I were asked to choose one word to describe him, that word would be “simplicity” which also defines both his way of teaching and the nature of his poetry. His simple use of language, the intensity and depth of his feelings for people and words is the reason that his poetry became so popular and spoke to many people on the continent and beyond.

Rubadiri’s teaching left such an indelible impact on his students because, apart from rendering things in such a simple manner that you felt you knew them already, he also was a redoubtable champion and an advocate of human rights. He made human sympathy a remarkable virtue and did so with characteristic hearty humour, traits that are unmistakable in his life and poetry. To his students, Rubadiri was a spirit that soared. He was a man as well as a mindset. He set his mind to free other people’s minds but also as many of his former students know, Rubadiri did not suffer fools gladly so maybe his exile was predestined because of his views and beliefs. He was a loud poet and teacher but a quiet and almost shy person. He was a consummate literary master and a very demonstrative teacher who identified keenly with what he was teaching and because he had a life-long passion for drama and poetry, he conducted the class like an actor and poet, dancing when he needed to, clapping and drawing pictures with his words. He insisted in his class that in order to understand any poem fully, the audience had to read and think. Perhaps that explains why a number of his own poems are full of allusions to other poems he had read and made part of his experience. As a teacher, he came across as a man of substantial and variegated knowledge. In the letter mentioned above that summarizes his experience of teaching at Makerere, he says this about his classes:

Most of all I shall miss my classes. With all that Makerere has gone through – these classes have been the most wonderful experience. Their standard of application has been excellent. This I shall remember with

pride. Standards in the field I have been teaching in (poetry) have been said to have fallen, if anything though, the [students'] sensitive application and their determination to excel is better than during my time as an undergraduate.

Rubadiri was a teacher who had a special skill in organising people's emotions. He managed to catch, to hold and to reward the attention of his students and his readers. In his poetry he had a way of rallying his readers' support behind the characters and ideas he built up in the poems. This I demonstrate below.

The Poet

Okot p'Bitek, Rubadiri's close friend and fellow poet, commenting on the status of African writers in 1973 had this to say:

I don't think we can talk of professional writers in Africa today. Achebe works, or worked, with the broadcasting station in Nigeria. Ngugi, Taban and Rubadiri are at the University. All our writers are part-time writers, but this does not mean that whatever they are doing part-time is not very important. (p'Bitek, 1973, p.43).

p'Bitek brings out a very crucial point as far as Rubadiri is concerned. He was never a full-time writer but he is widely recognized as one of the topmost and widely anthologized African poets (Mapanje 2004, Banda 2018, Otosierieze 2018).

In Uganda, most people first came to know of Rubadiri's poems in the secondary school classroom. He was a frequently mentioned and taught poet. During our time in secondary school, the most celebrated of his poems were those that looked to the humanity of Africans. The first of Rubadiri's poems that we were introduced to in Senior Two class at Uganda's Gayaza High School in 1983 was "Stanley meets Mutesa". The most striking memory about this much admired poem is not about insights revealed to us by our teacher; rather it is about our response to the poem which, quite interestingly, is similar to the response of the Senior Two class I taught nine years later at the same school. Whereas our teacher emphasized the European influence demonstrated both in the fact that the poem echoes T.S Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" and the presence and

welcome of the white man, as students we were captivated more by the familiar and vivid description of the tropical climate with its spectacular swing from the “The heat of day” to the “the chill of the night” and the whining mosquitoes (Rubadiri, 2004, p.24). It was very easy to imagine the climatic conditions because it was the same climate we experienced every day. The other aspect that caught our attention as students was the focus on the appearance and emotions of the African porters (“thin weary line of carriers/with tattered dirty rags to cover their backs” [Rubadiri, 2004, p.24]) on their journey to Mutesa’s court as well as the description of the imposing Mutesa, “the tall black king” who “towers over the thin white bearded man” (Rubadiri, 2004, p.26) as he receives him.

