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DR. DAVID KENNETH RYCROFT, 7 DECEMBER 1924 – 8 AUGUST 1997

An appreciation by Gerhard Kubik

The shocking news reached me on a bright September 1997 morning, just as we were struggling to get our suitcases through the door of our hostel at Columbia College, Center for Black Music Research, Chicago where we had had a delightful two-month period of work. Our good friend Johann Buis had arrived to take us to O'Hare airport for the flight to Europe, with a letter in his hand. The promising letter came from GROVE, London. It was by Stanley Sadie, and dated 1 September 1997. My vision blurred when I read these sentences: "I expect you heard the sad news of David Rycroft's death. This is very sad, and will make it more difficult for us to have the ideal coverage of South Africa that we had been aiming at."

We threw our baggage into the car waiting outside. I did not speak much. I did not know whether I should be sad or angry about this totally unacceptable news. David had been a very close friend of mine. We had planned to work together soon on the content of some of my Namibia video documents shot 1991-1993, especially the *sekampure* friction chordophone in a follow-up study of David's earlier article "Friction chordophones in South-Eastern Africa" (*Galpin Society Journal*, XIX, 1967:88-103). I had planned to visit him in England the same year.

On the long flight that night to Amsterdam, my thoughts circumscribed only one theme, coming back to the same subject, without finding any relief. My friendship with David Rycroft and his family dates back to the 1960s. In 1972, on one of my visits to their house, Ashdown Cottage, on Chapel Lane in Forest Row (East Sussex), not far from East Grinstead, I was in the company of young 'Donadi' (Donald Kachamba), the kwela flutist from Malawi and we had delightful sessions in David and Jacquy's garden, his daughter Michelle present, David Rycroft playing with us on the French horn. Countless have been my visits to him at his home and at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Often he was waiting for me at Gatwick Airport or Victoria Station to take me home, and then we usually had long walks in the wooded areas around Forest Row discussing anything from musicology, local history to botany. In his study room he not only preserved some of his own, now historical, field recordings, including a delightful item by a South African youngster playing a ramkie-related home-made banjo, but he also had a small soprano saxophone I fell in love with. It must have been during the 1980s on one of my numerous visits, that we were jiving together for hours in his study, David on the piano, and myself on that little thing...

David also visited me in Vienna in 1979 during a very cold winter season. It is the trivial and yet important things that stick in the mind: how David and my other

visitor, Mose Yotamu from northwestern Zambia, soon liked each other and found so much in common culturally, to discuss; and then after discovering that my heater had a partial breakdown, David tapped his vein of mechanical knowledge and created what in my eyes, as a person totally incapable of repairing anything with my hands, was a miracle: he repaired my heater, and we three then sat happily around it warming our hands in that cold, as if we were sitting somewhere in a village in southern Africa round the fire

There was substantial letter correspondence between us back into the 1960s, no doubt of interest for posterity. David himself drew attention to it in a wonderfully balanced preface to my *Festschrift* in 1994. David also knew my wife, the late Lidiya Malamusi, from a brief visit to him in London in 1984. He was very much with me in spirit when I lost her unexpectedly.

As our plane approached continental Europe, I was gazing down from my window seat in the early moments of dawn, and I knew that we were flying over England, passing London to the south; perhaps we were flying right over the house; for me the moment of a last opportunity of saying good-bye to David, with many questions remaining unresolved. During his last year David had often complained in letters about his asthma, and jokingly he had said that he shared it with his favourite dog called Flute. And yet, the tragedy is that nowadays people don't just die at the age of 76 only. And for someone of David's calibre I dare give the blasphemous statement: he should not have died at all, or at least when he himself would have decided that he had had enough of earth's entanglements. Brains like David's should be preserved. Can't some molecular biologists or geneticists come up with an appropriate programme? Science cannot afford the loss of condensed storages of knowledge such as David Rycroft's. He was born in the city of Durban, South Africa, from English parents whose genealogy aroused his interest during his adult life, and I remember well how I accompanied him once to archives in England in the late 1970s or early 1980s on a trip of research for his personal 'roots'. He has traced the Rycroft family a few centuries back. In 1951 David Rycroft married Jacquy (Jacqueline Audrey Dulche Bradnun) and they would have four children, two sons and two daughters. In 1952 the family emigrated from South Africa to Britain. In the same year he was appointed Lecturer in Bantu Languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and has ever since been associated with this renowned institution. Belatedly, the D. Lit. (London) was conferred on him in 1985, after he had been Senior Lecturer in Bantu Studies since 1983. In 1987 David retired and in 1988 he assumed the function of editor of the Galpin Society Journal..

His research work in South Africa since the 1950s has embraced both

ethnomusicology and linguistics in a unique and fruitful combination. Most of his path-breaking articles such as "Melodic features in Zulu eulogistic recitation" (*African Language Studies*, i, 1960: 60-78) or his wonderful account of "The Zulu bow-songs of Princess Magogo" (*African Music*, 5/4, 1975/6: 41-96) could have never been written without this dual background and focus. He also published a *Concise siSwati dictionary siSwati-English/English-siSwati* (1981, Pretoria: van Schaik) and later a *SiSwati lexicon*, London: SOAS. His work in southern African linguistics has been duly recognized, notably in a *Festschrift* compiled for him and edited by Rosalie Finlayson of the Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, Pretoria, in 1990.

But David was also a composer. One of his major compositions was the National Anthem of Swaziland, officially adopted by the Swaziland Government in September, 1968, on the occasion of Independence. This earned David Rycroft the Swazi praise name 'Mkhosi'. And we remember David as one of the very few ethnomusicologist who already in the 1950s became interested in urban 20th century developments in African music. His early articles "Melodic imports and exports" (*Bulletin of the British Institute of Recorded Sound*, 3 (Winter) 1956:19-21), "The new 'town music' of southern Africa" (*Recorded Folk Music*, 1, 1958:54-57), "African music in Johannesburg: African and non-African features" (*Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 11, 1959:25-30) and his ground-breaking analysis of Congo-Zairean guitarist Mwenda Jean Bosco's compositional techniques (in *African Music*, 2/4, 1961:81-98 and 3/1, 1962:86-101) are required readings for students intending to work on contemporary African music. An innovative approach to notation, with his circular layout of Nguni vocal polyphony (see *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 19, 19, 1967: 88-103 – already appearing in an embryonic form in his 1954 article "Tribal style and free expression" (*African Music*, 1/1: 16-28) has encouraged and considerably stimulated the subsequent development of more emically oriented studies of African music. Years after the 1966 I.F.M.C. conference in Ghana which David attended, participants such as Cameroonian ethnomusicologist Samuel Eno-Belinga used to revel in the memory of that Isizulu work song David had taught his audience: "We Majola ..." with the regular pickaxe strokes.

When we arrived in Vienna from the United States in the morning of September 4, 1997, I found the last letter envelope with David's unmistakable hand-writing on my desk. It had a 12 August 1997 postage stamp and contained a recent off-print of the Galpin Society Journal. There was a short hand-written explanatory note by Jacquy: "David had this prepared to send you when he got back from hospital – sadly this was not to be. Please keep in touch, love Jacquy."