



Our September UDSM Alumna

This is a “light corner” on the UDSM portal intended to feature for one month in turns two among many of the University’s graduates—alumni—since its foundation in 1961. The corner is designed to inform the public and the University itself, without prejudice in terms of historical precedence but guided only by professional information search, on the past graduates of the University, their whereabouts, their current position or engagement, what is remembered of them as past ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ of their time and, finally, on what is reckoned about their contribution to their Alma Mater, their nation, the Africa region and/or the wider world.

Gertrude Ibengwe MONGELLA



Year of matriculation: 1967

Year of graduation: 1970; B.A. (Ed)

More: Doctorate (Honoris causa), Ewha Women’s University (June 2005)

Gertude Mongella, nee Makanza, was born on September 13, 1945 in the village of Murutunguru on Ukerewe Island in Mwanza region. After primary education in her home village, she went to secondary school far away at Marian hill in Morogoro (run by the Marry knoll Sisters), whence she was admitted to the University College Dar es Salaam (UCD), then a constituent college of the University of East Africa. She took university studies leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in subjects including history and education.

For four years she worked as a tutor at the Dar es Salaam Teacher Training College in Chang’ombe, where she also served as a Dean of Students. In 1974, well until 1978, she was a curriculum developer for the Dar es Salaam Institute of Education, based at the University of Dar es Salaam. From 1978 to 1982 she was a School Inspector. From 1977 until 1992, Mrs Mongella had, apart from her professional appointments as an educator, had been appointed to membership on the Central Committee and the National Executive Committee of the ruling party - CCM. Earlier in 1975 until 1982, she had also served as a member of the governing Council of the University of Dar es Salaam. Other engagements as a professional included membership on the Board of Directors of the Tanzania Rural Development Bank (forerunner of the present CRDB Bank).

For part of the 1980s and 1990s Gertrude Mongella served as a member of Parliament in Tanzania – as Minister of State (Women’s Affairs) within the Prime Minister’s office (1982-1988), Minister of Lands, Tourism and Natural Resources (1985-1987) and finally Minister Without Portfolio within the President’s Office (1987-1990).

It was in 1985 that Mongella became Vice-Chairperson to the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations’ Decade for Women. In 1989 she was appointed Tanzania’s Representative to the Commission on the Status of Women. From 1990 to 1993 she was a Member of the Trustees to the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). In 1991, Mongella was appointed Tanzania’s High Commissioner to India. Two years later, in 1993, the strong-minded feminist campaigner was appointed a diplomat to the UN, to lead the preparation for the fourth World Conference on Women (as General Secretary and Chair) which took place in Beijing, China in 1995. She made such a significant contribution to the success and impact of this conference that she is affectionately alluded to as “Mama Beijing”.

In 1996 she was a Member of the Advisory Group to the UNESCO Director-General for a follow-up on the Beijing Conference in Africa South of the Sahara. Also in 1996 she was a Member of the Board for the Agency for Co-Operation and Research in Development in London. In 1996 she was a member of the board for both The Hunger Project in New York City and the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan, while, in the same year (1996) she elected President of Advocacy for Women in Africa. In 1997, Mongella was appointed Senior Advisor to the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on Gender Issues. In 1998

she became a member of the OAU sitting on the Women’s Committee for Peace and Development, subsequently, in 1999, becoming a member of the ‘Council of the Future’ at UNESCO in Paris, France. From 2000, she was a Member of the Tanzanian Parliament representing her Ukerewe Constituency, from thereon doubling for other public appointments such as OAU’s High-Level Advisory Panel of Eminent Persons (2002), Regional Reproductive Health Task Force for the World Health Organization’s African Region (2002) and OAU Election Observer Team to the Zimbabwean Presidential Election, as well as Goodwill Ambassador for the World Health Organization’s Africa Region (2003) and Member and President of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) in 2004, this latter making her a first President of the Pan-African Parliament, based in Midrand, South Africa.

In consideration of these enormous contributions in the educational, social, political and other fields of human endeavour, in 2005 the University of Georgia in USA awarded her the Delta Prize for Global Understanding, while, in the same year, Ewha Women’s University, a private women’s university in Seoul, South Korea, honoured her with a doctorate honoris causa in recognition of her life’s concerns about equal chances for women in educational and other socio-economic opportunities.

In 2006, on the ‘International Women’s Day’ on 8th March, Dr. Amb.Mongella, then as President of the Pan-African Parliament, carried a very passionate yet balanced speech recognising the ‘in-roads’ women had made into presidential, vice-presidential and ministerial positions in the government in countries such as Liberia, the Gambia, Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa; legislations that had been made to protect the rights of women; and an increased number of electoral positions for women to reach a critical mass of 33% as agreed by the Beijing conference, but also pointed out the hurdles still remaining, such as the failure to operationalize established gender equality frameworks, to implement national and regional policies and to repeal certain constitutional and customary laws that were still discriminatory to women.

On Saturday 18th June 2016, a periodical, The East African, almost summed it up regarding the attitude of the now retired Dr. Mongella: “From MP to the UN, she has women at heart: ... a respected Tanzanian educationist, diplomat and international gender activist who loves nature and can gaze at its beauty for hours.” Responding to the interviewer regarding her ‘off-duty passion’, she replied: “Everything about nature. I love nature to the extent that I can sit and gaze at its beauty for hours. I like the fact that in nature, there is no straight line. As you can see here [pointing to the neighbourhood of her residence], there is a virgin forest and some monkeys. I love watching how they connect.” Obviously, she would take pride not only in interrogating issues arising from gender inequality but also in reflecting on implications and imperatives of the symbiosis of wild nature and human growth, of school education and the future of school leavers, of the future relations between men and women.

Gertrude Ibengwe MONGELLA is Our September 2019 Alumna, and her greater story begins here!

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