In retrospect, these images must have been striking because of the poet’s focus on the humanity of the porters. The persona in the poem is acutely interested in the human beings that accompanied the white man. They are the main focus of the poem. The speaker is closely interested in their suffering even when he depicts it subtly by describing their condition of weariness and their deprived appearances heightened in some ways by the dirty rags they are wearing. There is close attention to the heaviness of their load and their emotions as they went through the days and nights. Our attention is drawn to the fact that some of these porters died on the way and their bodies were abandoned on the plain. The persona is portrayed as someone who understands human emotions well. He describes the porters’ feelings as they approached Mutesa’s court and pays attention to their excitement and to the minute detail of the hearts that beat faster and the loads that felt lighter. The poet accurately captures the elated feelings and their effect on the people he is describing. It is human to feel relief when a challenging situation nears an end and Rubadiri takes time to represent the feelings which any human being would identify with in the context of triumph. Rubadiri the poet is the same as Rubadiri the teacher. He was very conscious of the humanity of others and observed the things that made others human. He applied himself to questions of dispossession and repossession that were key debates at the time when he produced most of his well known poems with the awareness of recognizing the humanity in each of his subjects.

Another of Rubadiri's poems that proved very popular during our secondary school days was "An African Thunderstorm". Our teacher's interpretation of this poem was close to that of "Stanley Meets Mutesa". In "An African Thunderstorm", our teacher's concentration was on the first two lines ("From the west/clouds come hurrying with the wind" [Rubadiri, 2004, p.21]) and the last two lines ("amidst the smell of fired smoke/and the pelting march of the storm" [Rubadiri, 2004, p.22]). Her interpretation was that the poet's mention of the 'west' as the direction from which the thunderstorm came and the allusion to 'fired smoke' and 'the pelting march' evoked scenes of violent colonial invasion of Africa by Europe. Interestingly, I recollect that our attention as students was on lines and scenes that reminded us of the experiences of thunderstorms that we were familiar with. Considering the parts of the poems that took our fancy then, they seem to point to the poet's interest in human beings. The poet compares the clouds to a "madman chasing nothing". The subtle allusion to the complexities and mystery of madness reveals a very reflective mind; the wind in its power puzzles the persona and brings up questions of power and its relationship to nature. The recreation of people's reactions to the storm is very powerful. The poet calls attention to the children's delight at impending storm and he also highlights the women's sudden bustling activities in order to prepare for the storm. The poet's power of observation makes the experiences vividly real to the readers.

As revealed above, Rubadiri's poetry thrives on careful and intimate representation of the everyday which made it easier for students to relate with the subject matter. He bases his images on the familiar but deeply profound things and ideas. In my considered opinion, that is where his originality as a poet is rooted. He captures the ordinary with such eloquence that he leaves one wondering how he manages this feat. He is a deeply reflective poet and a probing analyst of experience. To me, what elevates Rubadiri's poetry to a distinguished pedestal is its strength of thought about ordinary things.

Besides intricate attention to the quotidian, Rubadiri's sincerity and sensitivity to (in)justice makes some of his poems stand out. "Yet Another Song"

comes to mind in that regard. In that poem, Rubadiri arrests in a perceptive way the experience of exile that defined his life and that of most of his contemporaries. The persona demonstrates the familiarity of what should have been an uncommon experience by using the adverb ‘yet’ in the title and the very first line of the poem. He points out with irony the reversal of the euphoria of political independence to the bitterness of exile. The very totems the persona helped to raise are the ones that became monstrous and forced him to leave his own land. In this poem Rubadiri demonstrates his ability to paint pictures with words and make the situations he illustrates so vivid. This style of creating pictures and appealing to the senses was something he not only used in his poems but also in his classes. He was an eloquent teacher who drew his students’ attention to things they could have ignored. He did the same in his poetry as is the case with his poem ‘An African Vigil’, a very popular poem when we were undergraduates and still one of the most enthusiastically received poems in the undergraduate classes that I teach. I suspect it is the classic capture of the body language of courting in the concluding parts of the poem that endears it to the students:

As I edge my way past
 Her eyes meet my eyes
 And for a moment that lingers timelessly
 Dwell on each other understandingly
 Same time tomorrow? *My eyes say*
 Hers: *I shall not fail* (Rubadiri, 2004, p.19).

