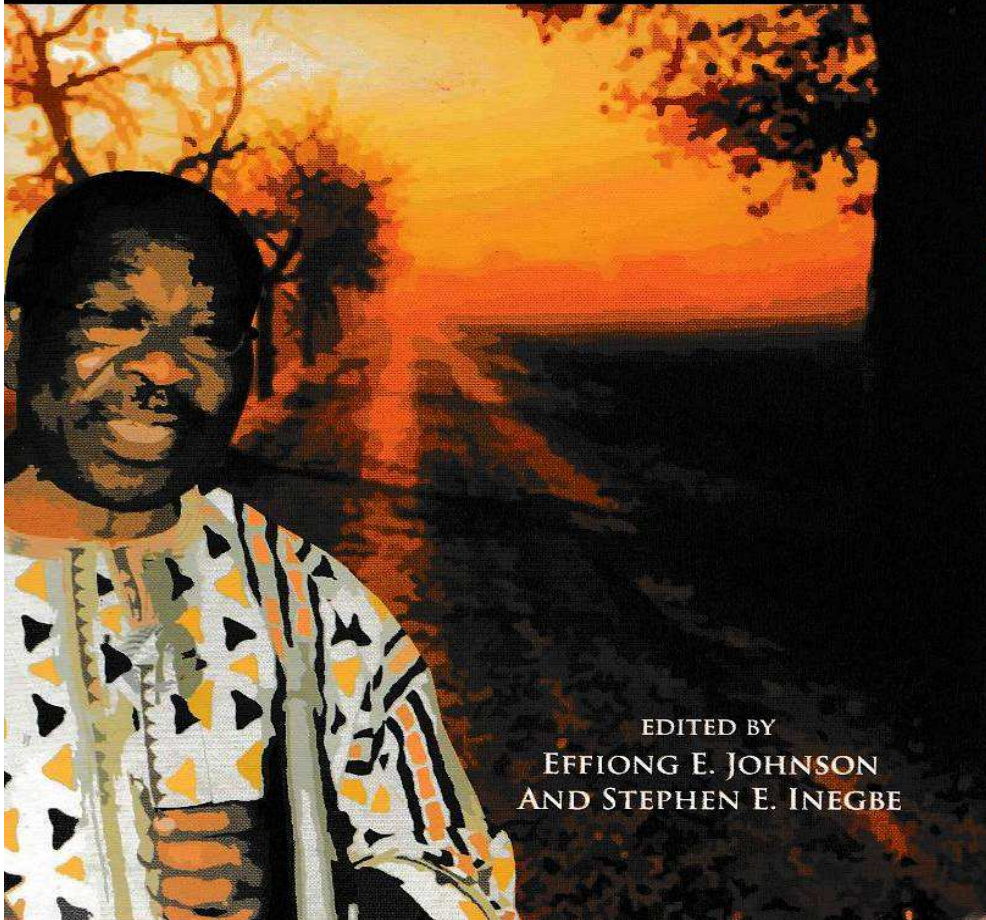


# A ROAD WELL CONQUERED

KALU UKA, LITERATURE AND PEDAGOGY  
(A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Kalu Uka)



EDITED BY  
EFFIONG E. JOHNSON  
AND STEPHEN E. INEGBE

## KALU UKA, LITERATURE AND PEDAGOGY

An Interview with Professor Kalu Uka

(When this interview was conducted in 2008, Dr. Johnson, now a Professor, was an Associate Professor and the Dean of Students, University of Uyo)

**Dr. Johnson:** Good morning Prof. I am happy we have honoured this arrangement to have this interview today. Tomorrow is your birthday ... [ March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008 ]

**Kalu Uka:** Yes! Good morning Dr. Johnson. Tomorrow is not the birthday. The birthday was exactly on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Because my children wanted to remember it as a Special Occasion being 70 years and you people in the Department wanted to mark it also as a memorable date, and we needed time to put a few things together, I said why don't we put it on Sunday, the last Sunday of the same month so that we can be getting all the blessings all the same. Then as your Department arranged the programme, they now tucked it into the fact that March 27 is World Theatre Day and they said, wow! Why don't we use that to honour our Prof. and I said, I'm very grateful to all of you. Thank you.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you Prof. You have been practicing theatre for a long time. How did you come into theatre?

