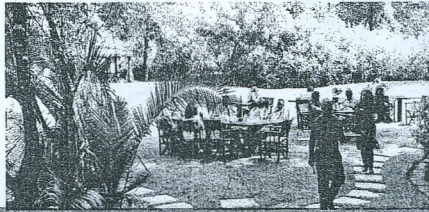


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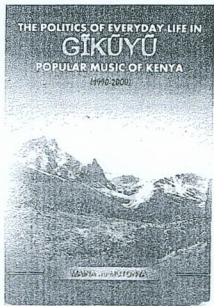


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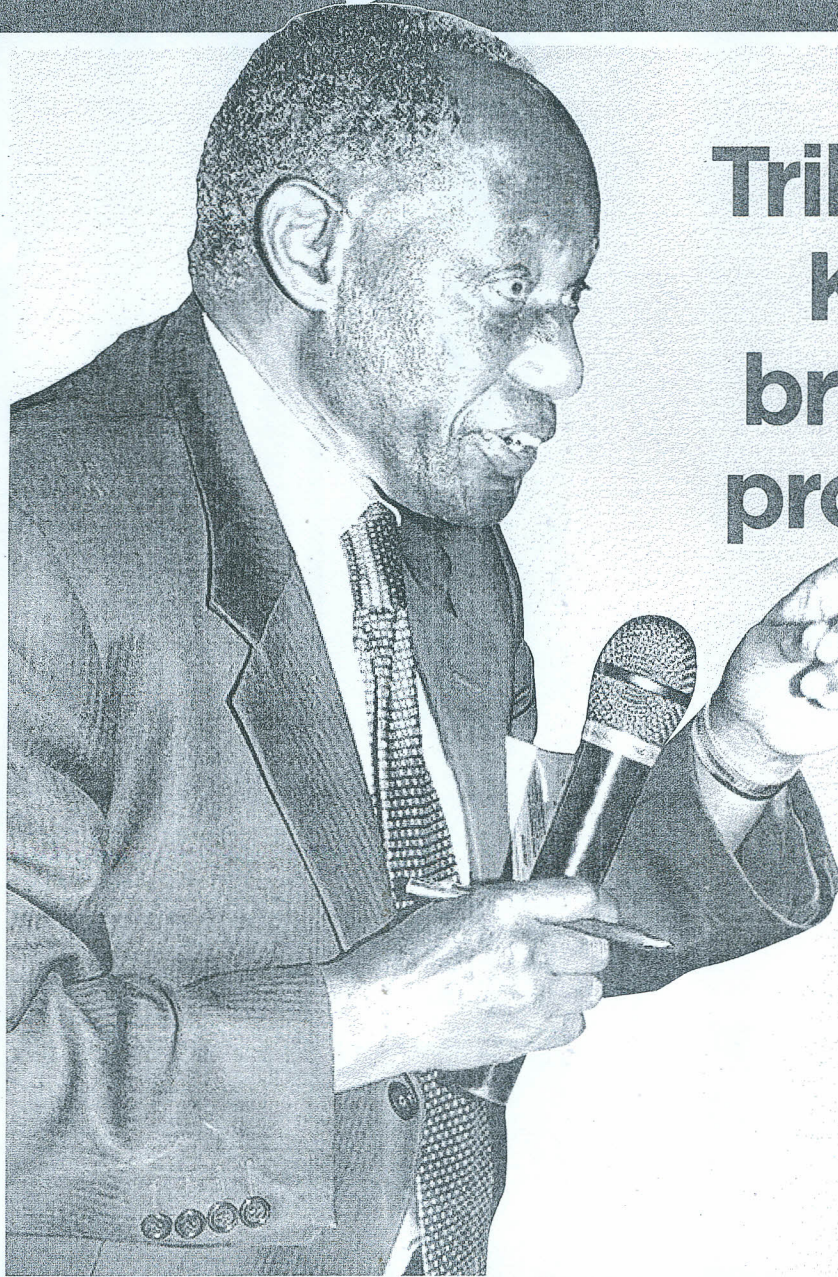
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## Tribute to Kenya's brightest professor

**While former  
colleagues  
paint a  
picture of  
an academic  
they held in awe,  
they also say Prof  
Wasawo, who  
died last week,  
was such a humble  
man you could not  
easily tell he was  
so educated**

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# Brilliant scholar who lectured into his golden years

**Prof Wasawo, who died last week aged 91, is hailed by his colleagues as one of the brightest brains to be born in Kenya**

BY EVERLINE OKEWO  
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okewo@ke.nationmedia.com

It took us three weeks to get in touch with Prof David Peter Simon Wasawo in our quest to tell the story about a young university with aged professors.

