LANGUAGE & LITERATURE FROM AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR MATIU NNORUKA



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CHAPTER 2

An Interview with Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Partisan of African Literature of French Expression

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Introduction

On a recent visit to Anambra State for the Christmas celebration, Ihembosi, a beautiful town in the eastern part of Nigeria, Anambra State was one of my ports of call. Ihembosi is a city with beautiful landscape and the home of the erudite Professor of French, Prof. Matiu Nnoruka. I called Prof. Nnoruka ahead to book an interview considering how occupied the Christmas period usually is for Easterners. In this interview, Nnoruka talks about his childhood, career, writings and socio-economic situation of Nigeria.

Matiu Nnoruka, one of the forerunners of Francophone African Literature in Nigeria, was born at Ihembosi, a village very close to Onitsha, in November 1945. He has since the beginning of his contact with French, at the Department of Classics, University of Ibadan, where he was initiated to French studies made an impact and left important traces for people to follow. A Federal scholar of the Nigerian first generation, Matiu Nnoruka is a name to reckon with in the promotion of Francophone African Literature in Nigeria.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Can you please tell us your full name (and nick name), Sir?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: (Eeehe!) You know I am a Knight, my full name is Sir. (Prof) Matiu Nwaneti Nnoruka. I am a titled man. My other name is Ezenwenyi.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: How long have you been retired from the University of Ilorin?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Yes, not quite long, 2010, I packed away from the university residence I was occupying; Quarter 74, Permanent Site, University of Ilorin. I didn't want to beg anyone for extension of stay. I packed away, surrendered my keys at the gate, to the porter precisely on November 21, 2010.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: How has life been after retirement?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: I wouldn't say everything has been rosy. What I was hoping to do after retirement was to continue teaching. I thought I would start a secondary school, and everything was ready. I was already looking for a site, but I felt sick four years after my retirement. That sickness took me to France twice, for operation. At that process, all the resources I had pooled over the years for my proposed school went into my health care. I am now recovering, trying to put things together. Whether I would still realize my dream of founding a school is still not certain because the resources are no longer there. So, it's not been all that nice, but I am happy for my life. There was a time people thought I had gone, but God was kind enough to spare us that shock.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Are there things you missed about your previous location?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: I think I planned not to miss anything. However, I had two plots of land at Airport area and Ganmo, which I never wanted to sell off. Eventually, I sold them because of the distance - Ihembosi/Ilorin, Ilorin/Ihembosi. I intended to come back. I had an accident, during my last trip, Ihembosi/Ilorin, three kilometers away to Ilorin; I lost control of my vehicle. I was in the bush; I felt as if I didn't know where I was. What woke me up was the shaky tyre, when I got up, luckily there was no ditch, no pit, no big tree for me to ram; I had to maneuver and come back to the road. That trauma was still in me when I was planning my retirement. I missed my colleagues at the Lawn Tennis court at Kwara Hotel, but we still communicate by telephone from time to time to ginger ourselves up.

Some have retired, some are still playing. Ilorin is good, but distance is my problem, distance from Ilorin to Ihembosi.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: What kindled your passion for French Language?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: (Laughs) I wouldn't say it was unexpected. I never studied French in the school, secondary or college. My area of interest, as far as foreign languages are concerned, was Latin. I was good at Latin, and that was what I was admitted to study at Ibadan in 1965 but fortunately, it was there I met French. My Head of Department (HOD), Professor Fergusson called me into his office and told me that the Federal Government had a very unhealthy policy about Latin Language; he advised me to consider combining Latin and French, and to start French as a beginner, since I was in Languages, and since Latin and French are almost the same thing, the pronunciation may differ, the grammar is the same.

That was how I entered into French Language. And I continued with that and finished my first year at Ibadan. My second year was at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), because of the civil war. Unfortunately, as they were not offering Latin, I continued with French for one other academic year, before the war started around June and July 1967, and we had to remove our student uniform to put on a military uniform to go and defend Biafra. All through the period of the war, I did not hear anything like French until the end of the war in 1970. When I came back, after the war, our HOD at U. I. said those of us who started French in the university should go to Lomé. This gave me an opportunity to start French again in Lomé, Lycée Tokoin for two weeks. As soon as we came back, the University of Ibadan changed its policy and those who started French in the university were to go to France, and those who did not do French before coming were to go to Senegal. That was how I found myself in French. As soon as I embraced French, I threw Latin away, but my knowledge of Latin helped me in French.

