

UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN

THE FIFTY-SIXTH INAUGURAL LECTURE

**THE UNCRITICALLY CRITICAL:
THE CASE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE**

BY

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Mr. Vice-Chancellor Sir,
Deputy Vice-Chancellors.
The Registrar,
Deans of Faculties,
Dean, Postgraduate School,
Dean, Student Affairs,
My Dear Colleagues in the Faculty of
Arts and other Faculties,
My Students, in all the Faculties
Especially Faculty of Arts,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Kabiyesi, Oba Jimoh Oladunni
Oyewumi, Ajagungbade III, the
Soun of Ogbomosho Land

THE UNCRITICALLY CRITICAL: THE CASE OF
AFRICAN LITERATURE

Create in me a clean heart,
O God
And put a new and right spirit
Within me.

Psalm 51:10

Preamble:

That one has to profess one's Professorship under one hour, appears to be a dream, too, beautiful to be true. I first of all thought this is unfair to any professor. However, because this has been the tradition, I have no choice but to comply so that I also can become a "**Kabiyesi with a crown**"

Hence, Mr. Vice-Chancellor and my distinguished audience, I stand before you now ready to profess in one long hour – the theory and practice of a discipline which one has accumulated over four **short** decades or so! Professors have been crowned, having blown their trumpets in form of self-evaluation and personal egoism. Good luck to them. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am not here to berate, lampoon or castigate these crowned Professors. Rather, like William Wordsworth postulated in his **Lyrical Ballads**, I believe in "my own way of doing things". I have not much time at my disposal to blow my own trumpet. My friends and my detractors (God bless them!) may blow it for me at a time they feel is convenient for them.

So, Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, I will just go straight into the business of the day by submitting that African Literature means different things to

different people. Let us quickly examine two or three definitions of literature.

Professor M.K. Thoman (1972) a professor of Literature, once defined literature as:
an abiding social beauty, the impression
and the expression of the people that
create it.

In a similar purview Ropo Sekoni (1978) defined literature as arrant nonsense out of which knowledge grows. In the same vein Adewoye (1993) cryptically describes literature as, a "mere compilation of mimetic human experience in fictive forms".

The definitions given above are the inner layers or pregnancies of literature.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, critics have become the surgeons who dissect and re-dissect the components of literature. What they finally get out of their surgical operations becomes battle of words among the curious public.

Often times, the audience becomes suspicious of these critics because of what they call "the critical censoriousness". The audience goes to the extent of describing critics as "**botanists who botanize on their mothers' graves for a bumper harvest**" (Chapman 1974).

What then are the criticisms of African Literature? Are the criticisms critical or uncritical? Are the criticisms biased or unbiased? Negative or Positive? Objective or Subjective? A journey into the criticisms of Africa Literature may help to shed some light on our questions:

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In the process of doing this, Mr. Vice-Chancellor and my critical audience. I will now begin to briefly examine African Literature genre by genre: vis-à-vis the critical awareness on each of them.

A. ORAL LITERATURE

When African Literature emerged on the world literary scene, many scholars especially Europeans received it with suspicion. African literature initially attracted little or no critical attention because many critics believed that the writers who emerged on the scene in Africa would disappear into thin air from the world literary scene.

However, the appearance of novels written by Africans in West Africa, East Africa and South Africa erased the doubts in the minds of the skeptics who saw nothing noteworthy in African literature.

The initial criticism of African Literature was by European critics who brought to bear on African Literature European critical cannons. The critics were overtly biased in their assessment of African literature. The European critics who attempted to evaluate African literature did so from European perspectives. This caused protest from African scholars.

Many African critics are now engaged in the criticism of African literature and one would see this as a happy turn of events. But most of them follow the beaten track of their Western mentors and now engage in unwarranted criticism against African literature. Some African critics give rave reviews and dissipate intellectual energies on certain works of arts, which ordinarily should not

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Attract critical acclaim. Tayo Olafioye captures the correct state of the criticism of African Literature when he observes:

*The manner in which some critics
express their ideas is sometimes
polluted with verbiage, esotericism, bias,
misinterpretation, ignorance and ideological
intolerance (1989:1).*

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, this lecture attempts an assessment of the criticism and lack of it, from the initial blooming of African literature to the present day proliferation of criticism and the critical cannons used in the assessment of African literature.