**Kalu Uka:** Well, em! both by accident and deliberate choice. You know I read English at U.C.I. in the laboratories of one of England's most distinguished Shakespearean scholars, Professor Molly Mahood. We were in a class of English Honours, at that time, a class of ten men only, no woman and that Prof of ours was the only woman in our class. And I was in that class with the likes of Prof. A. J. A Esen who was Dean of Education, Uyo, of Michael Angulu, the first Registrar of JAMB, Albert Badey who was unfortunately murdered among the Ogoni Eight, Jerome Enwerem who was also in JAMB, Ekom who was a



broadcaster and the Information Officer in the old Cross River and one Dan Abasiokong, he was also a brilliant boy and one former Senator, David Oke. So we liked a lot of jokes and dramatizing and we began to take English literature beyond literature and see the drama of it. That immediately linked me back with my own school days when my senior brother who sent me to school on behalf of my parents, had got me acquainted with what the school at that time called 'Concert' and I used to play around in a lot of concerts with the teachers. I am talking of years like 1945 when I knew next to nothing. I was still running around the compound half-naked or dressed in one shorts we used to call 'kapa'. You know ... and so I got interested in a lot of children's plays and mimicking people. It came to a climax when in class three in Hope Waddell we were reading Nathaniel Hawthorn's *Tangle Wood Tales and other Tales*. We had this fantastic Efik teacher, Mr. Okon. He knew literature. He inspired literature and I thought part of the inspiration was to imitate my teacher. So every morning before Mr. Okon came to class, I would take his seat and open to *Tangle Wood Tales* and read exactly like Mr. Okon, especially the point where he was imitating the cries of the birds. I was making the sounds that one morning, I didn't know that Mr. Okon was at the window, looking at me. The whole class was cheering but since he was such a disciplinarian, when they all saw him suddenly the class I was addressing was dead silent. I didn't know why. I continued my joke and then I looked at the window, saw the man, I also quietened down. The man then walked into the class (He was a very short man but very dynamic) sat down. We said our usual "Good morning, Sir!" to his "Good morning, class". The man's response was very unenthusiastic. After a few seconds, he pointed at me. "You there! You that idiot"! Everybody looked from one to the other. He said, "I mean you that idiot". Everybody was looking but as far as I was concerned, I wasn't an idiot. I

refused to get up, so he came on at me with the cane and pointed at me and said, "Get up!" and I got up. "What were you doing here?" A bit nervously ... I told him I was dramatizing *Tangle Wood Tales*. He got me punished and it took the Headmaster, John Summer to rescue me, a Scottish man. So over the years like that, my interest in drama increased. So when we went to Ibadan, I read English. Everybody else was doing English texts, I chose to do Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* and Wole Soyinka was my adjudicator and gave me an 'A'. So when I graduated and went to Canada, I decided I would go over to drama.

**Dr. Johnson:** So what happened in Canada?

**Kalu Uka:** What happened in Canada? The people must have reasoned well ... this is a Nigerian, you people we don't know ... well you can only study American Theatre. So I chose to study Eugene O' Neill and Tennessee Williams in comparison. It's still there, Masters Thesis. (You know...) And I was supervised by one of Canada's best Prof. Robertson Davis. He is a novelist, Theatre Director, Playwright, and we lived in a Special College called Massey College. Massey College, opened in 1963, was named for the Raymond Massey family of artists, filmstars of Canada. Raymond himself was one of the most prominent Canadian actors. The College was named and dedicated to the Masseys. Only distinguished postgraduate students were admitted into it from anywhere in the world. So we had British, Africans, Americans, Canadians, Japanese. It was a very lively place and our philosophy was based on "George Santayana" the great Spanish philosopher on "Happiness", "to be happy you must be wise". So we learnt to be wise.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you Prof. When you completed that programme in Canada with a Masters degree, what happened after that?



**Kalu Uka:** Two things! In Canada at that time, to go into a Ph. D. in Graduate School, you must make a minimum score of 90 in all your three major areas [to go into the Ph.D. programme]. I qualified but then the second thing came. I got an offer in U.C.I. through Prof. D. E. S. Maxwell to take up a year of lecturership in Leeds, Yorkshire which could be my first year of an Ibadan appointment. To me it was a two-horned issue. I scratched my head and said, I am not going to do Ph.D. when I can go on and be a lecturer to the English beginning in Leeds, Yorkshire and then going on to Ibadan without further interviews. So I chose to go to England. That's how I became the first black man to teach English and English Literature to the English in Leeds University in 1964.

