

Deo Ssekitoleko – Humanist Pioneer

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

On August 10, 2018, the humanist world lost a great humanist activist in Uganda. Deo Ssekitoleko died under mysterious circumstances. According to his post mortem, his neck was broken during strangulation. At the time of this writing, there is not much more reliable information than that to go on.

Deo founded the Uganda Humanist Association (UHASSO.) Many humanists regarded him as the most important humanist activist, organizer and leader in East Africa.

He had a very impressive and far-reaching vision for organized humanism in East Africa. It was his goal to establish 30 humanist groups in Uganda and 50 throughout East Africa by 2020. Though he did not live long enough to reach those ambitious goals, his success was still highly impressive.

Deo encouraged humanist leaders to organize and promote humanism. He worked with George Ongere, a young man I appointed to head the Center for Inquiry/Kenya. Deo also helped establish the Tanzania Humanist Association and the Rwanda Humanist Association.

In 2001, I paid for Deo's round-trip ticket to the first organized humanist conference in sub-Saharan Africa at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. My most lasting impression of that conference was Deo's magnetic personality. Whenever he spoke, attendees listened as if they were in awe of his wisdom, applauding his every statement. He was the most charismatic humanist leader I had ever come across.

However, that was not my most vivid memory of Deo. That would come later when I visited one of the humanist schools he founded. As soon as he walked into the classroom, his young students spontaneously started applauding and cheering, as though he were some kind of superstar rapper. Never before or since have I seen a teacher accorded that much love, admiration and respect.

It was clear that he loved his students as well. He always seemed to put their interests above his own. As a science teacher, he was especially interested in teaching them how to think critically and to value science.

Deo helped establish three humanist schools: 1. The Isaac Newton secondary school 2. The Mustard Seed primary school and 3. The Fair View secondary school.

In the early days of UHASSO, Deo led his organization in petitioning the Ugandan government to outlaw corporal punishment in the nation. As a result, the parliament declared corporal punishment illegal in Ugandan schools.

Deo was not only concerned with human rights. He was the rare African humanist who contended that any conception of humanism had to take into consideration animal rights. He seemed to believe that to be truly human and humanistic, human beings had to shed their speciesist mentality.

Consistent with his interest in human rights, Deo helped form two important women's groups, the Ugandan Humanist Effort to Save Women (UHESWO), and the Woman of the Free World Organization (WOFEWO).

UHESWO, headed by Bett Nassaka, had tremendous success. They helped to educate and rehabilitate prostitutes, and helped over 20,000 women improve their lives in various ways.

WOFEWO is headed by Annette Nalunga. The organization formed the Emitos Humanist Football Club-Uganda. It is still likely the only humanist soccer team in the world. Such a team is especially important in Uganda and other parts of Africa where many men discourage girls and women from participating in sports.

I had the good fortune to help inaugurate the team during one of my last visits to the Continent. It was heartwarming to see so many girls enjoying themselves playing a sport they love.

The club is not only for sports. It also teaches girls between the ages of 12-20 to combat prejudice against females and to face the many challenges they have in life head-on.

I appointed Deo to head the Center for Inquiry-Uganda, and of course, he did not disappoint. He established the first Paul Kurtz library and made much humanist literature available to people throughout his country. He shared copies of the *AAH Examiner*, the international newsletter of African Americans for Humanism, *Free Inquiry* magazine and other humanist journals.

Deo also worked with the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). In 2004, he hosted IHEU's General Assembly in Kampala. He served as a consultant for the organization, and most importantly, he helped form the African Humanist Alliance, whose goal was to have at least one humanist group in every African nation.

Deo was very progressive. While most of his fellow Africans believed in the persecution, or even killing, of LGBT people, Deo was a consistent defender of LGBT rights, which he considered to be inextricably linked to human rights.

Deo believed that pan-Africanism had become outdated, and that what Africans needed was a humanist life stance that went far beyond pan-Africanism. He certainly did his best to bring humanism to the African masses, and for this, humanists everywhere owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.