

BOY FROM MISYANI WHO BECAME KENYA’S FATHER OF PAEDIATRIC SURGERY

This is the incredible story of a bright Kenyan boy who serendipitously got into medical school in Germany and went on to become one of a handful of top surgeons in Kenya.

In Misyani village in Kangundo in the Machakos district, parents urged their children to emulate the son of Kyambi, whose full name was Julius Muasya Kyambi. He was born in Misyani on 15 March, 1936 and had grown up to be a well behaved clever boy who was admired by many in his neighborhood.

In January 1953, Son of Kyambi joined Holy Ghost College in Mangu after performing very well in his primary school. Kenya was under British colonial rule at the time, and a few months earlier, on October 20 1952, a state of emergency had been declared in Kenya Colony as a result of agitation for self-rule by locals who were referred to as “natives” by the colonialists. To travel from Misyani to Mangu, Son of Kyambi needed a special travel permit from the District Officer in Kangundo. He travelled by bus from Kangundo to Thika, from where school transport (lorries) carried the boys to Mangu. Movement of Africans was restricted at the time, especially into and out of Central Province, which was the headquarters of the resistance movement called Mau Mau. It was Son of Kyambi’s first time to venture so far from home, but this did not daunt or deter him.

Holy Ghost College had more than 200 boys and it was ran by Irish Catholic Priests (Holy Ghost Fathers) with the assistance of a few African teachers. The same Catholic congregation (Holy Ghost Fathers) also ran St Mary’s School in Nairobi. Son of Kyambi was quick to note that the Irish priests were paid higher salaries than their African counterparts. The priests also had

firearms and the school had been provided with flares for alerting the security forces at Thika in case of an attack by Mau Mau insurgents. The Mau Mau attacked the school twice during Son of Kyambi's time at Holy Ghost School, but the purpose of their attacks was not to harm staff or students but to obtain food from the kitchen. On the other side of the road opposite the Holy Ghost College at Mangu was St Francis Girls Primary School. Much later, after Son of Kyambi had left and after Kenya acquired independence, older boys acquired land near Thika town and the school was relocated to the new site, at which time it became known as Mangu High School. St Francis Girls High School was started where Holy Ghost College was located.

Son of Kyambi studied at Holy Ghost College from 1953 to 1956, and in his final year, the boys went on strike because of the heavy handedness of the principal, Father Barret, a Catholic priest who had much improved the college but who was very brutal. He had previously been the principal at the Whites only St Mary's School in Nairobi before being moved to Holy Ghost College Mangu. The transfer was as a result of parents' complaints to the Archbishop of Nairobi following corporal punishment which he had administered to some boys. Following the strike at Holy Ghost College in 1956, the final year students were recalled for the examination in 1956 and Son of Kyambi performed well in his final year examination and was ready for the job market. So it was that Son of Kyambi successfully finished secondary school.

In January 1957, Son of Kyambi got his first job at the East African Meteorological Department on Ngong Road located in the European residential area of Nairobi. In those days, Kenya was very much like South Africa was during the apartheid era. Residential areas were divided into zones for Whites, Asians and Blacks. Hotels such as The New Stanley and The Norfolk were for white people only, and for clarity, there were signs clearly displayed: "Africans and Dogs Not Allowed." Transport was well organized and there were even double-decker public transport

buses. The buses mostly went to the European sections of Nairobi, and any Africans travelling in them were required to sit in the rear section. Africans lived in the Eastlands, and that is where the young Muasya first stayed after moving to Nairobi fresh from school. At that time, Ofafa Jericho was the last frontier of Nairobi, beyond which was undeveloped land inhabited by rabbits and other wildlife.

