

Top Kenyan scholar a sage

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Talk of a philosopher and what immediately comes to mind is some eccentric character who takes an out-of-this-world pleasure in matters of wisdom and abstract ideas. Dr Tom Namwambah, a young Kenyan university lecturer, even in his favourite portrait ♦ a priest-like attire and a well-trimmed beard ♦ on his published works does not quite strike you as the traditional sage.



Dr Tom Namwambah, an eminent philosophy scholar, in his office at Kenyatta University during the interview. He was recently nominated for recognition by UK-based International Biographical Centre for his enormous contribution to the discipline, meaning his name will be on the list of leading philosophers.
Photo/Charles Kamau

On the day of the interview, we found Namwambah in his office at Kenyatta University, dressed in a flowing purple West African *Agbada*, complete with a cap, which gave him the look of anything between a politician and a village elder. But it was not long before his thoughts gave him away.

Asked about his preferred priestly image, his answer was typically philosophical: "I believe in God but I'm not notoriously religious."

At just 43, Namwambah was recently recognised by the International Biographical Centre (IBC), based in Cambridge, England, as being among the leading philosophers of the world.

The organisation honours individuals who have made significant contributions in their professional fields. In his letter to Namwambah, Nicholas S. Law, the director-general of IBC, said: "You are one of these contributors to excellence. You have, through your constant efforts, maintained a standard worth rewarding. Therefore, as a noted and eminent professional in the field of philosophy you have now been considered and nominated for recognition by the IBC."

The Kenyatta University don will be travelling to the UK in the second week of February to receive the award ♦ a commemorative medal designed by regalia-makers to the world's monarchies and a certificate. The award does not come with any money, but Namwambah takes pride in the fact that his name is on the historic list of scholarly fame, alongside those of such great modern-day thinkers as Bertrand Russell and Adam Smith.

"The award does not have any monetary value. It opens the way for one to become an international scholar. I will now be a roving scholar, sharing my ideas and knowledge with the world," he explains.

He has already received invitations to give talks in France and the United States, and more are still to come. Greener pastures are also beckoning, but he is not about to jump into the "brain drain" exodus.

"There is no way I am going to move out of Kenya. I will use my knowledge to help develop

Kenya," he says.

In 1997, he landed a scholarship from the Government of Spain through the Spanish Agency for international Cooperation to study for his PhD in philosophy with a bias in critical thinking and decision analysis at the University of Madrid.

The only hitch was that he was required to do it in Spanish, a language he did not understand, notwithstanding the fact that he is "very poor in languages". He overcame this hurdle and mastered Spanish in a record four months.

When he handed in his thesis, the panel realised that he had done double work and decided to award him two PhDs instead of one. The first one was in philosophy and the other one in Educational Sciences.

It is also interesting to note that he completed his PhD studies in three-and-a-half years instead of the required five.

"I used to work for a maximum of 15 hours a day," he explains.

The bespectacled Dr Namwambah says he was humbled by the award.

"I felt that this was a recognition of my efforts and my country. Indeed, it is an honour to my institution and by extension our Vice-Chancellor (Prof Everett Standa), who has been a guiding father and a motivation to me," he says.

In some quarters, though, Namwambah is regarded controversial, even arrogant ♦ a label he is quick to deny.

"If I was arrogant, could I have kept my job at Kenyatta University for 16 years?" he asks rhetorically. "Would I also be the darling of students at the university? Arrogant, he adds, is a relative term: "When you are principled some people say that you are arrogant. Intellectualism is sometimes misconstrued for pride." Waxing philosophical, he says that in any society there is a creative minority that sets out to improve society for the better as opposed to the conformist majority.

"I chose to belong to the former and such people are unwanted in any community," he explains.

He says that he is a firm believer in the truth and insists that it is a virtue he is ready to die for. But the love of truth, as he has discovered on the road to achievement, always attracts enemies for philosophers. It is fraught with tribulations, some of which cost them their lives.

Famous Greek philosopher Socrates, for instance, was sentenced to death for allegedly corrupting the morals of the youth of the city (Athens). He was ordered to drink poison, which he did in the company of his students. For Kenya's Namwambah, one such moment he would like to forget in a hurry took place in March 2003, on the Kenyatta University Campus, where he still lives.

The knock on the door was as rough as it was unnerving. Whoever was knocking must have been pretty agitated. The lively banter in the house suddenly went quiet as everyone turned sharply to look at the door.

Finally, Namwambah's younger brother offered to go and see who was at the door. What he saw left him momentarily speechless. A group of about 40, all mean-looking and carrying all manner of crude weapons took positions outside, baying for Namwambah's blood. Among those who were visiting were his own students. So when they heard the commotion outside, they came to the door to have a closer look.



**Happy family... Dr Namwambah's wife Agnes and their two children Brian (left) and Lynn.
Photo/Family album**

"One of the students in my house managed to identify about five Kenyatta University students in the rough crowd, as the security lights were still on," recalls Namwambah. "He actually called them by their names, but they were not in any position to respond."