**Dr. Johnson:** Was it not at a time that racial discrimination was still holding sway in Britain?

**Kalu Uka:** You can say this for the British that, though there is racism, just like Americans will not extend racism to economics and making money, the British will not extend racism to intellectual matters and scholarship. That's what I saw then, because the BBC man who came and interviewed me for BBC Africa Service was emphatic about it. That was in recognition of what they regarded as talent. And what did I feel? I said, well, I feel just humbled by it. I also feel proud for my race, for my people. Would I stay on in England after that? I said no, I would like to go back and help develop my country, Nigeria. In fact, it was so funny. By the August of 1965 when I was finishing from Leeds, Professor Eldred Jones and Prof. Norman Jeffares said to me; "Look, Nigeria is in trouble! Nigeria is going up in flames". And I was offered an alternate lectureship in Fourah Bay. So I would have gone from Leeds to Freetown. I said, no! I'm not going to a University in Sierra Leone, I'm not going to Fourah Bay. If

Nigeria is going up in flames, Nigeria is my country, I better go up in flames with it. So I returned to Nigeria right into that 1965 Workers' Union strike and crisis. More interestingly that is where I met Prof. Ime Ikiddeh in Leeds. He was a P.G. student. That was where I met, for the first time, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and he lived in a dingy flat somewhere off North of Leeds and we used to go to his place. His room would be scattered with papers in every corner and every nook. Every place was, you know, papers like shed dead cockroach wings. Then he was writing *A Grain of Wheat* and his name was James Ngugi not Ngugi wa Thiong'o. "James, where is em... what chapter are you on?" he would say, "chapter three". "But where is chapter one?"; "em... hold it". He would just move straight to one corner and bring out chapter one; But if you tried to search for it yourself, you won't find it (laughter). So we could all read together. We also had two Ugandans, one Pio Zirimu and his wife, Van Zirimu. They both are tragically dead by now. Then we had one other Ugandan, Peter Nazareth (cuts in "Oh Peter Nazareth?) Yes! Peter Nazareth; his daughter, Katty, was born by Caesarian operation and we were all friends sitting anxiously waiting by the fire in Leeds. Then the news came that she had arrived! So Leeds was a challenge. It was exciting. We were not discriminated against. But something also happened. I now decided to go to Cambridge from Leeds to visit my old school teacher in the Methodist College, Uzuakoli, the Rev. Dr. P. J. Collingwood, the man who introduced me to poetry writing. In fact he made us write the first poems: a quiet Englishman but very brilliant. When he knew I was in Leeds, he insisted I must come down to Cambridge and I went and spent a weekend with him. On the way, in the train, that was the first time three British youngsters called me 'Nigger', but I had known enough about race and things like that for me to think it was not typically characteristic of Britain. It could be



at the lower rung. I just turned round and called them "Pinky". Because, the white man, if you want to annoy him, call him "pinky" since their faces turn pink when annoyed. They sat back and looked at me. At my stop point, I went my way. I went away very quickly because being three I didn't know if they would attack me or not. I am talking about attack because in the same year, Ngugi had gone to visit his English girl friend in London and he was attacked by four British youths. So it's not as if we didn't know that England is this ambivalent country when it comes to race, but you could live above it. That's what I'm saying. An English girl even wanted me to marry her but I said I'm not marrying a white, I made it very clear.

**Dr. Johnson:** Interesting! So you came back to Nigeria... And what happened after that?

**Kalu Uka:** I came back to Ibadan, but again, two things happened. Ibadan wrote me a letter of appointment in which it said "...At a salary of so and so, you have been appointed 'Assistant Lecturer in English'." Signed 'Adamolekun' I looked at it. Why did they start a letter with "...at a salary of so and so". I thought the letter should have been more formal. So I wasn't too comfortable. Then the Nigerian crisis continued and my senior brother who was already a Lecturer in Educational Psychology in Ibadan, we got together and said, look we don't know how this crisis will go, let's not pack all our eggs in one basket, I better accept the Nsukka offer and stay at Nsukka while you stay in Ibadan. And that decision saved my family, because when the crisis came and Easterners were "exodus" from the West, my brother made a beeline to my house at Nsukka with all his family. I was single. So that's how we managed to hang together in my flat until the University could give him a place of his own about six months later. So I didn't teach long in Ibadan before going to Nsukka. And I

didn't teach long at Nsukka either before the war came. But I had to return to Nsukka at the end of the war in 1970.

