

## **Professor Felix Mnthali: A Life Well Lived**

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It is not often that a rural poor boy's fate destines him for the greatest academic opportunities that turn him into a professorial scholar of renown. Nowadays, only a few black people can tell you about their outstanding academic achievements during the days of colonialism where rebellion politics was a norm. Not to say that Professor Felix Mnthali had escaped the hype of standing up for his country's sovereignty, he had at one point tried to juggle both academics and politics but ended up having to prioritise one over the other.

Having had the honour of being taught by him, if we were to tell those we were in class with that our professor had at one point been detained in jail during the self-proclaimed President For Life, Kamuzu Banda's term, they would think that we were being over imaginative. Born to Malawian parents who were at the time of his birth settlers in the then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), his father and most of his relatives earned a living as miners. His father had not been to school but he did not want his children to follow in his footsteps.

As a result, he worked hard so that both Felix and his brother could go to school. Felix started his schooling late, at around age nine. In his comfortable chair at his office at the University of Botswana where he had been working for the past 30 years, Professor Mnthali said that back then they had Sub Standard A and Sub Standard B before one could advance to primary levels. The fact that he would be out of the office by the end of July 2010 had brought back a lot of memories for him, most of them still as clear as day.

When he was supposed to do his standard one, his father took his family back to Nyasaland (Malawi) because he did not want them to get lost in a culture that was not theirs. 'Life for the black man was hard in Southern Rhodesia and our father didn't want us to suffer as he did. When we got to Nyasaland, it was like reaching paradise. I had never seen anything so beautiful; there was grass that could be turned into salt, hot water that came from the earth,' said Mnthali. A strange incident he keeps remembering without fail is the one time when he and his brother fell sick with malaria and their relatives took them to the now famous hospital Livingstonia Mission Hospital where they were treated successfully. 'We used to speak Shona, but Malawians spoke a different language. The young man next to us was an Ikwendeni. After we were injected, my brother and I kept saying "kugwadza", which means 'painful' in Shona but it meant "stab" in Ikwendeni. The young man reported to his family that we wanted to stab him and his parents were not amused. The day ended with both families praying for our hearts to be good,' said Mnthali.

After primary school, he wanted to become a priest so he was in a junior seminary for 6 years. He lost his brother when he was still in the seminary due to meningitis. His brother's death discouraged him from continuing further because he now had to care for the family. He started working as a filing clerk and commanded a salary of 13 pounds, 13 shillings and 4 pence. Four months later he became a technical assistant. He was part of the surveyors for big roads that exist in Malawi today. He was still an assistant when government introduced the first sixth form school which he applied to and was accepted. Only 25 students were accepted from across Malawi. When he was still in school, president Banda came back from exile and went around the whole country firing people up against colonialism. Their strike, however, came from the fact that the school had hired a policeman to keep an eye on the African teachers. Mnthali was expelled from school.

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The priests in his area had established a secondary school where he taught mathematics and introduced volleyball even though there was no money. The bishop then found him a sponsorship to study at Lesotho's Roma Pius XII University in 1960. He was a member of the Student Representative Council (SRC), president of the National Union of Basutoland Students (NUBS) and he was involved in many committees. All these took their toll on his school work. He repeated his first year and decided to keep politics on the backburner until he got his degree in 1963. In 1964 he began work as an administrative officer after being head hunted by the Malawi government. His job was to find intelligent students that could be sent abroad, some of them are now prominent people, he said. 'What got me into the university system was a debate I had against the current president of Malawi. "Education or agriculture: Which is More Important?" I was for education; the minister of education was impressed and he offered me sponsorship to study in Canada where I became first graduate assistant, teaching assistant and offered dissertation fellowship', said Professor Mnthali. It was in Canada where he married the love of his life in 1964.

Back home in Malawi, he was arrested after rumours of a political conspiracy emerged; after that he found it hard to get a job. His wife has borne him two sons and four daughters. As fate would have it, in 1980 he saw an advertisement for a job in Botswana and he took it. The Department of English was the largest with nine staff members and he was given the position of Dean of Humanities and Head of the Department of English. In these positions of academic responsibility, he was able to ensure that local academic staff were recruited, trained and put on a developmental agenda as academics, many attaining senior ranks under his leadership.

When he reminisced he would say, 'I enjoyed my time here in Botswana, mostly attending conferences and research projects as well as seeing the students I taught become successful. I don't have a clear cut plan of what I will do next but I know that writing will be my first priority. There are novels and plays I wrote that need to be polished and published. I also plan to finish my autobiography which is almost done.' Prof. Mnthali excelled as a researcher and a creative writer. When he writes he has in mind the promotion of African cultural and language values. He is best known as a poet and his collection titled, *When Sunset Comes to Sapitwa*, was published in 1982. Some of his poetry also appeared in anthologies within the continent and abroad in countries such as Germany, United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada. In 1998, he published his first novel titled *Yoranivyoto* in which he uses literature to successfully bring to life the history of his life and beloved country. His conviction has always been to bring Africa to Africans and to leave its destiny to the sons and daughters of the soil. This is what has always brought him into politics.

Prof. Felix Mnthali contributed immensely to the development of the University of Botswana, which became what it is when it was established by an Act of Parliament in 1982. This was after an amicable separation from the sisterly partnership of University of Botswana and Swaziland (1976–1982). He was himself a student at the Roma Pius XII University College which was later established as a combined University by the colonial government Administrators for High Commissioners Territories of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. When he eventually joined the University of Botswana and Swaziland in the early eighties, he contributed to academic development and to building the monument of academic heritage that the present University of Botswana is enjoying. From one local full professor he found in 1980 he left over 10 professors in 2010.

The University of Botswana was fortunate to host this intelligent and generous son of Africa. He was self-less and relentless in his desire to see the University of Botswana grow into a true African University with an international perspective.

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