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Interview with Reverend Father Professor Amechi Nicholas Akwanya, a Gifted Scholar and Intellectual

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Amechi Nicholas Akwanya is a Catholic Priest-cum-Professor of English and Literary Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he works the job of teaching, researching, and writing. Akwanya is, in many ways, a gifted intellectual figure comparable to only few — now or in the past, as there have been 83,058 reads of his open access works worldwide; as he is never out of his depth in matters of literature; and as he is a Professor of Professors, which is to say that some of his former students have themselves become Professors in their own right, etcetera. Even so, this genius of a scholar keeps himself at a remove from the spotlight, living quietly as he does on the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and his house overlooking its suburbia. This is, in fact, why it has taken me, Andrew Bula, his former student and a lecturer at Baze University, Abuja, gentle prodding for slightly over three years to work up his interest to share these extraordinary episodes of his life, and much else.

AB: Prof. Sir, I thank you cordially for agreeing to grant me this interview.

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: You are welcome, Mr. Bula. It's a pleasure.

AB: Now, to begin, what readily comes to mind is the fact that you are a Reverend Father-cum-Professor of English and Literature — I mean, this exotic profile is not commonplace anywhere, especially in this parts, Nigeria, or Africa for that matter. So, how did you attain these heights? Does it have to do with your background as a child, or a very young person? Can you share, please?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: I did not set out to become a professor of English and literary studies, of course. I was already a priest before I got the offer to study a course relevant for training of young seminarians at the secondary school level, which took me to the National University of Ireland at St Patrick's College in 1982. I suppose I was taking one step at a time, and moved in

regulation time from BA to MA, and to PhD, and no intervals between. And I had all the support that I needed. One clear intention I can remember is, I wanted to be good at what I was doing. As in other things the decision that I should seek employment in a university was not pre-planned. It came almost out of the blue. But I was glad of the opportunity, convinced that I had something to offer. There wasn't a clear intention, though, to become a professor. I remember a form I was to fill in soon after joining UNN as a Lecturer II. The form had an item on career prospect within the university. I hadn't a clue what that was. So I asked the Departmental Secretary, who told me the answer – professor. That was a surprise to me!

AB: As someone who sat under your tutelage as a student and a huge admirer of your accomplishments, I know that you've written extensively, many books – five critical books or so, a novel, and three volumes of poetry, including so many articles, right? In fact, how many articles altogether have you published on literature and perhaps on English Language?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: There are actually six sole-authored books on theoretical and critical issues, plus one co-authored with Dr Virgy Anohu. There are several edited books as well. Book and journal articles in the discipline are over 70. There are others awaiting publication, as well as a few requests I am currently working on.

AB: Great writing, it is said, is not easy to do...

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: No. Someone spoke of unremitting labour – I don't remember who. But that's what it is for one who means seriously to write. And that's an essential part of an academic's work, writing driven by research.

AB: One has noticed, as I like to put it, that in your literary criticism, ranging from your critical essays to the books, every sentence is a Van Gogh! Can you say how you write? I mean the processes involved, the drafts and all that?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: Ah, Van Gogh! What an idea. But thanks. One of my teachers in Ireland used to say in regard to writing, 'Your first thought must not be your last', or something to that effect. One must literally *revise*, to ensure a fully processed thought – fully processed because all

the words are exact and correctly placed in a sentence that is the best it can be. That is my aim in sentence development; and I am glad that this is what you see when you read my work.

AB: Your novel, *Orimili*, is on the list of the African Writers Series that were published long ago, whose founding editor was and is the great Chinua Achebe. How did this come to be?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: I don't remember exactly how it began, whether I had wanted to jot down a few ideas that came into my head, or actually to write a novel, nor do I remember what led to the writing of the story. But I hadn't written a story before, not even a short one. I had earlier been attracted to lyric poetry, but then, I hadn't followed it up then. It was something I was to come back much later. The writing of *Orimili* happened when I was launching my doctoral research; it was definitely in my first year in the programme that the basic storyline was done – that was 1986/87. But the mythology of *Orimili* was discovered along the way. When it was done, I gave it to one of my teachers, Kevin Barry, who not only read it, but also recommended a literary agent and arranged a meeting between us. The gentlemen were all very kind. They read and advised, and then recommended that it be sent to Heinemann, the owner of African Writers Series. Heinemann took it through their mill; got its text editors to read and advise and ask questions. Finally, they sent a contract – some time in 1990. I had finished my PhD the year before and returned to Nigeria. Some time, I think April-May, 1991, the book was published, giving me a big shock with its cover. It took some time for me to realize how well the cover designer had captured the central insight of the *Orimili* mythology. Happily, should I say, no one else appears to have noticed – a direct challenge to criticism which, I am afraid readers hardly adverted to.