**Dr. Johnson:** (Cuts in) And when you returned after the war, you got into drama?

**Kalu Uka:** Boy...Not immediately. Disaster first! I continued in English. But the remnants of the war, destruction, the ruins were 'drama' enough!

**Dr. Johnson:** English! Drama as adjunct...

**Kalu Uka:** English because there was no Drama in curriculum I'm coming to that later. But when I said we returned to disaster, look around this room, you would see just two arrangements of shelves. If you can imagine this kind of shelves four in a row here made of iron, and four in a row there and four like this, that was my library at Nsukka and I had all the books of the Great Ideas of the Western World. Anything that was ever written by any philosopher, the thirty greatest thinkers of the world, from Aristotle right down to Jesus Christ; all the English Romantic poets; Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron I had them all in copies I had bought in Canada; what they called Publisher's from Remainders. Oxford University Press would publish the books, then the publisher would say from what they had published, there was something left that they could throw away but it's still genuine and they just made them off to some poor African students at very cheap rates or free. So I got the books. I got the entire Works of Shakespeare title by title; I got Milton. In fact I had books but that was way back in Nsukka. Dr. Johnson I am telling you, the Nigerian soldiers had either burnt all of that or they had torn pages to use as toilet paper. But the whole thing was destroyed; Prof. Nwoga's, destroyed; Prof. Echeruo's destroyed. All of it was like that... it was a disaster... Anyway, we got back to English



and with one man who came from here, one Dr. Ekpenyong, who was unfortunately killed during the war, I was teaching *Survey of English Literature, from Aristotle to Wole Soyinka*; I was teaching *English Language*; I was teaching drama – *Introduction to Drama* (you know all those things). So we had a kind of recognition of the “drama section” of English and I took charge of it. It was from there (I will show you a document later) we tried to make a case for theatre at Nsukka, because one of the failings of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka was that, although in 1960, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Zik) had actually said; “Start drama”, and had a building, and named it PAUL ROBESON DRAMA BUILDING, nobody thought of drama or theatre any more after that at Nsukka. I fought that battle for eight years and I got thoroughly misunderstood. But I’m happy now that in the end, Nsukka has, I think, only some three or four years ago, finally joined us and has a Department of Theatre Arts, the ninth or the tenth in the country, because of an opportunity they lost long ago. In spite of that, the late Ezenta Eze who wrote that wonderful colonial play *Cassava Ghost* had started a theatre on wheels that was as vibrant as anything Ogunde or any of the people from the West could do. When Ibadan was touring with *Danda*, they were also touring with something up on this side. So, I continued virtually from there until I left them in 1979/80 to go to the U.S. by special grace on Fulbright Senior Scholars’ Fellowship!

**Dr. Johnson:** What did you do in the Fulbright Fellowship year?

**Kalu Uka:** The Fulbright year I spent at Morgan State University; Baltimore, with Dr. Samuel Hay, HOD. He wanted the theatre of the African content spelt out for both black and white Americans. So from August 15 to September 30, in that year, I did what I called “African Initiations”. In fact if you

remember my play *Ikhammaa*, *Ikhammaa* came out of that “African Initiations”. I wanted to teach them. I had a Yoruba friend and we taught them basic drumming and music-making with our own instruments. Then I decided to direct Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* and we had absolutely nowhere to get the costumes. I made all the costumes. I went to an African Shop downtown that sold African fabrics and used pictures and diagrams to show the Canadian tailors how to make an “agbada” and its Sokoto (or jumper). It came out marvelously: Dr. Hay was excited. Then I re-devised a new curriculum in drama for them because they had the Aldridge Players but they had nothing. They were just doing American plays with a few black Americans. They wanted the African. So I did the African. In fact the Head of Department himself, Samuel Hay, wrote a play for children he called *Mushy Mouth* to show children sanitation of the mouth. How, if you don’t brush your teeth, what would happen and it would happen from there to infection; it was a good musical. They put it along side my directing of *The Lion and The Jewel* and then I wanted to do for the first time, *A Harvest for Ants* but they couldn’t find money to finance it. You know, it has a very large cast, a cast of seventy-four with a crew of fifteen. We did quite a lot. I concentrated mainly on the theatre. Fulbright Headquarters in Washington was very happy. From there we went to Chicago to see the production of Soyinka’s *Death And the King’s Horseman* with James Earle Jones in the lead. After that, they said the play was so exciting, they wanted it in Washington DC at the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts. We also got it. And Soyinka and I then formed a kind of partnership. He would come to Baltimore and lecture and I would go to Washington Seattle with one wonderful American scholar lady, Karen Morrell who wrote a book called *Achebe, Senghor and Soyinka In Person*: very fantastic collection of interviews. People like you know how to run this brand of interviews with the photographs of all