The scholar was the Chancellor of the Kisumu-based Great Lakes University, reputed to be the home to many professors, particularly from Nyanza, who have retired from other universities.

After many unanswered phone calls, he eventually spoke to *Lifestyle* on January 18, with the help of his wife. It was then that we learnt the professor was admitted to the Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi.

We had wanted him to tell us what motivated him to remain in the lecture halls despite his advanced age.

"Older scholars must remain in universities to guide the younger ones," Prof Wasawo told *Lifestyle*, adding that the character of education is of a lifelong journey with no retirement age.

Since the professor said he had a problem with his throat and could not talk for long, we wished him quick recovery and agreed to set up an interview once he left hospital.

He did not.

Prof Wasawo died a few weeks later on February 4 at the age of 91. His brief conversation with *Lifestyle* was probably the last the great man — described by some as the "father of professors" or simply DPS — had with the media.

Hailed by fellow professors as

one of the brightest brains to be born in Kenya, he maintained an active tie with academia.

His brilliance was best summarised by Edward Carey Francis, the legendary headmaster who taught him at the Alliance High School in an interview carried in the *Sunday Nation* in 1965.

When Carey Francis was asked who he thought was the most brilliant student he had ever taught, the man who shaped some of Kenya's brightest minds at Alliance was prompt in his response: "Far and away, David Wasawo."

Forty-nine years later, this was reflected in tributes to Prof Wasawo. Prof Ouma Muga fondly remembers him as "impossibly intelligent" and irreplaceable.

"If you go to Oxford University today you will see, inscribed on the list of honour, David Wasawo Osare, Bsc, Msc, Dsc, the brightest scholar at Oxford between the 14th and 20th centuries. David Wasawo and Simeon Ominde, with whom I had interaction at Makerere, first as a student and later as a member of staff, and also with whom I had joint research consultancies, were impossibly intelligent," Prof Muga said yesterday.

"Prof Wasawo was one of the most infectious scholars in Kenya."

"You could not work with Wasawo without his intellectual vision catching you. In the early 1980s I did research with him for United Nations and USAid on the impact of satellite system on analysis of African resources and prediction of disasters. He was one of the most intellectually capable scholars in the world."

Prof Wasawo was the first East African to be awarded a degree in Science and post-graduate in Zoology at the University of Oxford in 1951, with groundbreaking research on the lung fish of

Lake Victoria.

Senator Anyang' Nyong'o describes Prof Wasawo as an excellent scholar committed to the highest standards of education.

"I have known Prof Wasawo since 1968 while a student at Alliance High School. He set the standard of academic excellence which has never been broken," says Prof Nyong'o.

"He was a great teacher and contributed to higher education in Kenya to the best of his ability," eulogised the senator.

Born in Gem, Siaya County, in 1923, Prof Wasawo started his early childhood education in Maseno in 1937.

He sat and passed the Kenya Junior Secondary School Examination in 1941 with a distinction and was declared the best candidate in the country.

Between 1942 and 1943, he went on to attend Alliance High School in Kikuyu where he aced the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Examinations, scoring distinctions in all the subjects. Once again he was declared the best candidate in the country.

Prof Dan Kaseje of Great Lakes University says despite his achievements in academia and research, one could still easily pass without noticing Prof Wasawo because of his immense simplicity and humility.

In 1944, Prof Wasawo was admitted to Makerere University College in Kampala, the only institution of higher learning in East and Central Africa at that time, which offered diplomas and not degrees.

He enrolled for science courses with an emphasis in biology leading to London Higher Matriculation Examinations. Towards the end of 1945, the young Wasawo demonstrated superior academic prowess to his all-British academic tutors such as had never been witnessed before in that institution.