AB: But you have not expressed yourself in that form again. Why?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: Well, I don't know whether it is a question of self-expression. I just told you about *Orimili* mythology: that can't be self-expression! Was I even what you might call a novelist, and having to follow up a vocation? I'm not sure. But there was enough distraction, thankfully. I started teaching in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in August 1991, with a very heavy teaching load from Day 1. Soon it became clear to me that there was need for texts to enable meaningful conversation between me and my students. It was during military rule, and

higher education seemed to have a very low priority rating with them. The university libraries were not keeping up with book acquisition. Rather we heard things like, 'If you need books, you write them: that's what you are university academics for!' My first concern was with semantics. It was a 'language course', but in my view should, along with the History of English, be taken by every undergraduate student of English; and perhaps should be spread over two semesters at least. My chance came during a long strike in 1994. The draft of the book which was to come out as *Semantics and Discourse* was ready by the time that strike ended. But the publication was in 1996 after further revision on the recommendation of some older academics who very kindly and painstakingly read the draft.

AB: How would you assess the state of literary criticism/scholarship in Nigeria today?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: The question reminds me of my chapter in *Major Themes in African Literature* edited by D.U. Opatá and A.U. Ohaegbu, which is entitled 'The Criticism of African Literature'. In fact, there is another one: 'Literary Studies in Nigeria: An Advanced State of Crisis,' which was a conference paper and later published in the journal *CALEL (Currents in African Literature and the English Language)*. Your question is right on the mark. The state of criticism in Nigeria is a long-standing concern with me. I also return to it in my *Literary Criticism: From Formal to Questions of Method* published a few years ago. To me, it is a basic question about the nature of a discipline. There is even a question of semantics here too. For words have meanings not decided by us; and it is important to know not only their meanings, but also how these meanings come about and have evolved. Such knowledge helps to bring to consciousness the engagements entailed in the use of the individual word, especially technical words. Criticism is judgement about a certain object, the literary: this object, what do we judge it to be? If it is literature, by what norms; how do we come to the decision that it is literature; how does it differ from everything else, including things that may look like it, but are not the real thing; and what precisely do we mean when we say that a certain order of words is literature? These are the founding questions of *literary criticism*; and criticism is the documenting, or the documented account of the judgement that the object in question is indeed an art work. It therefore always involves rule-governed demonstrations, arguments and justifications – and quite different from *literary appreciation*, which is concerned with showing what one finds pleasing about an artistic production, whether art, properly so called, or what Hegel calls 'incomplete art':

incomplete because it can only exist in a dependent relationship to something else. But some people think that the discipline is not important, and that what is important is how to make an impact on society through writing, or how writing impacts society, which is probably why writings with an obvious cause seem to suck up all the oxygen in the room, as the saying goes. Literary appreciation needs no specific training, but there may be no literary criticism without the specific kind of training that makes it possible, and creates the literary critic. To me therefore, it is a question whether we have a discipline, and belong in a university, or whether we are social workers, and perhaps a branch of the mass media. If a discipline, criticism has of course to be taught. But many departments of English/Literature/Literary Studies simply copy the minimum benchmark in which not enough provision is made for criticism. In some programmes there is only one course that is properly and directly relevant to criticism, namely modern literary theory, often positioned in the last year of the programme; in some cases, the last semester of the last year, as if it is just a course to pass, rather than an instrument, really a set of instruments to enable and support the work the critic will ever do. So there is a problem there; and there is not a whole lot that one can do if the fundamentals are not in place.

AB: Any recommendations to fix the problem?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: The recommendation is to settle in one's mind – at the decision-making level – what the discipline is charged with, and then craft the academic programme in such a way that it will enable the teaching of the necessary knowledge and skills. The benchmark should be recognized as a *minimum* standard; and should be strengthened by courses that present the principles and the history of succession of critical practices. Modern literary theory itself should not be presented as if the pre-twentieth century state of the art is irrelevant. Modern literary theory did not abolish pre-twentieth century theories. It builds on them rather, and exists in a very important sense because of them. By reason of this history alone is there a proper grounding to the recent developments. There should also be a course, at least at the postgraduate level on emergent issues in theory and criticism. This is particularly important to keep all in the field on their toes and participating in the growth and development of their discipline. This core issue in the discipline should therefore not be viewed as a 'Western' thing, or some kind of a side interest and a distraction.