At the East African Meteorological Department, just like at Holy Ghost College, Africans were paid the lowest salaries, regardless of their level of education or skills. Young Muasya found out that his monthly pay of Ksh 320 (three hundred and twenty Kenya shillings) was the salary set for Africans, which was less than the Ksh 750 and Ksh 950 earned by his Asian and White contemporaries respectively. He could not understand why this was so and because he could not live with it, he decided to resign after only one month of employment. He soon found a better paying job at Caltex Kenya Limited, where he was the second African clerk to be employed by the company, which earlier had employed Martin Shikuku as the first African clerk. Muasya's starting monthly salary at Caltex was Ksh 550, which he found reasonable. He discovered that the drivers who ferried fuel from Mombasa to Nairobi were paid only Ksh 400 per month, which he felt was underpayment. Around that time, Muasya came to learn of the Kenya Federation of Labour and he also came to know Thomas Joseph Mboya, a trade unionist who had already founded a political party called the Nairobi People's Convention Party. He was also the secretary of the Kenya Federation of Labour. Muasya discovered that Mboya had also been at Holy Ghost College Mangu before him but was dismissed after two years, apparently because he was too smart. Mboya assisted Julius Muasya, Martin Shikuku, Philip Ocholla and others to form the Kenya Petroleum Oil Workers Union (KPWU), whose purpose was to look into the welfare of petroleum industry employees. The union's secretary was Philip Ocholla, who became known as

Philip MakAnyengo after International Congress of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) training in the United States. Not long after the formation of KPWU, Philip was transferred to Mombasa by his employer, but, rather than see him go, the union decided to employ him as the first full-time employee, with a starting monthly salary of Ksh 250. As fate would have it, or probably, as planned by the employers, Muasya was also transferred by his employer to Kitale. He arrived in Kitale in 1958 and was amazed at how different the place was from other places in Kenya which he had so far visited. He was posted to Kitale as an assistant to the Kitale Branch Manager, D'Souza, but after one month he returned to the Nairobi office, where he applied for leave and requested a transfer back to Nairobi. This had been triggered by a complaint lodged by a rude Kitale customer who he had refused to serve on account of his foul language. Both requests were granted and he even got promoted on his return from leave.

In 1959 and after one year at the Caltex office in Nairobi, a friend working with the Police Special Branch tipped him off about his poor record with the police on account of his union activities. He decided to approach his friend Tom Mboya concerning the possibility of getting a scholarship to enable him to travel abroad for further studies. He initially had gotten a scholarship to Duke University, which was mysteriously allocated to someone else. Mboya had, by that time, started assisting Kenyans to get scholarships, but the only available ones at that point in time were in Ethiopia and Liberia. He chose the latter, and so it was that he together with a few contemporaries, traveled to Monrovia via Bujumbura, Leopoldville (Kinshasa) and Accra, using Sabena and Panam Airlines, in search of further education.

In Kinshasa, they were hosted by Patrice Lumumba, a trade unionist who he had met earlier in Nairobi during a Federation of Employers congress. The Congo was under Belgian rule but was not racist like the British. Leopoldville was, at the time, bigger and better than Nairobi, and there

were no restrictions for Africans to be served in restaurants and big hotels. He experienced difficulties during the Accra stopover because of lack of visas and also because Kwame Nkrumah was not on very good terms with Tom Mboya. Ghana had already been independent since 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah and was a rich country. Muasya and his colleagues sent a telegram to Tom Mboya but he had unfortunately travelled out of Kenya. Upon his return one month later, he contacted President William Tubman of Liberia and they were able to travel to Monrovia, their final destination.

Liberia had been independent for 147 years when Muasya arrived in Monrovia, but they soon realized that they could not get the university education they had hoped for. The education system in Liberia now (60 years later) was still poorly developed. They had Americo Liberians and Afro Liberians who had no educational opportunities. It was the Afro Liberians who tapped the latex from the rubber trees. The ruling class (Americo Liberians) sent their children outside the country for education. The Kenyan students found that some of the books used in the Liberian University (LU) were what they had used in secondary school back in Kenya. They provided this feedback to Tom Mboya, their benefactor, and, while still in Monrovia, started looking for alternative scholarships in other countries.

Muasya ended up staying in Liberia for 8 months on a monthly stipend of USD20. The monthly stipend cheque was personally signed by President William Tubman and he would hand it over to Muasya and his colleagues at the state house. During his stay in Monrovia, Muasya met Joe Murumbi, who had accompanied Tom Mboya on a state visit to Monrovia. At a reception in the Ethiopian Embassy in Monrovia organized in honour of the two, Muasya, for the first time, met Joe Murumbi, who was born of Maasai and Goan parents and whose education had been supported in India by Nehru. Muasya had a long intellectually stimulating discussion with

Murumbi later than evening and found him to be extremely intelligent. Murumbi was later to become a short-term Vice President of Kenya.