three of them. And I spent four lovely days at Washington Seattle, again teaching them about African drama at the PC 45 where Simon Ottenberg (the man who wrote extensively about African sculptures had himself taught, and I introduced them virtually to West African Oral Traditional Theatre from the written versions. Even Akin Euba the musician was there.

**Dr. Johnson:** Interesting! Prof. Let's jump to Unical. It appears to me that all your theatre ideas, whatever you had been carrying from Canada through Ibadan, through Nsukka through Leeds waiting for an opportunity to truly experiment in the milieu that was called theatre, was realizable in Unical. Let's talk about Unical.

**Kalu Uka:** Ok. Here is how I came to Unical. I've already told you about the dismal failure of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka to initiate, start, mount, establish and sustain a Theatre Department. In spite of all the strong traditions of theatre around us, if you read the brochure I will show you later, of my production of *The Lion and the Jewel* in 1970 at Nsukka, I put it down there that it is a shame that in a place that people have such strong traditions of theatre as we have, that Nsukka was never able to start a proper Theatre Department. It got to about 1980/81, after I came back from the Fulbright, they started politicizing the whole issue. It's not like I don't understand University academic politics, but I have very little patience with it, in the sense that, when you see merit and you don't want to recognize it, it upsets me. And I was so upset that in July 1981, I addressed a very strong, powerful, "four-act" letter. It was a memo but I called it "four-act" drama, to the then Head of Department, Professor Emmanuel Obiechina telling him of the failure inspired by him for us not to have theatre, simply because they resented me as a person. But I was arguing for Theatre in Eastern

Nigeria, to also let us know that we can nurture that tradition here. That letter was so devastating. I gave a copy to Chinua Achebe, a copy to one Rev. Fr. J. V. Landy, a brilliant New Yorker who was with us, who made me do *Leroi Jones Dutchman* and I did it very successfully. So successfully that the Americans on campus thought I was an American by dialect! (chuckles). Now they all saw it. So, at that time I had become very disgruntled and dissatisfied with staying at Nsukka. To crown it all, they started all these politicized debating of whether I should be recommended for Professor in Literature or for Professor in Theatre or for Professor of Directing (because I had written my first novel then) you know. The whole debate I found to be absurd. Ola Rotimi actually was invited from Port Harcourt and came and assessed and said, "This is a man we know carrying theatre with him", and gave reasons why I should be made Professor in Theatre in 1981. Somehow, that recommendation "disappeared" (you know how these things are, I don't have to tell you). I now made a move to see my friends in Calabar, Prof. Okon Uya (he is now a Pastor, owns a church JESUS CARES, very powerful Church. He will be with us in Calabar on Sunday and I hope he remembers he is the Chairman of the day) and Emenyonu. They said "Kalu, come over to Calabar. We know what you have been". I said "No, I am an Associate Professor. I don't want to go to any other place as Associate Professor. If you want me, you must promote me". They said "No, come on down with us...". I said "No, I am fed up with a certain type of academic politics. I don't want my life to continue to be dragged on". So, Okon Uya said, "Ok, send us your publications. We will send them out". They did. And they got three positive reports that I should be made Professor. So, Calabar appointed me Professor in 1983, two years later, on April 19<sup>th</sup> 1983, but I resumed August 1<sup>st</sup>. Johnson, you were just running away. I wish I had caught you (laughs) and it was actually because Lindersay had not given