The critics of African literature had little or nothing to say about African Oral Literature. At best ethnographers, sociologists, historians and colonial administrators collected folktales, myths, legends, songs and proverbs of the different African tribes. The like of William R. Bascom, Susan Felosman, H. Chatelain, R.S. Battray collected and published Dahomean, Angolan, Yoruba, Ashanti folktales and myths. In their comments, these folklorists tried to establish the polygenesis of the tales in addition to highlighting the customs, traditions, manners and history of the groups from where the tales originated.

No real critical attention was given to African Oral Literature. Edris Makward explains this neglect when he says:

*Literary criticism as a separate and
Autonomous specialty or genre had no
Place in pre-colonial Africa, where the
Best qualified and reliable critics were
Indeed the public itself (1971:2)*

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S.E. Ogude supports Makward's view when he says: "*the communal nature of oral literature tends to rob it of adequate critical balance*" (1983:2)

These assumptions pre-suppose the views that the people who were the practitioners of oral literature forms were also the judges. Besides, this form of literature did not belong to the literature of 'book-culture'. Therefore, the genre did not need specialized critics.

The real criticism of African Oral Literature started when Ruth Finnegan's effort published in the book, **Oral Literature in Africa (1978)**. Finnegan's effort departed from the mere assemblage of folktales and myths to an incisive and analytical interpretation of the folktales. It is an effort at putting African oral literature on an intellectual critical scale. However, Finnegan's effort suffers from a Euro-centric perception. She lacks the knowledge of the cultures of the areas from where she took her tales and her European approaches are the major weaknesses of the study.

This awakening by Ruth Finnegan made African scholars to show more interest in African oral literature. Isidore Okpewho in **The Epic in Africa (1979)** **Myth in Africa (1983)**, Ropo Sekoni and other critics of oral literature in the Universities, have elevated and given meaning to the criticism of oral literature in Africa. The preponderance of oral literature today among critics has culminated in the revival of the performance aspects of the oral African literature. In Nigeria, for instance, the Egungun festival among the Yoruba, the Masquerades of Ibo, Ibibio and Ijaw and the Kwaghbir puppet theatre of Tiv

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land attest to the vibrancy of the critical attention given to African oral literature.

Africans and other scholars are interested in oral literature now than in the past. Conferences and seminars are organized in Africa and abroad on African Oral literature. The critics of African oral literature are not only interested in identifying sociological data, but also in re-defining and situating the experience of this genre into a truly African milieu. Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, ladies and gentlemen, I want to examine prose-fiction at this point.

B. PROSE FICTION

The favourite genre in African literature by writers is the prose fiction. This genre is produced within "a book-culture". And it is also assumed that its audience is basically literate (Ogude 1983:3). African writers have used English, Portuguese, French and local languages to write novels, short stories and novella, interpreting African life and experience.

The novel began as an offshoot of the introduction of literacy in West Africa and the entire Africa, Amos Tutuola's **The Palm-Wine Drunkard** appeared on the literary scene in 1952. With its appearance, the criticism of the African novel began in earnest. As a new genre in Africa, European critics were lost as to how to classify the novel. The critics simply dismissed the novel as "primitive" or even "infantile". Some of the critics read into the novel what was extraneous. In her book, **African English Literature**, Anne Tibble says that Tutuola's novel reminds her of:

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*Mixing of modern wonders, radio,
Telephones, guns and bombers with
Crusoe-Anderson-Treasure Island
Gnomes, imps, goblins, cudgels,
Cutlasses and jungles – (1965:100)*

Any reader who is familiar with the novel will find it difficult to accept and comprehend the reference to "radio, telephone". Guns and bombers". Initially, African critics did not show interest in Tutuola's novel because they, like their European colleagues, found no artistic merit in Tutuola's un-English expressions, which they considered a ridicule of the educated African author. Those African critics who evaluated Tutuola's popularity, while they themselves, with their hard-fact English, could not write an ordinary plot.