Still talking about my journey to French, we went for Year Abroad in France and I was along with others sent to Besançon; Eastern part of

France. The authorities in the University of Besançon organized tests to ascertain our level of French. Owing to my good performance, I was placed in category II. Some were in category I but for one to be in category III, he/she should sit for and pass prescribed examinations. I was able to pass the given examinations and was placed in category III (troisième degré) and had courses with French citizens themselves, no longer as a foreigner. I was henceforth, considered as an authentic French student and I took courses with them.

When I finished the 'troisième degré,' I was qualified to enter into the Faculty along with French students. When it was time for us to come back to Nigeria because the *Year Abroad* was one year, I told my colleagues that I was staying back in Besançon to finish my study in French Language, because, if I agreed to go back to Nigeria, I would be forced to study French in English, as that was the policy of UI in those days; they taught French in English. (Interviewer cuts in: *even now they still teach French using English Language).* As for me, I did everything in French. Thus, I threw in my weight and at the end I got my first degree, B. A. (Hons) French in 1973.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Self sponsored or on scholarship?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Under scholarship from Ibadan. All through my university study, I was a federal scholar.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Does it mean that then it was allowed to either continue in France or come back to Nigeria and finish up?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: It was my decision to stay, especially for the fact that at that time, education in France was free, without any payment of school fees. In the midst of all that, I got married to a French lady. We were together, she was there to help me in my studies and finance and stay.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Apart from French and Igbo, which is your indigenous language, are you conversant with any other language?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: I was forced to do German at UNN and I did it for that academic year. I didn't go further as I only knew about greetings; I didn't know how to read any text in German. So that was one foreign language I was able to study when I was at UNN, between 1967/68.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: So you were not conversant with any other language like Yoruba?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: We compelled our students never to speak any indigenous language, but to concentrate on what they were in school to learn. That was the reason I never learnt or spoke Yoruba. It was only French, French and French alone. I gathered a few words in Yoruba but not when I was a lecturer at the University of Ilorin. When I went for census in Yoruba land in 1963, I could speak Yoruba then but after that, since there was no practice, I could not speak Yoruba again.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: In your family, were there times you preferred communicating in French?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Yes, my wife and three children were speaking French. They felt it was easy to answer questions in French. So, in my family, we were speaking French.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: French language acceptance, now and then, are there any differences?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: There is always the joy to speak a language that does not belong to you. This joy and the happiness to hear somebody from another geographical area, francophone or whatever, is still there now. In those days, there was a competition among students to know who would speak faster and more fluent in French. So there is that urge now. And, there used to be an encouragement from the government that gave scholarships, I

benefited from such, as I went to Canada to do my Ph.D, and Quebec too, which is a Francophone country, just because I was able to perform in French. And I got the Commonwealth Scholarship when I was finishing my Master's degree at Besançon in France. After my M. A., there was that strong urge to continue because of available financial encouragements. The study of any foreign language becomes more interesting when you are getting scholarships. Now, I don't know whether universities and colleges encourage students in that line any longer. Also, people teach/speak French without knowing the basis of what they are speaking. Now and then, it all depends on what the learner is interested in. When I was in the University of Ilorin, I founded Alliance Française, and students were coming to learn French in order to travel outside the country to do business and some trade, not to learn French as a university student would do. Now it is more of oral French instead of academic French. In terms of scholarship, government scholarships are no more the way they used to be available then.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: How many works have you published, Sir?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: My work is mainly in form of articles in learned journals. I will give you a copy as you go.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: What is the name of the work and what was your objective in putting the articles together in this work, Sir?

