

Interview With Dr. Micere Mugo, Professor From Nairobi

By CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS

The more they can shape you, the more contempt they have for you."

Prof. Mugo

The prospect of being in the presence of a woman of her extraordinary intelligence and social prominence would quicken the heartbeat of many an extrovert. However, her extreme politeness and gracious manner made one feel comfortable immediately. Frequent smiles reveal a warm and very sensitive personality. Her soft-spoken manner carries with it no touch of arrogance, but firm confidence.

Professor Micere Githai Mugo is a visiting professor in the government department this semester. The course she teaches now is titled "African Literature and Politics." Prof. Mugo is dean of Faculty of Arts at Nairobi University, the first woman in Kenya to be so honored. She got her MA and PhD in Literature from the University of New Brunswick, Canada.

A very productive writer, Dr. Mugo has written some books, plays and poetry. As testimony to her talent, she won the 1971 Sir Charles G. D. Roberts Award (Best Short Story Writer, University of New Brunswick), and her name is included in Who's Who Among Writers, Who's Who Among Women, and Who's Who Among Intellectuals. The list of her awards, honors and career responsibilities are too numerous to list, however, let it suffice to say that St. Lawrence is fortunate indeed to employ her services.

It was sunny and very quiet, the silence broken intermittently by the noise of the cars as they zoomed by, when I talked with Prof. Mugo at her home where she resides with her two children. She was first asked how she was making the adjustment to St. Lawrence and the town of Canton. "Well," she said, "it has been very helpful to meet familiar faces. There are quite a few people from Kenya and other (SLU students) who participated in the Nairobi program. This," Prof. Mugo feels, "helps you to settle down much more." As for Canton? "Quite friendly," she responded, then smiled.

Prof. Mugo saw the invitation to come and teach here as saying "Come and see where we live." She views the SLU atmosphere as an extension of

the academic atmosphere exhibited in Nairobi by SLU students.

When I remarked on her great productivity as a writer and asked if she planned to do any writing here, she, with genuine modesty, refused to think of herself as very prolific at all. In fact, one of the reasons she came to SLU was "to give me time on my own, especially to take me away from the 12,000 students at the graduate and undergraduate levels of which I am dean. "My ambition," she added after a thoughtful pause, "is to be prolific as soon as I can."

In July of the year there was an attempted coup in Kenya; students were arrested and killed; the Nairobi University was closed. I asked her about her feelings toward this and how it would affect her future. "It is a question that is so touchy, so sensitive and so close to both my life and the lives of my children that at the moment I'd very much like not to speculate on it until I have concrete information to go on, until I have decided the way I see my life affected by this," she said.

However, she talked freely about the situation from a more distant, detached view — as a critical observer. "When you love your country, when you loathe colonialism, imperialism and the kind of effects it has had on African countries in general and on Third World countries, some of these issues that make these forces penetrate us, divide us and impoverish us are being ignored and anger turned onto the university students makes you very angry," Dr. Mugo looked toward the window as she spoke, one arm upon her chest, the other penetrating the air. "A university," she added, "should exist to raise issues research about them. The



university has become a convenient scapegoat."

Also, recently in Kenya, James Ngugi, a prominent Kenya novelist and political activist was imprisoned. While commenting on this, Dr. Mugo talked about her view of Christianity; like Ngugi, she was critical of the way the Christian religion was used as a formula to colonized and enslave African people and how today it is being used to spread out cultural imperialism. She mentioned how South Africa uses orthodox Christianity as a formula for apartheid. "Racism was institutionalized in order to use it for economic exploitation of black people."

Dr. Mugo, who has a deep interest in Afro-American history and literature, has done extensive studies on this. "How, she was asked, "has black Africa been affected by Afro-Americans and vice versa?" "The influence," she said, "is profound. The two worlds have been feeding each other for ages, without realizing it. In the late 40s, with the rise of nationalism in Africa, Afro-Americans have had a tremendous influence on the thinking



Professor Mugo and students

it has happened in the world, and instead of running away from it (in other words, trying to cope by conforming, by changing yourself) blacks must realize that this is "my historical situation. I can't run away from it." Above all black or any other minority must refuse to get swallowed up, must refuse to become an extension, (they) must remain a people with identity and a people who are proud of that identity."

Dr. Mugo is very familiar with the travail that a black can encounter on a predominantly white campus. In 1960 she was the first African allowed in a white school of government students. The experiences she went through were terrible but she "refused to be turned white," even though they tried to get her to speak English like a white child. It is with this experience in her own past and memory that she advises blacks or any minority in a similar situation to "use what is positive: within a given atmosphere do that and discard that which forces you to deny yourself."

What are her thoughts on the blacks in America who cannot see their connection to other blacks of the world? This she found very disturbing. "Study history," Dr. Mugo advises. The black student who cannot see the history of his people and how, in fact, they must learn from this history to be resourceful and to be themselves is only lazy. Blacks are the grandchildren of great men and their ancestors expect them to take the struggle to the end."

SLU is truly fortunate; this fact cannot be emphasized enough. Professor Mugo's presence here with us is much the same as an untapped oil well — valuable, waiting to be discovered.

I advise everyone to search for this wealth of knowledge, Prof. Mugo, and to spend a vital few minutes in conversation. It is only a shame that she will be here for only a semester; however, it'd be more of a shame if we let her just pass through without ever realizing her precious and important presence.

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Prof. Mugo

Many blacks on white campuses feel they have to constantly show gratitude all the time; this kind of attitude, according to Prof. Mugo, wears away one's confidence and makes one search not for self, but for how to please that person you think you should be grateful to.

Secondly, one must ask: "Who am I?" and "Why did I come to this environment?" More than doing academic exercises that are expected of all students, Dr. Mugo urges black students to spend time discovering themselves. Otherwise it becomes "very easy to imitate and become that which they are not."

Thirdly, blacks must realize that their situation is not unique; "This is not the first time

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