In order to establish their bias against African literature, these critics made comments, which demonstrate that Africans were incapable of assimilating the tenets of original creative writing. This group of critics who engaged in comparative study of African literature vis-à-vis European or American arts is described by Ola Rotimi as those who practiced the "pin and magnifying glass game". (1988:34).

Critics of the African literature also imposed their own critical values on the criticism of the novels. The African experience in the novel remained irrelevant to most of them and even in circumstances where African experience was touched on, it remained essentially a documentation of sociological materials. It is true to say that these critics subjectively criticized African literature. This kind of criticism has done a lot of harm to African literature. Ola Rotimi supports this view in his observation:

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*The consequence of such cynicism
is the infliction of the African author,
with the attendant waning of self-
confidence in his capabilities. An
author, being human, needs self-
confidence to confront the
challenges of his calling – (1988:35)*

The next generation of critics, mostly African critics, condemn works by African writers of lack of ideology or commitment. The Marxist socialist critics, the Larsonist critics, African-Euro-centric critics, Bolekaja-Onitsha market literature critics, practiced their own conviction to the exclusion of other schools of criticism. Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, for example, question the lack of ideology in Wole Soyinka's writing. This kind of criticism causes feuds among a few writers, who seem to be unhappy with this turn of event in critical discourse. Speaking the minds of his colleagues, Ola Rotimi says:

*The African writer perceives the
arrogance of the critic in its
omniscient worst. This is where
writers find themselves being told,
indeed, being dictated to, and not
just what critics want to see written
(1988:37).*

In a sense, the idea of commitment or ideology in African literature pre-supposes that a critic has to be ideological in order to be able to assess a work of art in its proper perspective. Some critics see in African literature a "politically" committed literature while the approach of others is in favour of "art for art's sake".

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Some writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiongo gave an insight into their writings through interviews, articles in learned journals and magazines. Achebe for instance, informs us that he writes "applied art", instead of "pure arts" (1965:162). These comments by writers on their writing made critics to see in the writings some kind of commitments. Achebe and a host of other African writers wrote to explain Africa, unambiguously, to the outsider. Critics of Achebe and the other novelists who exposed Africa to Europe dwell on the criticism of culture contact and conflict.

The emergent novelists of the post-colonial period brought in a literature of questioning and attack on their fellow Africans. This is a period also referred to as "we on us". Therefore, critics of African literature had to respond to the new development. There emerged new critical theories such as feminism with its emphasis on "gynocriticism" and "androgyny". Critics of African feminism theories adopted "accommodation" as well as "womanism" and STIWA (social transformation association) including women. (1996:5).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, ladies and gentlemen, I want to quickly cross the bridge of the prose fiction to poetry.

C. POETRY

The criticism of poetry, especially the oral form, was neglected by critics. The critics concentrated on Euro-centric written poetry. Chinweizu identifies this form of poetry as a genre that:

Assiduously aped the practices of
20th century European modernist
poetry. (1980:163).

Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Dennis Brutus, Christopher Okigbo, Okot P'Bitek were the "darlings" of critics. In the manner of Euro-centric criticism, African critics wrote several articles in journals extolling the merits of these poets and asserting that they were the most significant poets to have emerged from Africa. These poets occupied a central stage in African poetry. As with the novel, the critics recognized the indebtedness of these African poets to Euro-American poets.

However, some African critics quarreled with these poets for using Latin archaisms and obscuran language. Chinweizu attacks the poems because they are:-

Craggy, lumpy, full of obstructions,
Unnecessary and artificially difficult.
(1980:166).

Chinweizu also condemns and rejects Wole Soyinka's poetry because he considers Wole's works "unreadable". (1987:21). Yemi Ogunbiyi defends Soyinka against charges of difficulty leveled by Chinweizu and other critics when he says:

To state that he is difficult in places
Is not to say that he is difficult and
Deliberately obscure through and
Through. To put it that way is to deny
Important assumptions of the literary
Vocation, namely that no writer writes
From beginning to end, and that
Different situations dictate different
Approaches even within a given
Literary genre. (1987:84).

