

## IN MEMORIAM

**EZEKIEL ALEMBI (12 December 1960 – 17 January 2010)**

Ezekiel Alembi, a friend and colleague, passed away unexpectedly in January, as a bitter surprise to folklorists in many countries of the world.

I met the laughing and argumentative Alembi for the first time at an ISFNR congress in Göttingen. He was stubbornly protecting his juice glass and disputing his tablemate's wholehearted glorification of wine. Ezekiel disparaged wine and talked, in his fascinating manner, about Abanyole children's oral poetry. I do not think I could respond with similarly interesting stories about Estonian folklore. Ezekiel, as a representative of folklore, was a man like an orchestra, he was an actor and a poet, complementing his stories with songs, and dancing, when necessary, he could swiftly join folkloristic purports of

thought with linguistically innovative ideas and culture related contemplations. His discussions on how to find possibilities for mother tongue education, promote the prestige of small languages, make the values of a native culture desirable and oppose the pressure of mass culture made me an interested listener and draw parallels with the situation in the Estonian language and culture more than a century earlier. Ezekiel kindly agreed to come to Tartu as he had planned to go to Finland to write his Doctoral thesis.

In late autumn, he did arrive in Tartu, had a broadcast in the radio, delivered lectures to students, recorded folk tales and children's songs in the studio of the museum, taught dances to a hall full of Estonians, wrote and, together with folklorists, ended up in an inferno-hot clay sauna in Kamsu. Always smiling happily, he took part in all the unforeseeable sauna-insanities, yet stopped at the verge of a pond with icy water, as the first snow was falling in November. No! That's enough, he said laughingly.

Ezekiel was an experienced conference-goer by the time of the Göttingen congress, having been to China, India and attending training events in Australia and Finland. From a little village school in the Vihiga region, and through different local schools, he had made his way to Nairobi Kenyatta University, defended his Master's thesis on the children's songs of his home area, followed by his Doctoral dissertation, "The Construction of the Abanyole Perceptions on Death through Oral Funeral Poetry", in Helsinki in 2002. Local folklore nurtured his research, his close ties with the people and tradition of his home environment were the inheritance and source of his life.

Ezekiel was a support to his siblings and other relatives. He was concerned about the educational pathways of the children in his home area, searching for opportunities to pay their fees and support their educational endeavours.

When visiting Kenya and Ezekiel's native land, I realised more clearly his concern for fading cultural knowledge: a country with rich traditions lacks possibilities to



record folklore, each new international airport would spoil and destruct the subtle threads and networks of tradition. His concern about lopsided role-models was understandable, having seen the pictures of white Barbie, as an ideal of beauty, on the walls of slanting clay houses.

Ezekiel wrote poems and books for children. He managed to publish about 40 of them, this was his contribution to promoting African culture. In 2003, he was awarded a great literary prize. Theatre, too, was one his favourite arts: the participants in the Kenyan interim congress in 2000 would definitely remember the colourful theatre performance during the cultural programme. For many years, Ezekiel was the National Chairman of the Kenyan Schools and Colleges Drama Festival, and, during recent years, the director of Kenyatta University radio station. His daily work as a senior lecturer at the Chair of Literature in Kenyatta University, numerous lecture courses, supervisees, his occupation as a folklorist, participation in the work of professional societies, presentations at conferences and congresses, his role in the editorial boards of journals (for more than ten years, he was a member of the editorial board of *Folklore. Electronic Journal of Folklore*, published in Estonia since 1996) left little free time. Every minute was on account, yet despite all this, he was always a good listener and managed to raise the spirits of others with his infectious smile.

Ezekiel founded a library in his home area, with an aim to promote education. In 2000, Lauri Harvilahti, Merili Metsvahi, Andres Kuperjanov and the signee were pleased to hike in the tracks and lanes of his native village. We saw an ancient fig tree Ebwiranyi in Emuhaya, in the vicinity of the gates of his home farm. Ezekiel's father instructed village children to read in his house, and our friend is now resting in this home garden, together with his close relatives.

Mare Kõiva