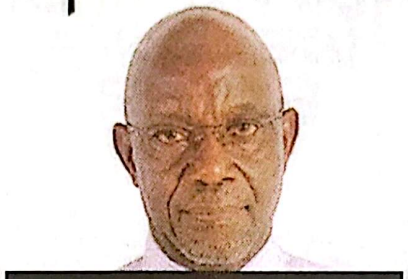
Remembering top biotech scientist Dr Andrew Kiggundu



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A screaming headline in the *New Vision* last month, impossible for any reader to miss, reported how one of Uganda's top scientists in biotechnology had died in an apparent freak accident. The article, which was very well written by Prossy Nandudu, showed one of the most recent photographs of Dr Andrew Kiggundu in his typical pose as a quiet, unassuming agricultural scientist – an image that gave little indication of the intellectual behind major achievements in agricultural development in Uganda.

I first met Dr Kiggundu at the now world-famous International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE), where he was a trainee scientist studying the role of insects in biotechnology. I was myself a post-doctoral fellow at the institute. ICIPE was established in 1970 by Kenyan professor Thomas R. Odhiambo, who had, coincidentally, began his career as a research assistant at our own Kawanda Research Station, now an institute. Kiggundu drew my attention for two reasons: first, as a young, focused Ugandan who had won a coveted scholarship at the centre; and second, because he stirred memories of a past research colleague who carried the same name – Mukasa-Kiggundu, a soil scientist of the highest calibre – and of Samwiri Mukasa, the doyen of bean breeding in Uganda and the first African chief agricultural research officer in the agriculture ministry.

The next time I met Dr Kiggundu, he sought my support in his application for the position of director at one of the National Agricultural Research Organisation's (NARO) institutes, which I of course provided, having assessed him as a budding scientist with a powerful curriculum vitae that demonstrated his extensive training at some of the finest university campuses in the US and South Africa, in addition to his wide-ranging international travels. At the time of his death, Kiggundu was principal scientist for biotechnology promotion and was a leading authority in biotechnology across the whole of East Africa. He was at the forefront of the development of the anti-tick vaccine at NARO. Ticks are carriers of East Coast Fever, a debilitating disease in cattle that leads to up to 75% of deaths and poor performance in cattle. East Coast Fever can lead to 100% mortality in untreated animals and poses serious challenges to cattle farming in Uganda. Dr Kiggundu's team, using advances in biotechnology, reached the stage of vaccine production in Uganda that will clearly make significant contributions to cattle farming in the country. Uganda ranks among the top 10 countries by cattle population on the African continent, and so the vaccine will have relevance well beyond our borders.

Having attended the burial ceremonies of Kiggundu and listened to all the tributes paid in his memory, I noted his significant contribution to the community in his birthplace of Bulooba. I also noted the tributes poured over their departed colleague by the director general of the NARO, his employer and supervisor. These tributes brought me to an argument I have advanced elsewhere before. In Uganda, we seem to shower tributes over departed colleagues, yet their memories are left with immediate family members and, to a small extent, a few close friends. We do not appear to have permanent national memorials in their honour. I wish to advance the argument that scientists make subtle but significant contributions to our national development, and the nation needs to take cognisance of this fact.

RECOGNISING PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVERS

Last year, some prominent Ugandans went to court seeking the indulgence of the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) to replace colonial names with Ugandan ones. In an admirable decision that received support from thousands of Ugandans, the High Court agreed and ordered KCCA to rename streets and remove monuments honouring British colonial officials, replacing them with names that reflect Ugandan culture and heritage.

Names such as Colville, Ternan, Speke, and Henry Johnston clearly do not resonate with anyone today; they are not only irritating colonial relics, but also mean nothing to the Ugandans of today, more than 70% of whom were born after independence. For those who do not know me, the author, I lived in Zambia for almost 20 years and greatly admired the late president Kenneth Kaunda's drive to replace colonial names with African ones. Much of southern Africa followed suit and removed colonial street names. So what is it with Uganda?

I wish to advance the case for recognising prominent Ugandan scientists and academicians by having their names commemorated in memory of their contributions – not only to the advancement of their professions globally, but also to Uganda's development. In this article, I shall limit myself to agricultural research and extension.

In the area of bean and maize breeding and the production of varieties that are now widely used in Uganda and beyond our borders, which farmer or politician knows the names of Samwiri Mukasa and Elizabeth Rubaihayo, respectively? These were outstanding Ugandan scientists working at Kawanda Research Station amidst intense colonial pressures and biases, yet they produced high-yielding varieties that have stood the test of time.

What of the gracious and jocular agro-politician Dr Israel Kibirige-Sebunnya, whose work in clonal coffee breeding has taken Uganda to become the top coffee producer in Africa and second in the world? Tress Bucyanayandi, who rose from a field extension officer to head the agriculture ministry and delivered captivating lectures at Makerere University, worked alongside a team of three ministers and professionals – Prof. Z. Nyiira and Dr Kibirige-Sebunnya – to lift the ministry from its chaotic past, when it was led by military figures such as Col Ombia as permanent secretary and a certain Brig. Garandi as minister.

Not even a conference room at the ministry, a historical edifice at colonial Entebbe is named after these eminent Ugandans who spent sleepless hours and sacrifices of personal time in advancement of national agriculture development. Well done Dr Kiggundu, Dr Kibirige-Sebunnya, Elizabeth Rubaihayo and other top Ugandan scientists and academicians beyond which this page cannot accommodate.

The writer is the author of 'Survival of the Fittest'

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