In the Franco-African countries, poetry assumed the toga of cultural nationalism. Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, Birago Diop wrote under the auspices of a movement called "Negritude". Case acclaimed this movement as a "**revalorization of Negro-African values and a belief in the dignity of the Blackman**". (1975:65).

Abiola Irele Sunday Anozie Sylvia Washington Ba also wrote favourably for the Negritude movement. However, some critics including Wole Soyinka is credited with the statement that "a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude". Another critic, Jean Ghehenno shares Soyinka's view when he says he could no more accept Negritude and its values. In his words: "**the human spirit has no colour**"(1975). The rejection of Negritude by some African critics punctured the notion of "Universality" of Black Culture and Civilization.

In South Africa, the system of racism and discrimination brought about a political system called "apartheid". Dennis Brutus, Oswald Mtshali and others depicted the deprivation, censorship, torture, brutality and segregation, which came to be associated with life of apartheid South Africa.

Critics reacted to apartheid by condemning as well as highlighting the need for a change of the system in South Africa. The critics, unlike the situation of Negritude, where dissenting voices were heard, were unanimous in their condemnation of the apartheid system. It is to the credit of those critics that today, South Africa is a free country.

The post-colonial poetry of Africa ushered in a generation of modern poets. Funsho Aiyejina I his pun refers to the post-colonial poetry as "An Altearnative Tradition". (1988:112-28). These poets have in their ranks, Niyi Osundare, Funsho Aiyejina, Obiora Udechukwu, Tanure Ojaide and others. Their poetry is masses-oriented. Their vision envisaged a Marxist resolution of the oppressed masses. Therefore, the criticism of the works of these poets is often rooted in Marxist-socialist praxes.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, my radiantly looking audience, let us, in two minutes direct our torchlight to the African drama.

D. DRAMA

In the genre of drama, there are two categories namely: traditional ad modern drama. The traditional drama, to which ancestral plays, masquerades, cults and others belong, has been neglected by critics. The reason for this is not well known, but the sacredness of these traditional plays may have prevented the critics from assessing the plays critically. (J.P. Clark 1966).

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, we are aware that women, because of their dancing interest, are always heavily involved. But because of the Africans' attitude towards the syndrome of women-must-not-see, women could not participate freely in traditional drama. Listen to this: "**Obinrin to ba fi oju kan oro, oro yoo gbe e lo**". Translated thus: "**Any woman who dares visit the grove will be devoured by the occupant of the grove**".

In between the traditional drama and modern drama is the popular theatre of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmole, Duro Ladipo. Baba Sala and the rest of their imitators. This category of drama has received critical attention from European and African critics. Ulli Bier, and recently Biodun Jeyifo, have done some research work on the Yoruba Travelling Theatre.

The modern written drama of J.P. Clark, Sloyinka, Efua Sutterland, Ama Ata Aidoo and others have been given serious critical attention by critics who recognize in them familiar European dramatic traditions. These critics see in the works of these African dramatists influences of Greek tragedy. Some of the writers borrow elements of African oral literature such as the myths, and turn them into vehicles for conveying their own vision of things.

The radical critics have always linked the emergent African playwrights to the Breechtian theatre. These critics condemn any playwright who refuses to imbibe Breechtian epic theatre. Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande and the rest make this criticism their main focus in the evaluation of the African theatre.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, certain salient features are discernable in the criticism of African literature. African literature began with an uncritical attitude by those who considered themselves its critics. The reason for this attitude may be explained in Solomon Iyasere's view.

In our developing criticism as in our developing literature, we seem as yet uncertain as to what issues are of prime importance. This uncertainty is perhaps the reason for the excessive concerns – we like westerners seek to repudiate exhibit for dubious questions seldom of literary significance. (1975:21)

When African and European critics started to recognize African literature with serious critical attention, they became aggressive, and threw into the dustbin what criticism ought to achieve. To put it in the phrase made popular by Tayo Olafioye, the critic became a "terrorist".