Prof Matiu Nnoruka: The name of the work is *Etudes en Littérature Francophone*; it is a testimony of my academic trips; that is, a collection of selected articles which publication reminds me of my trip from Africa to North America through Europe, precisely. Most of the literary journals that published these studies no longer exist, that is why I decided to recreate another space in form of a work in which all of these studies are cited, so that researchers and insiders in the field could have easy access to it.
Etudes en Littérature Francophone is a work not divided into chapters; instead, countries from where authors originate and the

subjects treated were used. The book does not have a common theme, because each of the writers showcased in the book wrote based on his own vision and commitment. Apart from talking about Francophone literature, it also talks among other things about the French Revolution. For example, one of the articles in the book reveals that the story in *L'aventure ambiguë* written by Cheikh Hamidou Kane took the reader back to the colonial period. The author through his characters made the French people to realise that we had our own culture and school before they came; there is no need to impose on us another culture and school, thereby condemning westernisation.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Is there any of them that brought your career to limelight?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: I scarcely publish in English and I scarcely publish in Nigeria. All my articles are published in France, Paris or in Canada. And, it was an honour to read scholars quoting me in one of the works I published, saying; according to Matiu Nnoruka..., of the University of Ilorin (laughs). It was a joy in reading that person, because I have a feeling that I have contributed something in my own field, African literature in French, I discussed Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë.* So the bulk of my articles are published overseas, two or three are published here in Nigeria.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Do you have any advice Sir, for emerging scholars in African Literature?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: My advice to them is that one has to be interested in it. Literature is literature. African literature is a particular literature. For one to do well in it, one has to have thorough knowledge of the culture of African people. The interest of reading African literature must be there, and it is pertinent to know that African writers don't write for writing sake like the French people do. Political motive explains the writing of African writers. Words like 'Existentialism', 'Socialism' are for Europe and not for Africa. Our

mentality and culture are not the same with that of Europe; so, one has to be in constant touch with African culture and civilisation.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: My best subject as your M.A. student was Literature and Society, and there was something distinct about your style of teaching. What would you say prepared you for a life of such pattern?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: I am a qualified teacher. After secondary school, I went to Bishop Lasbrey College, Irete in Owerri West Local Government area of Imo State for teachers' training exercise. In those days we were called "pivotal" teachers, as you have your school certificate, you go in for teachers training Grade II, and when you come out; Ha! Ha! Ha! You are qualified. What you didn't know how to teach when you were just a holder of school certificate, as soon as you enter the college, you are taught principles of education and how to handle class management, courses, note preparation and the interest of what you are going to teach. All combined, you'll definitely come out with something that will ring bell in the ear of those who will listen to you. So, my training as a teacher helped me to do that.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: As a Professor of French and promoter of the Igbo language, culture and tradition, can you compare French and Igbo Languages?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Yeah! I think there are similarities between two of them. As you learn a language, you also learn the culture of the owners of the language, their civilization, and how they see things. No language study can be done without reference to the culture of the owners of the language. So it is with Igbo Language. It is only when you master the culture, that your knowledge of the language becomes relevant. Once anybody hears you speaking a language, there is always that assurance that the same understands the culture of the owners of that language. French and Igbo may be similar in this wise. What may not be similar is the grammar in Igbo Language and in French. Which one is more detailed and more logical

depends on the learner to see the difference in terms of grammatical system. I wouldn't say Igbo language is not logical but French has undergone many changes before it became what it is today. We still have a lot to do in Igbo language.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Do you still read presently?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Yes, I read.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Can you share your reading/studying experience now and then?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Now, it is out of pleasure, no motivation or aim and, then, you had a reason and something in mind to achieve. In those days, every lecturer wanted to be promoted and will try to avoid what is called "if you don't publish you perish". So this is what made me in particular aim at publishing. Now I read for pleasure, no longer with the intention of vying for any position in the academic world. I follow what is happening in the newspapers. *Vanguard* is my best newspaper. Anytime I go to Nnewi, I buy one; I come back, read and underline certain issues. I have books in French to read but the urge is no longer there as it used to be. I still believe that one day I will go back to it (laughs).

Pauline A. Nnabuike: As a Professor of Francophone African Literature, how will you assess the study of French literature in Nigeria today?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: The motivation to read in those days is different from what is happening now; post independence African literature. I was attracted to African literature in French when I was doing my Masters programme at Besançon University, because of the political undertone of that literature. When we went through some writings especially *Présence Africaine*, it had a political undertone. The author, the Founder, Alioune Diop, said it openly that he was using this medium to make clear the fact that that literature had a

political undertone. It was a literary matter but also a political issue, which was using literature to fight for independence. That was what literature was all about in those days.

