

A tribute to Dr Mudakikwa Antoine, known as Dr. Tony



When someone passes away, it takes time to understand the loss. We ask ourselves: « How could someone so precious slip away from us? How can it be possible that we will never see him again in this life? » That is what the family of conservationists and veterinary doctors went through when hearing the passing of Dr. Mudakikwa Antoine, known as Dr. Tony.

When I heard on the morning of September 20, 2024, that Dr. Tony left us to join our ancestors, it was quite a shock. I lost my friend, my big brother, and my mentor in my passion for veterinary medicine and for caring about mountain gorillas and other wild animals. But above all, I lost my lifelong supervisor. More than a supervisor, Dr. Tony became my confidant. A title that he earned from all of us, from his son Rudy, his daughter-in-law Bella, and the entire Mudakikwa family. Being the second mountain gorilla doctor in Rwanda after him, there are a few lessons I learned from Dr. Tony since 2004. I learned from this incredible man who supported me in my professional career that the word "NO" should not be common in my dictionary. No matter how big or difficult the task, Dr. Tony always answered a call for help. Tony contributed greatly to the current ecotourism and One Health approach system that are now our pride in Rwanda and the delight of our country's tourists. Together, we trained wildlife veterinarians and researchers on how to ensure the survival of gorillas in captivity after rescuing some from poachers. Through efforts Tony led, we rescued the first mountain gorilla in the world to ever survive after captivity (« Maisha»). He led us towards the success of several projects such as the survival of mountain gorillas in their natural environment by observing them and providing effective healthcare. This was done even for other wild animals from national parks in Uganda and DRC). Some of the notable accomplishments and results we achieved with Dr. Tony are:

- the transfer of mountain gorillas to the North Kivu' Senkwekwe sanctuary and of lowland gorillas to the Grace sanctuaries in the DRC;
- a clinic for the reception and care of gorillas and monkeys taken from poachers in the region (Kinigi Quarantine Facility);
- We illustrated the Human-to-gorilla transmission explained with human metapneumovirus in 2 wild mountain gorillas and the Human-Herpes-Simplex-Virus-Type-1-in-Confiscated gorilla
- the plea for a wildlife laboratory for the health of mountain gorillas in Rwanda
- improvement of the conditions of conservation and veterinarian experts,
- the protocol of mountain gorilla visits for the prevention of diseases affecting great apes

Dr. Tony also supported several other projects with the Rwanda Tourism and National Parks Office (ORTPN) which became the current Rwanda Development Board (RDB). There, he was happy to work with great people with whom we managed to transform the conservation and tourism sector. The cherry on top of that transformation is the global success of the "Kwita Izina" ceremony that we now all know, along with other initiatives led by the RDB in line with our country's conservation vision, such as the reintroduction of lions and the introduction of rhinos in Rwanda.

Dr. Tony was a scholar who supervised several studies, authoring more than 64 publications in international journals. He was fluent in both English and French and could communicate with clarity, regardless of the audience. He honored Rwanda in meetings at the national and international level, validly representing the country by being

outspoken, frank, and debating like the great scientist he was. And he still had time to mentor me in my discoveries in the field of primatology, encouraging me and guiding me with clear and precise advice.

Dr. Tony was described as very kind. However, he was strict and did not hesitate to refuse access to the Volcanoes National Park to any experts who did not respect the directives of the institution in charge of conservation. The same treatment was offered to those who ignored the rules despite being warned in meetings. Dr. Tony was the ultimate fixer, a man who viewed every broken thing as a challenge, especially in our field. For him, life without challenges was too boring to bear. He had a gentle heart, full of love. Dr. Tony was a happy and beautiful man. He loved being in good company and loved seeing happy people around him. This is why he has many friends, including several colleagues who came from the DRC, Rwanda, Uganda, and from all over the world who came to honor him as soon as they heard about his passing. Dr. Tony was the kind of man you could count on, even during a wildlife intervention or on a One Health Project. As a veterinarian, I often had him on the phone for a second opinion on my patient's situation, after he first quizzed me on my strategy for providing care of the said patient. Throughout those interactions, I always felt that he wanted to understand and support my work. He did the same with teams we trained and he was appreciated everywhere.

Dr. Tony is gone from earth. As painful as it is, I'm learning to accept this reality, keeping up the hope that we will see each other again on the morning of the resurrection. In the meantime, Dr. Tony's professional legacy lives on, allowing other experts and friends to understand the conservation of wildlife animals in their natural environment. I still teach the discoveries I made with him (<https://gorillahealth.org/scientific-publications/>), in several universities and international institutions but also in the field with our young conservationists. Knowledge is still being imparted around the world based on the experience and confidence I acquired through Dr. Tony. Above all, I still have my organization" [One Health Approach for Conservation \(OHAC\) - Gorilla Health](#), which Dr. Tony encouraged me to create.

Dr. Tony is gone from earth. But let us thank the good Lord for having had Dr. Tony among us and for his love of truth, love of work, and for his tremendous contribution to successful conservation and tourism as well as the "One Health" approach in Rwanda and in Africa.

To Dr. Tony: You fought the good fight and we will continue it professionally and honestly until we meet again

Rest well, Dear friend.

Dr Jean Felix Kinani Sangwa (Dr JFK)

CEO and Founder of the OHAC – Gorilla Health

One Health Approach for Conservation (OHAC) – Gorilla health

jfkinani@gmail.com/ Info@gorillahealth.org

Website: gorillahealth.org