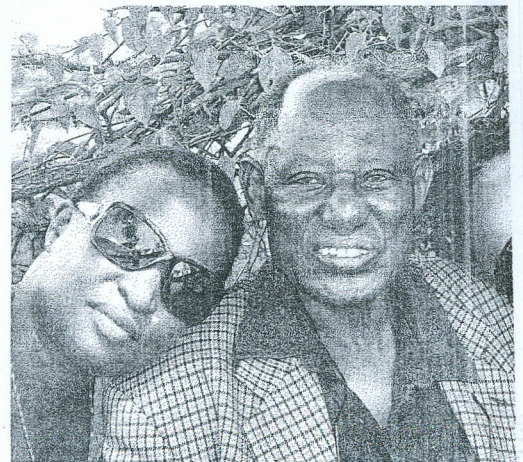
Prof Wasawo taught in Makerere between 1952 and 1965, going through all the academic ranks to full professor and Head of Zoology Department.

During this period, he taught students from various faculties, including Medicine, Agriculture and Veterinary Science.

He went on to become the first East African to hold the post of vice-principal at Makerere.

In 1965, Prof Wasawo transferred from Makerere to University of Nairobi College to become its first deputy principal, a post he held until 1970 when the University of Nairobi was inaugurated into a full university and a new vice-chancellor appointed.

He reverted to teaching and became the first Kenyan pro-



Prof Wasawo and his wife Ruth and children.

PHOTO | COURTESY

fessor and Head of Zoology Department and Dean, Faculty of Science, at the University of Nairobi. He served in that capacity until 1971 when he retired to join the United Nations.

After 19 years of university teaching, research and administration, says Prof Kaseje, he established himself as not only East Africa's "father of science" but also "the father of professors".

After retiring from the University of Nairobi, Prof Wasawo's first assignment was with Unesco between 1971 and 1973 as scientific adviser to the Government of Tanzania during which he assisted in establishing the Tanzania Scientific Research Council.

Prof Wasawo became the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Chief of Natural Resources between 1973 and 1979 based in Addis Ababa where he was in charge of programmes in science and technology, mineral resources, energy and water resources, remote sensing, among others.

Former Prime Minister Raila Odinga said Prof Wasawo was Kenya's first African professor and a distinguished scientist who inspired many to pursue university education in general, and sciences in particular.

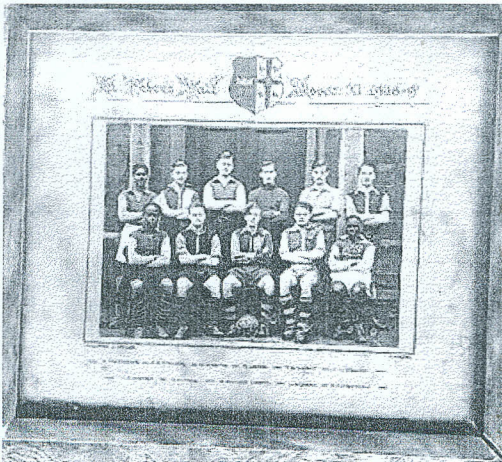
"Prof Wasawo was an icon who promoted science-based education and lifted the country's reputation internationally from early days of independence," he said.



Prof David Wasawo (left) greets Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni at a past event. FILE PHOTO



Prof Wasawo with his daughters Delia and Lavinia. PHOTO COURTESY



91  
Age of Prof Wasawo when he died.

Mr Odinga says the professor served as a mentor and friend of many in Kenya's academia and was easily recognised as one of the world's greatest brains to date but who remained immensely simple and humble despite his great name.

Moi University Chancellor, Prof Miriam Were, describes the scholar as supportive to younger colleagues.

University of Nairobi Vice-Chancellor, Prof George Magoha, says Prof Wasawo was exemplary during his tenure as chairman of the governing council at the university between 1998 and 2005 (see Prof Magoha's tribute).

Maseno University Vice-Chancellor Dominic Makawiti describes the late scholar as an

"academic doyen".

Prof Wasawo became the first post-apartheid Director of Training, Africa Institute for Policy Analysis and Economic Integration in Cape Town, South Africa.

During the end of his tenure in 1996, he prepared a report titled "A Reconnaissance Visit to South Africa on Science and Technology", which he presented to President Nelson Mandela's Government as the way forward in co-operation in science and technology for development.

Prof Wasawo may be gone, but it is clear his legacy remains throughout Africa and beyond.

