

John Kalubi: Diaspora Man

By Michael Jones

Educator Associate Professor John Kalubi is a real Diaspora man. The African Diaspora pertains to African descended people and their impact throughout the world. Kalubi teaches literature from the African Diaspora, courses on African and African American history and intellectual thought, and Swahili.

Kalubi had an interesting childhood growing up in Zambia. As he explains, "my childhood was a little bit different from most people's because my parents were immigrants to Zambia. My grandfather wanted them to be tied to the culture of his background. So actually my family lived in two countries and two cultures at the same time."

Being part of two cultures in Africa meant learning several languages. There are many local languages in use in Zambia, but English is the common language. Zambia also has two major native languages, Bemba and Njanja.

Kalubi believes that education is more prized by Africans in Africa than it is by Americans. "In Africa, education is the only thing that most people have access to that can catapult them to a better life. You use your mind to work very hard, you get a degree, and with the degree you'll definitely be better off than most people. In poor countries, education is the only way out of poverty...People in Africa say that education is a matter of life and death."

Sitting back in his chair to think for a moment and then laughing, Kalubi goes on, "In America, you can go the educational track or the business track, or you can just chill and then work at McDonalds from time to time and then after six months you start collecting unemployment. People just have a way of living their lives here."

It was different where Kalubi grew up. "The area that we come from is very depressed; there's nothing there, there's a lake and people just fish. The Europeans disrupted the areas where there was anything to be taken, so there's an area called the copper-belt where the bigger cities are because there's copper and cobalt there and the copper is mined, but the area that we come from up in the north of the country has nothing."

Kalubi's father was a school principal in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. "My father was of a high class, since in Africa, being a teacher was a very honorable job. My father had a big house, so we lived with extended family: my grandfather and my cousins lived there, so we had close to 20 people living in our house most of the time. My life was eventful." He goes on, "The most important thing was school of course; all these other things were second. We had to do well in school by any means necessary; we had to—first to honor the family, to honor the parents and also to do well in life...

there was no fooling around, you have to graduate and graduate with the highest grades. You come back from school, you sit down, homework. Most of my siblings have PhDs. Because of that and we had to do things very well as quickly as possible so that we didn't find ourselves later depending on our parents."

Talented in math and physics, Kalubi concentrated on these subjects when he first went to college. Yet he had to make the decision of changing his major to education in order to graduate quickly and to make sure that his seven siblings stayed in the city to attend school instead of leaving to go to the countryside at the retirement of his father. After graduating in two years, he got a job as a teacher. According to the custom in Zambia, the government provided Kalubi with a house, and he kept his siblings in the house with him.

Because Kalubi's education degree included French, he received a scholarship from the French government for continued studies there. The same year he got his degree from the University of Sorbonne, he met the then-director of UC's Romance Languages department, Prof. Winter. Winter put Kalubi's name on his list of potential PhD students. Winter died a few months later, but the new director found him. "Prof. Seigneuret found a note that Winter had written about me, so he contacted me and sent a telegram." Two weeks after communicating with Seigneuret in Italy, Kalubi received a scholarship from UC.

Upon Kalubi's graduation, Seigneuret recommended that Kalubi cast a wide net and explore other universities and cities for better opportunities and a higher salary. Yet Kalubi didn't leave UC because he didn't want it to affect his family. He's been here in Cincinnati for over 25 years with his wife and three children now.

Kalubi offers sage advice on the importance of learning about Africa: "For one, most students in the United States don't know about Africa, because Africa isn't studied in school a lot. It's my belief that Africa should be in the center of study in the United States because the largest minority so far is of African descent.... Two, Africa is very crucial to America, not only in that Africa gave its sons and daughters to the United States to come and work and build up a very vibrant and robust economy, but Americans need to understand Africa in order to continue building economically, politically, and in other ways as Africa is now the final economic frontier to explore....It's very profitable for students who are educated in the United States to understand the business potential...to understand that Africa will not always be the continent of the wretched, the diseased, the famined...Americans, especially the educated, need to understand that Africa could be one day the little grain of salt that can tip the scale!"



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