AB: Speaking of literary criticism, for a time now I have pondered about something which I'd like to take this opportunity to ask you for clarification. Is it possible that one can deploy the meaning of a theory in principle for one's essay? In other words, is it possible to adopt a theory not in its original sense of conception but in its implied meaning in an article?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: Research articles provide latitude to explore insights of all kinds arising from theoretical knowledge about the literary. What you call the implied meaning of a theory suggests that the theory has been interpreted from a specific viewpoint and interest. To ensure that the discipline is not a free for all, and all things to all men, the theories should be diligently studied and mastered. Exact knowledge of the theory cannot be compromised because as Northrop Frye teaches in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, they comprise the body of knowledge the discipline teaches, which sets it apart in the universe of knowledge. Literary studies is not accomplished by reading one award-winning novel or play after another. Anybody can do that: this level of exposure to literature is, in fact, a key part of what they call *culture* in the West. And if they say that someone is 'well-read', who may be a politician, an engineer, a mass communicator, a scientist, etc. it is this exposure to the significant works of the literary tradition that is often meant, not that individual's professional discipline. The expert in the field of literary studies, however, is the one with the knowhow to account for each of the works in question and each of the new productions that may enter into the literary tradition as an individual work of art – *art* being the property that entitles them to membership in the tradition. In the instrumental view of theory which defines my own attitude, the first task is to know the theory; what it consists of, what its presuppositions are, how it identifies and defines its object, the literary; whether it is a general theory of art or is concerned with a specific aspect of the question, like Mark Currie on temporality in narrative; the instruments of analysis it deploys; what kinds of outcomes result when it is properly put to work. But one must not work with a specific end in view, and then try to manipulate the theory to ensure the desired result. The theory is engaged; if it works, fine; if it fails to work, then that's interesting. Why has it failed? Has any step been missed along the way? Or is it that the theory is unable to deal with the problem – since it was not designed for this kind of problem, or because there is a design failure in which case the theory needs to be rearticulated; or because it has come to its limits and needs to be replaced and moved to the history of evolution of the discipline? Working with theory may in fact be seen as

the reason why the operation is a *discipline*, or part of a *discipline* – again semantics pops up, in terms of what is meant by an academic discipline.

AB: What do you think about the current situation of the novel Corona Virus pandemic ravaging the world today, especially as it affects Nigeria and particularly the education system?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: Corona Virus is of course not a literary problem, although it can give impetus to a literary work, just like anything else under the sun – which is not to say that the sun itself may not give the impetus. The global health problem is one thing, but it also impacts every other aspect of human life – the full dimensions of economic and social life, politics, culture, education, leisure and recreation, even religion. It is also a problem for science, especially the biological, medical, and pharmaceutical sciences. Nigerians should recognize that this is the reality of the times, and accept guidance by the relevant scientists in thinking about the pandemic, trying to avoid infection, and keeping society itself safe. Another thing is not to behave as if the world began today, or began with us, or consists of Nigeria only. The world has known many pandemics during the course of recorded history. One with the contagiousness and virulence of coronavirus could have done infinitely more harm in the centuries before modern medicine. Some of the very bad ones in those eras actually did a decimating job on humanity, and no one had the first idea how to defend against them. The educational system is suffering in Africa, as all over the world, as a result of the pandemic. But the effect will be deeper and longer lasting in Africa, and especially in Nigeria, considering our underdeveloped internet and physical infrastructure. Some of the universities have vastly over-subscribed classrooms and hostels, as well as offices. It's hard to contemplate tertiary education restarting under these circumstances, unless the pandemic abets or adequate treatment or a preventive is developed and deployed. It is not likely that even the lower levels where class size is regulated can fare much better.

AB: And how viable is the on-line learning we have turned to? How, in fact, is the university in which you work handling teaching and learning on-line?

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: Well, you can see that there is no internet access in this office; and there was no electricity until about an hour ago – altogether for more than thirty-six hours since Saturday evening. All this is part of what ASUU has been complaining about for ages. They call

it university funding. The facilities a modern university needs to run are all in short supply or non-existent. It would be an interesting idea to visit the labs in the faculties of biological and pharmaceutical sciences at this time of frantic search for a vaccine and a cure for Covid-19 – never mind that ASUU has been on strike since well before the closure of schools owing to the pandemic.

AB: Again, I thank you very much for your time Sir— Rev. Fr. Prof. Akwanya!

Fr. Prof. Akwanya: You are welcome. All the best.