

In Memoriam for Professor Alexandre Kimenyi

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1. Preliminary Remarks

We accepted an invitation from the editors of this volume to write a dedication to our esteemed and beloved colleague Professor Alexandre Kimenyi who departed untimely from us on June 11, 2010. Since Kimenyi was known mainly as a linguist to Africanists and other linguists, the expectation was that we would address his contribution as a linguist. However, after combing the Internet, including Kimenyi's own website, we have come to two realizations: (1) that our task is much more difficult than we had initially thought; and (2) that this taciturn and modest man was, in the words of Professor Emeritus David Covin in his obituary of Kimenyi, "a giant ... among us". So, instead of writing a dedication to Kimenyi the linguistics professor, we offer here one that recognizes his numerous contributions as an *organic intellectual*.

2. Kimenyi's Formal Training as a Scholar

Professor Kimenyi received his undergraduate degree from the National Institute of Pedagogy (IPN) in Kigali, Rwanda in 1971 with specialization in modern languages (Kinyarwanda, English and French) and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in linguistics in 1976 from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). He specialized in syntax with a focus on Bantu languages, including his mother tongue, Kinyarwanda, upon which he wrote his dissertation. But as any other graduate student in the Department of Linguistics at UCLA, which was one of the top departments in Generative/Chomskyan linguistics, he received a well-rounded education in other theoretical sub-fields (phonetics, phonology, and semantics) that equipped him to publish in these areas subsequently. Dr. Kimenyi was a brilliant scholar whose intellectual prowess was acknowledged publicly upon his graduation in 1976 when his department "recognized [him] as one of the 10 top young linguists in the country" and offered him a position (see Covin's obituary of Kimenyi).

2.1. Kimenyi the Linguist

Kimenyi's contribution in linguistics was considerable. It consisted of three books: *Studies in Kinyarwanda and Bantu Phonology* (1979), *A Relational Grammar of Kinyarwanda* (1980), *A Tonal Grammar of Kinyarwanda: An Autosegmental and Metrical Analysis* (2002), and thirty six articles of which ten were in Kinyarwanda (Alexandre Kimenyi's Website). His *Relational Grammar of Kinyarwanda*, which was a revised version of his Ph.D. dissertation, represented, to our knowledge, the first in-depth application of relational grammar theory to a Bantu language and quickly became a much cited piece of work that in turn inspired further research as it substantiated claims in that approach. Kimenyi's twenty-six articles in English appeared in several refereed journals that included *La linguistique*, *Linguistics*, *Anthropological Linguistics*, *Studies in African Linguistics*, *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics*, and *Education, Science and Culture*. Unlike his linguistic books that focused solely on Kinyarwanda, his articles dealt with a cross-section of other Bantu languages as well as Indo-European and East Asian languages and addressed a variety of topics from phonetics/phonology to language variation and metaphors.

2.2. *Kimenyi the Ethnic Studies Scholar*

As if this research was not enough in quenching his intellectual curiosity, Kimenyi embarked in an extraordinary fashion in ethnic studies, which became his primary teaching field at California State University at Sacramento (CSUS) in the late 1990s following the 1994 Rwandan genocide that exterminated all of his family (viz., parents and siblings). This conversion, which appears to have been motivated in part by his natural curiosity and in part by a need to sustain himself mentally in the aftermath of this horrific personal and national tragedy, rekindled his abhorrence for injustices of which he had been a victim since his youth. Ethnic studies became such a passion to Kimenyi that six of the seven courses he taught at CSUS were in this field; only one was on linguistics. Yes, while he was known to linguists across the world mainly as an Africanist linguist, his colleagues at CSUS knew him primarily as a “Professor of Ethnic Studies”. His courses in this field covered the gamut of the cultures, lives, and plight (e.g., cases of genocide and holocaust) of ethnic minorities in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and Europe. The issues of injustice and genocide against such groups figured prominently in his courses.

A review of all of his syllabi on ethnic studies shows that he painstakingly sought to impart to his students an informed understanding of minorities as first and foremost human beings who deserve universal rights; second, as cultural products via language or history; and third, as individuals who have been subjected to unwarranted injustices, including genocide and cultural destruction. As in any field in which Kimenyi was engaged, he was not simply satisfied by teaching and presenting conference papers on it, but also in publishing such research to share both his findings and concerns. His research in this area totaled nine articles that include “The Genesis of Ethnicity and Collective Identity,” “Anatomy of Culture,” “Language, Names and Religious Beliefs,” “Metaphors and Metonymies in Ethnic Studies”, and “Trivialization of Genocide: The Case of Rwanda”.