You who said Africa had no culture, Camara Laye brought his own side of African culture and called it African child, telling us this is how I grew up, and this is the *milieu* where I grew up. So that literary matter became a cultural issue. So that literature was intended to fight for political independence. People were assigned to things. Are you a politician? Are you a literary man? Are you a business man? This is what you are going to do if we want to have our independence. After that, post-independence became something else. The common enemy is no longer the Whites; it is our brothers and sisters who replaced the Whites using the same politics as the Whites. The political intentions of literary studies are still there for us to see and so you can't study one without thinking about the other, they are interwoven.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: French and some foreign languages have gained study status in Nigerian universities. Do you see one of the Nigerian languages gaining a study status in foreign institutions?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: That is very possible, but don't ask me which of the languages (laughs). Well, I am hesitating on that. As a person from Igbo land, nature would necessitate me to defend my language but it is no longer a secret to anyone that we owners of Igbo language are not serious about the use of that language. In our families, market places, anywhere, Igbo man will love to speak English. I had to blame a couple in Ilorin when I went to them on a visit and the mother was speaking English to the daughter. I said, Madam, this English that you are speaking to your daughter, if I were to be a stranger and you don't want me to know what you are planning for me, what language are you going to use? What I was trying to tell her is, between her and members of her family, it was better to speak the Igbo language. Using your indigenous language is a secret weapon when a foreigner is among you.

Maybe in future, we will go back to our Igbo language, but in the meantime, the only group that is encouraging their indigenous

language is the Yoruba. I don't know which University in Paris that teaches Yoruba now. A French lady came to University of Ibadan to learn Yoruba, that lady learnt Yoruba language correctly, and when you learn a foreign language you study the grammar. I say this because I know that I am more qualified than some French speakers, who don't know how to analyse the grammar in the sentence. So the woman left Nigeria and was employed in Paris to teach Yoruba language. It is unfortunate that some of our African languages will be wiped away someday because there are no more speakers of such languages.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Sir, what do you think can be done to avert this situation?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Let us use our indigenous languages.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Sir, do you think study of French affected other aspects of your life?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Aaahmm...Positively, yes. My study of French had some good effects on the way I see and judge things. When you are learning a foreign language, you learn their culture too. Some good part of French culture is in me. Take for example; politeness, French is noted for that. And when you are polite, you can get anything you want. But when you start ordering people here and there, they will just leave you alone. One part of French I admire is; 'S'il vous plait' this is very important. I use it to talk to my colleagues, even at home. You don't order people to give you things, you say 'please' 'biko', this is one good thing I learnt through French.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Would you like to see one of your children take after you in career?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Unfortunately, except these ones now. I've started to speak French to them, but I am not forcing them. It

depends on their mood, likeness of whichever they are going to do. They are going to decide on that.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: What is your best travel destination?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Now or then? For pleasure trip, it is France. Trips outside Nigeria now may not be possible due to its cost implication.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: What is your best food, sir?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Pounded yam (laughs) with egusi soup or semovita, or wheat .

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Who was your best teacher and why do you like him/her?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Dr. & Mrs. Daniel from England initiated me into French in the University of Ibadan. The two of them rekindled my interest in French. They are English but they were teaching French.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: What are your favorite sports?

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: Lawn Tennis. But I also play Darts and Table Tennis.

Pauline A. Nnabuike: Thank you Sir for your time.

Professor Matiu Nnoruka: You are welcome. The pleasure is all mine.

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Editors: Ihechi Nkoro, Simeon Olayiwola, Lasisi Busari & Leo Balogun

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ISBN: 978 – 978 – 54088 – 5-0

Produced and printed in Nigeria by:
Dawn Functions Nigeria Limited
84, Nza Street, Independence Layout, Enugu
Tel: 0806 344 9922; 0813 257 9387, 0906 636 3810
E-mail: info.dawnfunctions@gmail.com

Published by the Department of French, Kaduna State University, Kaduna, NIGERIA

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