At the function, Muasya also had the good fortune of meeting the West German Ambassador to Liberia, and, in their discussions, the ambassador advised him to apply for a German scholarship.

Muasya went ahead and applied, but as a Liberian, and was awarded a full DAAD scholarship to study in West Germany. Few Liberians were interested in the available scholarships in non-English speaking countries. When he applied for the scholarship, the embassy advised him to apply as a Liberian citizen, because if he applied as a Kenyan citizen, they would have had to seek clearance from the British Government because he was travelling on a British passport. His travelling documents indicated that he was a British subject from the colony and protectorate of Kenya. He was thereafter to remain on record as a Liberian until much later when Kenya gained independence.

When asked at the West German Embassy in Monrovia what he wanted to study in West Germany, he stated that he wished to study economics and political science. This was the ambition of most people involved in trade unionism. The embassy officials, however, laughed and advised him to choose a science subject, since these had been his subjects in high school. He chose physics, but later, at the language school in West Germany, a Nigerian student colleague advised him to study medicine instead because of the likelihood of wider job opportunities when he returned to Kenya. He heeded the advice, and, after enquiring which were the best medical schools in West Germany, he ended up at Heidelberg University in 1961, following completion of a 6-month German language course at Goethe Institute, Rothenburg O.T. Germany. However, he had to undertake a one-year bridging course, having come from a country with no A-Levels. German language lessons were also a part of the bridging course, and, in the end, he became very

proficient in the language, so much so that he could comfortably participate in campaign activities of SDP, one of the West German political parties. (Willy Brandt, one-time Chancellor of West Germany, won his election on an SDP ticket.)

The medical course at Heidelberg University was not easy, partly because of the long break Muasya had taken after high school, and also the fact that instruction was in German. He was, however, determined and he put in extra effort, and, in the end, completed his studies within the minimum 5 years without repeating any year of his course. In his final year, he started his research on respiratory flow rate, and by the time he sat his examination, his dissertation had gone through. In his study, he compared patients with students, who were his controls. He successfully defended his dissertation at the University of Heidelberg Medical School and passed with Magna Cum Laude.

At the time Kenya gained independence in 1963, Muasya was a second-year medical student at the University of Heidelberg and the German Government provided the opportunity and funding to enable him and other Kenyans to celebrate their independence in Bonn. At the celebrations, attended by officials of Foreign Affairs as well as the British Ambassador to West Germany, Muasya presented the keynote speech, which very much applauded.

On completion of his studies, it was a requirement for DAAD that graduands return to their home countries. The Chancellor of the Kenyan Embassy in Bonn, Mr Ngethe Njoroge, however, assisted Muasya to get permission from DAAD for further training in West Germany.

He had decided during his undergraduate days at Heidelberg that he wanted to be a surgeon and there were no two ways about it. The Department of Surgery at Heidelberg was, however, too

big, with many residents, and furthermore, the surgical training there would have taken seven years and hands-on experience would have been limited because of the large numbers.

For a better experience, he decided to apply for training as a surgeon at a smaller university, and he identified the University of Giessen and was successful in his application. The Chief of Surgery at the University of Giessen was Professor K Vosschulte, who also happened to be the President of the German Surgical Society in 1969.

Muasya started his training as a general surgeon on 1 January 1970, and soon encountered some animosity from consultants who were opposed to a foreigner being trained in their hospital.

When they complained to the Head of the Department of Surgery, Prof. Vosschulte, he listened to their concerns but he put his foot down and insisted that Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi had to stay in the department to train so long as his performance was satisfactory. They hit back by giving him a lot of work on the duty rota, but this worked to his advantage, and by his fourth year of training and as a result of his exemplary performance of duty, the Chief of Surgery started assigning him consultant duties, a role he also performed very well. He ended up getting a lot of experience, and, at the end of the 5-year training period in 1974, he was certified as a general surgeon by the German Board of Surgery. He was offered employment, which he declined, because he was focused on returning home, where he planned to bring about change. He applied for employment as a general surgeon in Kenya but was advised that he would be posted to any place within Kenya where his services were required, which he found unacceptable because of his young family.