2.3. *Kimenyi the Poet*

Kimenyi’s third area of interest, which appears to have been a hobby, was poetry. He apparently drew on his undergraduate training in Kinyarwanda and other modern languages to produce a total of seventeen poems in Kinyarwanda to reflect on life and capture in it part of his own life. That Kimenyi, with his multiple scholarly and political activism, had time to pursue this highly reflective undertaking is absolutely amazing. Perhaps this pursuit was his avenue to maintain his inner tranquility in a life that was replete of traumatic challenges from his early youth days.

2.4. *Kimenyi the Organic Scholar*

What emerges from Kimenyi’s overall scholarly work, engagements that are informed by such work and his own life experiences, as well as obituary statements from colleagues such as Professor Covin, is that Kimenyi was a multi-faceted organic scholar. He did not believe in being an ivory tower scholar, but rather one who applied his knowledge to address practical issues in life so as to benefit other human beings indirectly or directly. This is how he articulated his view in his biographic statement posted on his website (p. 4):

Many of my friends inside Rwanda have advised me to keep quiet if I want to visit the country. I wish I could but I can't. This is the price I have to pay. *I truly believe that academicians have a responsibility to be concerned with social and political issues. Most of us do research not to advance the world but for selfish intellectual pleasure and curiosity, which is legitimate. Even if we are doing it to make this world a better place to live, it doesn't make sense to keep quiet and act as if things are normal, when people whose lives our research is supposed to improve are having their basic rights violated.* I have also been lucky to be associated with the Ethnic Studies Department [at CSUS] because all my colleagues are convinced *that we should not live in the Ivory Tower confined in the halls of the academe without being involved in social, economical and political issues that affect our society.* All of us are affected by bad political policies. And we should be concerned. (Emphasis added: EGB/JN)

This is what we term being an organic intellectual. Kimenyi would be the last person to consider himself, or even accept, the characterization of being a giant among us. His response to such a characterization, in his typical modesty, self-effacing nature, and soft-spokenness, would be that he is not a giant but a simple person doing what is normally expected of us. The objective reality, as amply documented in his work and acknowledgement by others across the globe, is that he was truly a gentle giant with a brilliant mind. And as our colleague Covin put it:

People often say they have stood on the shoulders of giants. But in our case - we walked beside a giant, stood beside him, worked beside him, lived beside him. Yet he lived and worked among us as if he were an ordinary man. He fooled us.

We could not agree more with this description. Prof. Covin is absolutely correct, and we can offer more examples of this giant who teamed with two other graduate students (*viz.* Eyamba G. Bokamba and Wayne Selassie Williams of Indiana University) in the early 1970s to encourage African graduate students to become presenters of papers at ACAL, instead of continuing to serve as “informants” to their professors and thereby have no voice in the outcomes of the research on their languages. The result of that quiet drive, among subsequent mentoring of African and Africanist students, is in part reflected in the composition of the ever-increasing Africanist linguistic scholars trained in North America, whose strong presence at ACAL is now well established. We can also attest that the legacy of Kimenyi’s work lives on through many of us, and will undoubtedly outlive us as much of it was not bound to ephemeral theories, but careful description of data and real life issues.

3. Kimenyi’s challenge

Prof. Kimenyi loved life and took every opportunity to live it fully, in spite of the many and enormous obstacles that he faced from his early youth days in Rwanda. He had such an indomitable spirit to view himself as a lucky person:

I am always wondering why I have always been the lucky one: to be admitted to high school, to be allowed to go to college, to get the Fulbright Fellowship, to be one of the few in my extended family to survive [i.e., escape the Rwandan Genocide]. This question always haunts me. (Kimenyi’s biography posted on his website)

He could have easily become depressed or overwhelmed by these obstacles, and thus given up on the career he achieved; but he refused to succumb to all these. In so doing, he epitomized the true character of a strong person who succeeds not by lamenting the number of times he/she was knocked down, but rather by how many times he/she stood up to carry on. Yes, Kimenyi’s death has robbed us of a bright light on this earth; it has wrenched our gentle and soft-spoken giant; and has left an enormous empty space in our lives. We feel, however, that his spirit, which has joined the ancestors, is and will always be with us to guide and gird our actions, not as ivory tower scholars, but as organic ones. We hope and pray that he, the ancestors, and The Creator will empower us to live out the challenge that he left us:

[To] truly believe that [we] ... have a responsibility to be concerned with social and political issues. [That] [m]ost of us [not] do research ... to advance the world ... for selfish intellectual pleasure and curiosity..., [but] to make this world a better place to live; [and that we should not] ... keep quiet and act as if things are normal, when people whose lives our research is supposed to improve are having their basic rights violated.

May these proceedings of the 42nd ACAL, held at the University of Maryland, College Park, serve as small token of our esteem for your organic scholarship among us, and as a reminder of the ties that bind us.

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