FOND MEMORIES

# Professors pay glowing tribute to 'academic doyen'

By GEORGE MAGOHA

The world woke up to a rude shock last Tuesday with the news of the death of a founding academic icon, Prof David Peter Simon Wasawo, who passed on at the Aga Khan Hospital early that morning at the age of 91.

Prof Wasawo was a pioneer African zoologist in East Africa who taught at Makerere University in the 1950s and 1960s and at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s and early 1970s before joining international bodies including UN agencies, Tanzania Scientific Research Council, and the Organisation of African Unity panels and countries.

In those earlier years of independence when the country was charting its path in higher education, Prof Wasawo was appointed Vice-Principal of the University of Nairobi College in 1965 and served until 1970 when the college was upgraded to a full-fledged university. Thus, he is easily credited for laying the foundation for what was to become a successful university in the region.

Later he served as the pioneer chairman, Department of Zoology and dean, Faculty of Science. He resigned in 1973 to serve on international bodies.

Prof Francis Gichaga, who was later to become vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi in the 1990s and who worked with him for years, describes him as "a humble man you could not easily tell was so educated".

For his excellent service to the university and the world, his impeccable academic credentials, his enormous contribution to research and teaching in science, his outstanding role in the application of science and technology for development, and above all unsurpassed humility, the University of Nairobi awarded him the Degree of Doctor of Science (Honoris Causa).

From where I sit, I know that the university benefited greatly from Prof Wasawo's leadership as Chairman of Council between 1998 and 2005 - a critical period when the university implemented module II programmes and pioneered the competitive hiring of top managers in the university. This practice has since been emulated by other state bodies.

As an academician Prof Wasawo was without parallel, a fact acknowledged by Margaret McPherson in her book, *They Built for the Future*, A chronicle of Makerere University College 1922-1962.

She wrote: "Tutors had the joy of reporting an outstanding student in biology, D.P.S. Wasawo, who is now the vice-principal and professor of Zoology, having been sent straight to Oxford University from Makerere."

As an outstanding zoologist, he researched extensively on various biological species in East Africa and published many scientific papers. He will always be remembered for his original contribution to the study of the lung fish (protopterus aethiopicus) the largest fish in the lake region before the introduction of the Nile Perch in Lake Victoria.

His contemporaries in Makerere included eminent scholars like the late Prof Simeon Ominde, Prof Joseph Lule, Prof Wilbert Chagule and Prof Y.M. Bora. His former students remember him for his powerful intellect; he could conduct a three-hour lecture without referring to his notes. Among his



students were the late Prof Hillary Ojiambo, the late Prof Joseph Maina Mungai, Prof Richard Musangi, late Prof George Kinoti, Prof Canute Khamala, the late Prof Nimrod Bwibo, Prof J.K. Mati and the late Prof Ambrose Wasuna. This cohort of scholars played a critical role in the expansion of university education in the country and to a large extent were the founding scholars in their respective disciplines.

A true scholar, Prof Wasawo's contributions were felt beyond our borders. In Tanzania, when serving as Unesco's scientific adviser, he was instrumental in the establishment of the Tanzania Scientific Research Council.

Again, while serving as the Chief National Resources Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) based in Addis Ababa, he was instrumental in setting up the regional centre for services in surveying, mapping and remote sensing.

Further, Prof Wasawo was the post-apartheid Director of Training at the African Institute of Policy Analysis and Economic Integration in Cape Town, South Africa. As a true scholar, he documented his experiences in a report which he presented to the then President Nelson Mandela's government, as the way forward to cooperation in science and technology for development.

His best contribution to the field of academia and leadership of learning institutions is best captured by the following comments by University of Nairobi scholars.

Prof Gichaga: "He was a humble man you could not easily tell was so educated."

Prof Gitahi Kiama: "We shall miss his guidance and leadership for he served the university with dedication."

Prof Charles Okidi: "He was a pioneer scholar who provided intellectual leadership." Prof Bernard Sihanya: "He pioneered the essence of administration in the university."

A respected family man, Prof Wasawo was married to Ruth and the couple was blessed with four children - Fredrick, Delia, Steven and Lavinia and many grandchildren.

As we celebrate the life of this incredible man whose trademark was simplicity and humility despite remarkable achievements, the valuable services he rendered to society and his commitment to scholarship will forever remain etched in the annals of history. Fare thee well Prof David Peter Simon Wasawo.

Prof Magoha is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nairobi