We may then ask, what should criticism of the African literature be?

The answer is very simple. Criticisms of African literature should reflect African sensibilities. According to Ezekiel Mphahlele:

How could one understand the
literature of a people without
understanding the psychology,
sociology and the emotional balance
of the people (1962).

Unless a critic is completely disinterested, keeping artistic distance (especially foreign critics) criticism on African literature will lose its aesthetics, meanings and functionality. Africa is very rich in language, which unfortunately, its critics are deliberately ignoring.

Listen to this:

Yokolu Yokolu
Ko wa tan bi
Iyawo gboko sanle
Oko yoke...

Mr. Vice-Chancellor and the happily patient audience. It is only a thorough knowledge and understanding of the Yoruba language that can show that the cryptic song is heavily loaded with meaning.

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Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, I had sleepless nights in trying to translate the song. At a point I told myself, "don't worry, the Chairman of your inaugural lecture is an expert in English; he will help you".

All right sir, let me now have another go at the translation. The translation is that:

With all his braggadocio
the wife outsmarts her husband in
a wrestling tournament and consequently
became hunch-backed.

This translation might have given us the surface meaning of the song but its deep meaning is lost. It is only those who understand the Yoruba culture that can fully grasp the aesthetics inherent in the song.

Mr. Vice-chancellor and my dear audience let me give you another instance of how important it is to understand the culture of a people before their literature can be objectively criticized.

If a foreigner complains of having malaria fever, the typical herbalist may tell the victim to gather herbs like dongo yaro, lemon grass, pawpaw leaves, plus the "other thing".

The unsuspecting foreigner to the African Culture will be looking for the so-called "other thing" whereas an African who is versed in the culture readily knows that there is no "other thing". It is only to hoodwink the foreigner.

Again listen to Adewoye:

Critical standards derive from standars,
which is derived from aesthetics. Aesthetics
is culture dependent. Therefore, critical
standards must derive from culture. (1989:xii).

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Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, and my attentive audience, I cannot complete my assignment because of hunger, thirst, time and restlessness; hence I have to draw the curtain here. But before the curtain is drawn, today I want the critics of African literature to understand that objective criticism is markedly different from ridiculing, satirizing the mimicking. Let us listen to this:

Okunrin sosoro Ara Ogbomoso
To nran masini Loke sosi

Translation:

A tall, slender man from
Ogbomoso who is a tailor
On the hill where the church is located

Another Example:

Eebo nse nkan Igi ntene Apoti nsoro,
Won tun pa titi laro

Translation:

The white man is performing
Wonders, trees are producing lights,
Boxes are talking; streets are dyed

The two examples are satire on the people of Ogbomoso and Oke-Ogun respectively. Because we ridicule these people, they may never change in their enunciation. But if they are objectively criticized, there is every likelihood that they can change in the articulation of Yoruba words. This same argument goes for the criticism of African literature. When it is objectively done in a serious manner, it records marked improvement. But when critics turn to ridiculing and lampooning, it deteriorates and stagnates.

By way of conclusion. I would now want to recommend a few antidotes for balanced criticism:

1. Both the Africans and non-Africans should keep artistic distance in criticizing African literature.
2. Critics of African literature should not unjustifiably castigate, Lampoon and dissect African literature with boss-eyedness.
3. Political activism should be differentiated from literary criticism.
4. As African writers, we should not be unaccommodating to critics that are unbiased because objective criticisms are meant for the improvement of our literature
5. Our foreign critics should remember that African world-view should be understood before they become surgeons of our literature.
6. National conferences should be encouraged on African literature.
7. International conferences on African literature should be treated as a matter of priority where foreigners could be practically educated instead of being fed upon the breasts of vicarious experiences.
8. African critics and foreign critics should see one another as partners in progress.
9. Criticisms lead to new frontiers in knowledge acquisition.
10. Cross-fertilization of criticism is a must for any country.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, permit me to conclude this address by proudly but not arrogantly saying: Adewoye I know, Obafemi I know, my junior colleagues in English literature in the Department I know, but who exactly are these critics of African literature?