them what they expected. So when I came, I presented a position paper, an address rather, to the Department which I called ALL THE WAY PERFORMANCE. I started with the musical excerpts from Aretha Franklin (you know the famous American female singer) and showed Calabar why we should have a Department of Theatre Arts that was five Departments in one; Fine and Applied Arts, Music, (because Music doesn't exist in Calabar as a Department up until today), Theatre itself, Folklore, Languages and Communication. And I made that a very good case and that was the centre of my philosophical concern for the Department. I didn't think we should just go back into saying let's take *Moninkim* from Northern Cross River, and because we are in Cross River, we make it the centre like what we find in Western Nigeria; what we find in the West is the symbol of 'Ifa' or some other thing, and this is entrenched in the centre. So, when you get there you must have the colouration that this is Yourba and nothing more. In fact there was a time they were very intolerant of other dramatic ideas, theatrical ideas from other parts of Nigeria in spite of the fact that Wole Soyinka had gone to Afikpo to do his initial research, and a lot of the things he wrote in *Myth, Literature and the African World* are things he gathered from Afikpo. So, I didn't see why we couldn't have a broad-based scholarship like that to mingle and link all our concepts like the relation between "the dead, the living and the unborn" characteristic of various Nigerian cultures instead of attempting to grant it to *one* group of people. So for me, the fourth stage, Soyinka's *Fourth Stage* incorporates all of us. There is another article he has on Afikpo, (I've forgotten the title) – it's on African Literature). I wanted to establish this kind of holistic approach to theatre and theatrical themes. That is why I didn't reject European, didn't reject American, didn't reject Greek and then we had a good success. In the undergraduate, in the Diploma, in the P.G. Programmes, you will see

reflections of that. And I also thought we should be able, always, to keep things abreast with the changing times. If you look at our Theatre Programme in Calabar, by 1985, when the first NUC Visitation came, Mr. Adamolekun who led the delegation, gave a special commendation to the Department of Theatre Arts programme as forward-looking with deeply conceived programme to the point that some of my colleagues (I remember Prof. Okon Essien) nearly went mad, and all wanted comments like that to be made for their programme. But they didn't provide programmes that merited that. I believe in productions. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for instance, in a period of twenty years; I did twenty-two productions. You would soon see what I have to say on your book, titled *Play Production Processes...* but I'm not going into the processes, I'm going into the task. So in Calabar, I encouraged a lot of productions (and you know) we had three tier productions: there were UCPC Productions, there were Departmental productions of Theatre Arts and there were students-directed productions and I made sure we had them all. And then we had this particular room next to the Head of Department's Office where late Abimbola Ojomo was our librarian and kept the prompt books for fifty-one of these productions so that students could refer to them, because it was also part of our Department Library. (Do you know they destroyed all those things for one reason or the other, I don't understand). Now come to think of it; Calabar was, for me, the composite ground for realizing of Theatre Arts. But above all, I want to tell you this, Dr. Johnson (which you can check out); in 1987, when we first went to the NUC panels to draw the curriculum for Minimum Academic Standard for Theatre, it was what I took from Calabar that you will find in many Theatre Arts Departments today, whether it is in Nnamdi Azikiwe or Nsukka itself or Calabar or here. 'Dapo Adelugba and Professor Kujore who were with me signed and endorsed



what I brought and we took it as the minimum standard. So for me, it was fulfilling if not attractive. I am not boasting, I am not saying that I did it all by myself because there is nobody in the theatre, as we know, who works alone. It is always that collaborative thing that will now metamorphose into something which will be permanent.

**Dr. Johnson:** (Chuckles) Thanks Prof. let's be a bit more personal now. From your theatrical prowess, in producing a play, what are your vital areas of emphasis?

**Kalu Uka:** First, I insist that everybody – director, actor, everybody – because most often, we are directing students and it is very difficult to direct students; so I insist that students, lecturers whoever they would be, come together to understand the language of the script. And by 'language' of the script, I don't mean just the English word or the words of any other spoken language in which the play is written. Then we go to the characters, because it is the characters who will elicit meanings from script language. Take your *Itiaba* which is a production I enjoyed. At the time you used "bodies" to form "seven" on the stage, you are speaking a language, meta-language. If the actors, who happen to take part don't understand its relationship to the central theme of the play, they won't form a satisfactory "seven" for you; they won't even be able to form it. Some of them will just think that you are playing with ordinary picturization on stage. Then after the characters, I go to the individuals to see their own concepts. Here I also had a very good example. I was doing Soni Oti's *The Old Masters*. In the play, there is a love scene.... remember. That is the love between "Amadi", the well-born, and the "slave" descendant. And I had two girls, one Mary Blossom and one Catherine, (I always double cast my lead roles). I had the two of them doing the same part. Mary Blossom was a cheeky 'liberated' girl and the boy who was