The scene recreated in this poem seems so real and familiar that it is hard not to see it with one’s mind’s eye. Because of the intense images and vivid descriptions, the poem acts like a little play. In class, students have been able to present drawings and acted out the poem illustrating the lovers’ actions which only serves to confirm that Rubadiri’s poetry evokes the sense of a great dramatist and painter.

In my recent teaching of one of the less known poems by Rubadiri, “In memory of Okot p’Bitek”, the students’ attention was drawn mainly to two aspects of the poem which they regarded as significant even though there are other equally interesting aspects of the poem. The first was the poet’s elaborate reference

to Budo, the school at which he and Okot p'Bitek became close friends and the second was the evident suggestion that he viewed Uganda as the land that nurtured him. This is captured in the lines:

You from the land of the Nanga
 From the King of dances
 The Bwola,
 I from far flung lands
 Of deep lakes and high mountains
 Now to be watched over
 By the waters of Nalubale
 In the womb of the Pearl of Africa.

In these lines, Rubadiri talks about Okot p'Bitek's place of origin, Acoliland, by referring to the royal dance, the Bwola, that is unique to the Acoli people. He also describes Malawi as "far flung lands" and shows "the Pearl of Africa", Uganda's nickname, as the place where the two friends are united and will be protected and mothered.

The ideas of home and exile work like a patchwork quilt in most of Rubadiri's poems demonstrating feelings of desolation as well as contentment. In poems such as "Thoughts after Work", the feeling of isolation is bred by the persona's elite status. After work he goes back to his "brick government compound" which he sees as his "new exile" because it separates him from the happiness of the children and the whole community. His new status acts like a prison that denies him access to the "clear laughter of African children" which the rest of the village may take for granted (Rubadiri, 2004, p.30). The persona in this poem is in exile in his own village. A similar idea of an alienated home comes up repeatedly in the poem "Begging Aid" (Rubadiri, 2004, p.37-38). Elders who are supposed to be respectable figures at home become figures of ridicule as they beg for "alms" away from home. There is extreme irony demonstrated in elders becoming "circus lions" not even at home such that they become doubly alien. In addition the homelands have become zoos which imply not only confusion at one level but also unnatural conditions. Home is an arid and derisory place that actually

receives “toys of death” which are presented as more important than children. Alongside poems that show extreme sadness and pain, Rubadiri demonstrates what Said has termed “a triumphant ideology” (Said, 2001, p.177). For instance, in the poem “Black Child”, despite the acute suffering and humiliation of the child, the persona predicts victory over the condition when he says:

Black child,
I see your wings
Sprout and grow
I see the dull eyes
Catch fire and glow
And then you must fly (Rubadiri, 2004, p.31).

The grim conditions of home do not snuff out hope. Perhaps that insistent hope could be one of the reasons that Rubadiri found in Makerere University a home away from his Malawian home.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt at remembrance. It sought to piece together moments of Rubadiri as an active student, a greatly admired teacher and eminent poet with close links to Makerere University and Uganda. Besides illustrating the unseverable bond between Rubadiri and Makerere both as a physical and intellectual space, the paper has demonstrated how from his student days, Rubadiri embodied characteristics of a great thinker and leader. His admirable abilities as a student both in class and outside earned him praise from his tutors. These very traits were to define his later roles as an intimate teacher and intuitive poet who always sought to appreciate humanity in the everyday. The directness and conversational manner of his expression combined with the profundity of the experiences he presented made the intensely personal, social and political voice behind the poems so significant particularly in Uganda where he spent a substantial part of his life.

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