INDEBTEDNESS

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, I must express my profound gratitude to several people who have crossed my path and whose I have crossed in my sojourn on earth and foremost, my parents Pa and Madam Ojebode Adewoye Eboade who accepted my invitation to be the brought into this world of woe. Daddy and Mummy I have no regret for your willingly bringing me into this universe. My only disappointment is that you both left me when I needed you most. If I had that audacity I would have questioned God for taking you away from me at such crucial moment in my life. But who am I to redirect your divine direction?

I owe a lot to my teachers right from primary school days, at the age of sixteen and half (an over-ripe age) to the time I received that covetous phenomenon called Ph.D., which is humorously described as “‘Pull him down’ or ‘prepare harder for death’”, from the University of Denver, Denver Colorado, U.S.A. I doff my cap for them all.

My students at the Morehead State University, Morehead Kentucky, University of Denver and my undergraduate and post-graduate students at the University of Ilorin since 1976 I say a “‘big’” thank you. Mr. Vice-chancellor sir, I want to single out two of my former Ph.D students Dr. Bayo Adebowale, the deputy Rector of The Polytechnic, Ibadan, who also is the Director/Founder of the **African Heritage Research Library**, Adeyipo Village, Ibadan, and Dr. P.O. Balogun of the Department of Modern European Languages. Dr. Adebowale, thank you for your generous hospitality when I stayed with your family in Ibadan. Thank you Dr. Jide Balogun, thank you for being here and there whenever I called on you during the process of preparing this lecture.

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My colleagues in the Department and non-academic staff, I do not know how to express my feelings of you. Thank you in a million times.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor sir, the academic gods and goddesses may not forgive me if I fail to acknowledge the role that Professor Y. Quadri of the Department of Religions played in my academic life. He and I know where the rain stopped beating me. Professor Quadri, you are really a human among humans. Thank you very sincerely.

According to Robert Frost, good neighbours need no feeling. Professor and Mrs. Moses Oyeleke Fawole, you are just wonderful. On many occasions, when the heavens were pregnant but would not shed tears, when roads become blocked, cocks refused to crow, keys refused to open the door you were always there for me to say, “‘Look, Dr. Adewoye, you will not die now; God has a purpose for you in life’”. Thank you deeply because as you foresaw after the cloud the sun started to radiantly shine and the moon never stopped to send illumination.

The Vice-Chancellor and my loving audience, if I had a better, stronger or weightier word than appreciation, I would have chosen it for my family.

My only wife, I appreciate you, when I remember the life we lived together in the United States of America, my love for you becomes more waxed. What we endured together to achieve what we have today, is something worth remembering. Thank you for being the mother of my lovely children. Babatunde Akinwumi with his wife, Folasade Adetunko and her husband, Oyebade Akinyan, Omobolada Adigun and Eyinde Mofoluwake, I will never exchange you for other people’s children. You are all beautiful and loving.

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My brothers and sister, Adebayo, Ariyibi and Asande, I appreciate your love for me. God will bless you and your families.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, permit me to counter the adage which says “**one does not count the ninetoe person in his presence**”. Today, it is better one does that; it is only that one will not count it aloud.

Sir, I want to say with every degree of sincerity that you are a Vice-Chancellor of all Vice-Chancellors, no matter any cavil raised by anybody. You are just wonderful!

The University of Ilorin, the world may collapse if I fail to pay my homage. I started my professional career as a Lecturer II, and Acting Head of the Department of English of the then University College and the first Sub-dean of Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences on September 1, 1976. I started as a Lecturer II. I went through the professional stages of Lecturer II, Lecturer I, Senior Lecturer, Reader, and finally to Professorship. I went, I saw, I conquered. God’s name is praised.

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Finally, and lastly too, whatever I am, and whatever I have been able to do I owe it to the Almighty God – the sustainer, the corrector, the leveler, the avenger and all-in-all, the only Almighty God. I thank Him for giving me the grace to live to see this day – the day that is memorable in the life of any academic.

Thank you one, thank you two, Thank you Mr. And Mrs. Calabash wherever you are.

TO GO BE THE GLORY.

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