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OBITUARIES

Gilbert O. Ogonji, noted professor at Coppin, dies

By **FREDERICK N. RASMUSSEN**
THE BALTIMORE SUN | MAR 20, 2017



Mr. Gilbert Ogonji



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Dr. Gilbert Ogonji (Handout/HANDOUT)

Gilbert O. Ogonji, former longtime professor of biology and chair of Coppin State University's Department of Natural Sciences, died March 13 at his Silver Spring home from pulmonary fibrosis. He was 77.

"Early on, he demonstrated a talent for leadership, teaching, mentoring and inspiring students and faculty to achieve," the university said in announcing Dr. Ogonji's death. "Dr. Ogonji remains instrumental in the growth and sustainability of the natural sciences programs at Coppin."

"He really was a wonderful person with a great attitude, and I consider it a blessing that I had a chance to know him," said former Coppin State University President Calvin W. Burnett.

"He was gracious, kind and academically capable, and no one ever had anything negative to say about him," he said. "I thought the world of him."

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The son of Mwalimu Zedekiah Ogonji, a school teacher, and Elseba Oneya Ogonji, a businesswoman, Gilbert Odhiambo Ogonji was one of 12 children and was raised in Kisii, Kenya, where he graduated from Kisii Government High School.

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He traveled to the United States and obtained bachelor's degrees in biology and chemistry in 1964 from Hope College in Hope, Mich.

Two years later, he received a master's degree in biology from Atlanta University, where he also performed graduate studies in advanced and synthetic organic chemistry.

In 1969, he received a doctorate in zoology with an emphasis on biomedical genetics from Howard University. He also completed a postdoctoral fellowship in

reproductive physiology and developmental genetics at Yale University in 1971.

Dr. Ogonji began his long tenure at what was then Coppin State College in 1969. He began teaching biology and rose to become biology department chair — and finally chair of the department of natural sciences, where he enjoyed a long tenure.

"His professional career was dedicated to the teaching and training of students," the university release said, noting his goal to help them "thrive as teachers, researchers, engineers and individuals."

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He was a prolific author or co-author of professional papers and articles, and also directed students in their research work. He served in a research capacity at Howard University, Atlanta University and the National Institutes of Health.

Dr. Ogonji was an adviser to the Baltimore public school system's Science Technology Engineering and Math [STEM] Programs, and the University System of Maryland.

At Coppin, he played a significant role in the construction of science buildings and, through grant writing, was able to secure funding for the continuance of technical and science education for years to come, according to university officials.

"He was very skilled at taking few resources and making the most out of it for his students — and they loved him," Dr. Burnett said. "Everyone admired the way he carried himself and how he dealt with conflicts. He may have disagreed with you about a situation but you always came away respecting him."

Dr. Ogonji was known for the candy jars containing hard and chewy candy that he kept in his office for passersby who shared his fondness for sweets.

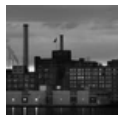
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He was nationally known, said Dr. Burnett, and earned many awards and honors from organizations including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Genetic Association, Federations of American Scientists, National Association of Biology Teachers, National Institute and the Society of Sigma XI-Research Society.

He was also honored by the Maryland Association for Higher Education — an organization for which he served as a president and chairman.

He retired from Coppin in 2015.

Dr. Ogonji maintained a serious scholarly demeanor, but family members said he had a "lighter and sometimes mischievous side" and liked to challenge their minds with "mathematical puzzles, philosophical teasers and humorous tomfoolery."



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An avid gardener, he spent hours planting, weeding, fertilizing and trimming the flower beds and lawn at his Silver Spring home.

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Dr. Ogonji was a serious collector of watches, clocks, fountain pens, fine china and neckties, family members said. For special occasions, he enjoyed setting the table with china from his collection and telling diners the history of the pieces.

A family profile of Dr. Ogonji stated: "He was a husband, father, grandfather, brother, uncle, colleague, teacher and friend who inspired and encouraged you to do more than you expected you could, to press on when you thought you could not, think outside of your mental and spiritual scope, be passionate about all that you do, and always show compassion for others."

Dr. Ogonji was a member of People's Community Baptist Church, 31 Norwood Road, Silver Spring, where funeral services will be held at 11 a.m. Tuesday.

He is survived by his wife of 50 years, the former Jewel Helen Williams; two daughters, Alisa Adhiambo Ogonji Wallace of Morristown, N.J., and Azella Akinyi Ogonji Dunams of Red Lion, Pa.; three brothers, Matthew Shadrack Oluoch of Albany, Ga., Frederick Meshack Otieno and Gordon Willis Ochieng, both of Kenya; seven sisters, Linnet Niver Otieno, Alice Joan Atieno, Macrine Rhoda Agola, Judith Ruth Awuor, Dr. Florence Millicent Awino, Dorothy Joy Achieng and Jane Anne Adhiambo, all of Kenya; and four grandchildren.

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