Muasya decided to stay on in West Germany and sub-specialize in paediatric surgery, and on 1 August 1975, he joined the Hospital for Sick Children, Amsterdamer Str in Cologne, where he undertook a two-year training program in paediatric surgery under Professor Helbig. He initially

only assisted in surgery, which made him very uncomfortable. However, after some time, Professor Helbig decided to test him with a difficult case, after he discovered that Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi was very knowledgeable and skilled. Muasya performed the surgery so well that everyone, including his professor, was very impressed. On completion of his paediatric surgery training in 1977, he was certified as having special competence in paediatric surgery.

On his return to Kenya from West Germany in December 1977, Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi applied for a job at the University of Nairobi (UoN) and was employed as a senior lecturer in the Department of Surgery. There was, at the time, no paediatric surgery specialty in Kenya, and, at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH), the teaching hospital of UoN, Mr Miller, the Chief Government Surgeon, operated on patients of all ages. Prof. Ambrose Wasunna, who had been Miller's student, was at the time the Chairman of the UoN Department of Surgery. Prof. Wasunna told him that over-qualified surgeons did not stay in the hospital long and he gave him the example of a neurosurgeon who moved back to Canada after a short stint in Kenya. Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi, nevertheless, insisted on starting a paediatric surgical unit instead of joining the general surgery duty rota, as had been suggested by Mr Miller.

The paediatric surgery unit was in female ward 16 of the old hospital (King George VI Hospital) but the unit disappeared when Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi went on leave. However, when the old hospital moved into the newly constructed KNH tower block in 1980, he was allocated a ward in the specialized floor. He embarked on motivating and training staff for the new paediatric surgery unit. He, in time, developed a dedicated committed team of doctors and nurses. He recalls Dr John Duckett, during his visit to Kenya in 1986, advising him to look for money to pay staff for extra work done, but he felt that model was unsustainable and opted to work with the goodwill of staff motivated in non-monetary ways.

In early 1980 at the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons (BAPS) meeting in London, Muasya announced that he wished to establish collaborations, but his international colleagues appeared uninterested in Africa. Fortunately, he was later able to collaborate with SACOW (Surgical Aid to Children of the World), based in New York. Through this collaboration, American and European paediatric surgeons and anaesthetists would spend 4 weeks at the Kenyatta National Hospital working in his unit, during which time there was exchange of skills and teaching of mainly the post-graduate students. This greatly raised the unit's profile to international status and resulted in Dr Julius Muasya Kyambi being invited to the USA as a Distinguished Overseas Guest (DOG) to attend the Surgical Section of the American Academy of Paediatrics in Chicago. He was the first African invited as a DOG by the American Academy of Paediatrics. Around the same period in 1980, the University of Nairobi also gave him recognition for his efforts by his appointment as Associate Professor of Surgery and Paediatric Surgery.

Outside work, the doctor was having trouble making ends meet on account of his low university salary, and he realized that he had gotten into the university job without properly scrutinizing the remuneration. The Ksh 8,000 monthly salary was simply not enough for him and his young family to live on, and he decided to try to supplement the government salary with part-time private practice. His efforts to get a part-time private license through a former school mate, however, failed, leaving him feeling very disappointed and dejected. He later succeeded, through the assistance of Dr Eric Mngola, the Director of Medical Services at the time, and who still did ward rounds at KNH. Dr Mngola happened to have heard of the good work Muasya was doing at KNH and requested to have a meeting with him, and during the meeting, the doctor pointed out

to Professor JM Kyambi that he actually qualified for private practice license, on account of his being the only paediatric surgeon in the country.

Meanwhile, Muasya's academic career continued to progress, and in 1987, he was promoted to a full professor of the University of Nairobi. The many papers he published, and the conferences and workshops attended or organized are testimony of his academic prowess. Three years later in 1990, Germany was reunified following the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. The iron curtain had fallen, and West Germany merged with East Germany and the two became known as Germany.