Sensing that the crowd outside meant no good, he switched off the lights and asked everyone to follow him into one of the bedrooms, where they barricaded the door with all manner of furniture.

"What happened afterwards was simply blood-curdling," he says. "The violence unleashed by the group was terrifying, all window panes were shattered and the door was left in splinters."

His Mercedes Benz car was overturned and set on fire, so was another vehicle belonging to a colleague living nearby.

"I have never been so terrified in my life. But I later decided that if my life was to end on that day then so be it," reflects the philosophy lecturer.

So why would someone want him dead?

"At that time our university was undergoing a particularly rough time as staff and students were unhappy with the administration. I was at the forefront in the group that wanted the administration out. That was the price I paid for being so vocal," says the lecturer, who, behind his desk, does not look like he could hurt a fly.

After the crowd was through with their violent mission, some students got wind of the incident and offered to spend the night outside their teacher's house to protect him. They even lit a bonfire to keep themselves warm. Today a tree is growing at scene of crime.

Namwambah says: "I planted the tree as a way of commemorating that night when my life was almost brought to a brutal end."

While accepting his recent award, Namwambah said that it awakened him into doing what he has

always believed in.

"This recognition comes to me when my country is at a political crossroads. When reason is being sacrificed at the altar of a bid to remain in power by a few power-hungry individuals. A time when emotions seem to override reason in arenas of political dispensation," he wrote.

He reserves some wisdom on the political front as well.

"I do not shy away from saying what I think is right and no amount of intimidation can stop me," he says.

He actively took part in the public debate on the proposed new Constitution, which was rejected in the referendum last November 21. He gave his thoughts on the political situation as a guest on a local FM radio station.

"I made it very clear that both the President and the Vice-President should be rise above politics and not appear to siding with any particular side," he recalls.

By supporting the Banana side, he added, the President was being biased, and that the action amounted to defeating the course of justice, "because he is President to people in the Orange and Banana camps."

Asked whether he did not fear retribution from the quarters he directed his "controversial comments", he responded, thoughtfully: "That is how people misunderstand my intentions." Then, wagging a finger, he added: "You see, Kenyans do not like being told the truth. When you tell the truth you are accused of being controversial."

The philosopher in him takes over when he starts talking about philosophy and how it is a much-misunderstood discipline.

"People say that philosophy is too abstract and most wonder whether they can get jobs if they study philosophy. By studying philosophy people have a better understanding of the world they live in. Philosophy is the foundation of knowledge," he explains as he switches into lecture mode.

"It is a platform to liberate the human mind from mediocrity and mental dormancy. It is through philosophy that ideas are integrated and understood. Eventually, the rational power of man is what distinguishes him from beast."

To him for university students to ask what jobs they are likely to get after studying philosophy is to defeat the purpose of scholarship and intellectualism ♦ "which is simply to gain knowledge and be wise." In the West, philosophy is a compulsory subject in universities.

Citing Nyayoism, Namwambah says that for a long time political slogans have been confused for philosophy.

"Nyayoism was all about following in the footsteps of what Jomo Kenyatta stood for, which to me



Dr Namwamba points to a tree sapling outside his house at Kenyatta University. He planted it in 2003 to commemorate the night he survived an attack by a crowd he believes was incited by people opposed to his views. Photo/Charles Kamau

was an appeasement to the Kikuyu community," he says. He similarly dismisses Dr Kenneth Kaunda's Humanism and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's *Ujamaa*.

"This (*Ujamaa*) was just socialism blended and should not be misconstrued for philosophy," he adds.

Dr Namwambah is an elder brother of Ababu Namwambah, the activist lawyer known for his stinging political commentaries in the media. He talks very fondly of his younger sibling.

"He is our last born brother, but I relate to him the way one would his son," he says, with a warm smile. "When I was at university, I offered to take him under my wing by paying his fees through the boom (student allowance) we used to receive."

He recalls that as the younger Namwambah was growing up, he impressed upon him the importance of acquiring knowledge.

"When I started working I would invite him to stay at my place during the holidays. During the day, I would dispatch him to the library with enough money to buy himself soda and bread," he says, adding that he is not surprised that he turned out to be what he is today.

Namwambah the philosopher was born in 1963, in Bumadeya village, near Port Victoria, in Budalang'i division of Busia district. He is the third-born in a family of two girls and seven boys, two of whom are deceased. He attended Port Victoria Primary School, Kisumu High School and later Agoro Sare for his Advanced Level education.

He later joined Kenyatta University for his Bachelor of Education degree, which he completed in 1988. He taught briefly at Alliance High School before going back to Kenyatta University for his Master of Arts in Philosophy degree, which he earned in 1993.

He is married to Agnes Wanjiru, and they have two children 13-year-old Lynn and Brian, 10

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