Muasya served as Chairman of the UoN Department of Surgery from 1987 to 1993, and was the University Council representative of the Faculty of Medicine in 1990. On attaining the age of 60 years in 1996, he retired from UoN but as his presence and expertise was still much needed, he was the same year reappointed on contract as Professor of Surgery and Paediatric Surgery. In 2004, he was appointed Alumni Representative of University of Nairobi Council.

The professor also served as Chairman of the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board from 1999 – 2003. At Nairobi Hospital, he sat on the Nairobi Hospital Board for 8 years and was consultant at the hospital for many years, during which time a children's ward was created. Gertrude's Children's Hospital in Muthaiga also benefitted from many years of his practice there and as a member of the Medical Advisory Committee (MAC).

In his strategy for increasing his work force, Muasya first recruited Dr Nelson Wachira, then later, Dr James Muturi Ndungu. Dr JM Ndungu had been posted to Garissa, and while there, his family was evicted from the KNH registrars' quarters, which resulted in his resignation from government, and later he was employed by UoN through Prof. Julius Kyambi's intervention. The

professor later organized specialized paediatric surgery training for Dr Nelson Wachira at The Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital in London, and Dr James M Ndungu later went to Manchester Children's Hospital. He also extracted Dr Gilbert Anangwe from Siaya and sent him to a good paediatric surgery department in the University of Liverpool, the UK, where he was quickly noticed to be a gifted surgeon. At about the same time, another doctor, Svetlana Barrack, was working for KNH and had been unable to train as a surgeon at UoN because of biases against women by the then Chairman of the Department of Surgery. Dr Barrack was posted to the paediatric surgery unit and for some time was very useful as the first on call in paediatric surgery at KNH. When Prof. Julius Muasya Kyambi later became Chairman of the UoN Department of Surgery, she reapplied for training as a general surgeon and was accepted, went on to do well, and, after qualification, returned to the paediatric surgery unit. Later, and after South Africa became independent, Prof. Julius Muasya Kyambi sent Dr Fred Kambuni and Dr Joel Lessan to the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town for training. About the same time, he locally trained two other general surgeons, Dr Josphat Obeid Njiru and Dr Hamdun Said Hamdun.

The professor later started local paediatric surgical training at UoN, and by 2018, three graduate students had qualified for the degree of Master of Paediatric Surgery of the University of Nairobi. By that time, the UoN master's degree course had become well established and popular, such that not all applicants would be admitted.

Professor JM Kyambi, in time, built a busy world-class paediatric surgery unit which became known for its efficiency in handling paediatric surgical cases. The unit had two major ward rounds, one out-patient clinic and four operating theatre days in a week. Prof. Kyambi attended all major ward rounds, the clinics and all his theatre days. The unit admitted every day of the

week, and, at the time of writing this real life story, the schedule and routines were still being maintained. The unit was, during his time, known for being a busy, efficient KNH paediatric surgery unit whose repertoire included treatment of complex paediatric surgical cases such as separation of conjoint twins. In November 2017, Professor Kyambi oversaw the much publicized successful separation of a pair of sacropagus conjoint twins.

He subsequently got admission rights for major hospitals in Nairobi, and the two that benefitted the most from his presence were probably Nairobi Hospital (TNH) and Gertrude's Garden Children's Hospital (GGCH).

Prof. Julius Muasya Kyambi retired from UoN in July 2018 after serving on contract from 1997. He has scaled down his private practice considerably and spends time with family or attending meetings and travelling.

Among the achievements which he is remembered for are: contribution in manpower development for surgical practice in Kenya, leadership on the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board and the establishment of a paediatric surgery specialty in Kenya. He is also a founder member and past Chairman of the [Pan African Paediatric Surgeons Association \(PAPSA\)](#) and the Kenya Association of Paediatric Surgeons (PAPS).

[Professor Julius Muasya Kyambi](#) is greatly distressed by the slow rate of development, the widespread theft of public funds and the poor work ethic of people in Africa. He is Kenya's Father of Paediatric Surgery, and his wish is that a very high standard of paediatric surgical practice is maintained in Kenya.

Transcribed by Joseph Kimani Wanjeri and Edited by Audrey Van Ryn in November 2019