playing the part of the lover, (and this wasn't in the script) had a very hairy chest. All we wanted was, as I was director; "let him hold you in such a way that people will know that it's a love scene". But she went beyond that; she was fingering his hairy chest in a way that suddenly opened my own eyes to the possibility of interpreting that character and I kept that interpretation, because I always allowed my actors leeway, to make their own suggestions. Where I disagree, I tell them why I disagree and I reject; where I agree I tell them why I agree and incorporate. I can cite one example after another. I also did *Edufa* with Enobong Sonny Sampson-akpan, (Sonny also was a good acting teacher and a director). I, as director, always took part in my own plays to teach the students because I regard the stage as a continuation of the pedagogical process. I believe, too, that "acting it out" by myself was the best thing. I did it in *Edufa*. I acted with the students to show them. Sonny was acting 'Senchi', I was 'Edufa'. He forgot his lines. So what he did was; he came to me (you know in that scene we were both wearing suits with bow tie), grabbed me as if there was something wrong with my bow tie, swung me around so that I was now facing the audience and he was backing them, pretended to be adjusting my tie ("I don't forget the lines, whether you go help me") he whispered. Of course, a good actor would know his lines but should know the beginning of the other's lines too, and I knew it. So I said, "hear your lines, you idiot"; don't forget the thing again". To people out there, we were merely repositioning, positioning, picturizing moves that were never in the script. It was never what I did as director but I loved it. It also showed the presence of mind that an actor can have and I encourage my actors to have presence of mind. Don't forget you are acting. Don't ever forget you are acting. But at the same time, don't be so self-conscious. So, what have I said? Grasp the "Language", literary and symbolic; understand the character, the motivation, the meaning, each



person to know his own cues and his lines, each person to have presence of mind and be able ... (instead of feeling lost and hollering, 'prompter', 'prompter'). By the way, I never use prompters, I refuse to use prompters. You get lost with your lines, you are there, you are stuck. First, I found out that prompters are (so) bad. They will be shouting the lines even when you've got it. They will be shouting if from the wings and everybody will know that you are being prompted. In fact, it so happened once in Calabar, (I don't know who was doing the play), but somebody was prompting. Some members of the audience said, "you no hear wetin dem dey tell you"? (laughter) It can be very embarrassing. So I don't use prompters. I believe in the autonomy of the script, in the autonomy of what the actors and director can do with the fitter script in order to sift out the real meaning.

**Dr. Johnson:** In your repertory of productions, from Nsukka to Calabar and all, what would you consider your most challenging production and why?

**Kalu Uka:** I still think that it is *A Harvest for Ants*, my adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* done between 1975 and 1977, originally for the FESTAC with the largest cast of 74 and a crew of 15 and other helpers. It is not easy to blend, to coordinate, to harmonize but I still love the challenges. It's not like when I had to do *Rhythm of Violence* with about some thirteen characters or do *Childe Internationale* and there are three characters or ... (you know what I mean) it was then that I believed, with Ola Rotimi, that a director should try and direct a play with a whole village and then sit back and rest. His own, he said he would sit back and die. That he would write a play with a cast of three hundred but he doesn't know that when you film it, it won't have that kind of strength as if you are staging it. So because of the nature of our stage, I did not do *A Harvest for Ants* for the proscenium, I preferred

open air because it gives you a bit more room to manipulate. And for my productions at Nsukka, the second challenge, apart from the cast the second, of any play, would also be the venue. At Nsukka, in all those years I took people through four or five different venues; one was the Paul Robeson Drama Building which you know is so bad that Soyinka had rejected it when he first saw it in 1962. I took audiences to the Sir Akanu Ibiam Stadium where I did Zulu Sofola's *The Wedlock of the gods* for convocation. Then I took them to the quadrangle in front of the English Department between Economics and English bounded by three roads. Then I took them to the Prince Alexandra Auditorium where I had hosted Lindersay and Co. with Imaikop's... *The Successor*. What is that play with a Vulture on top of it? Em... I've forgotten, but you know the play abi? Finally I was going to take Nsukka right to the hills where the Physics Department had her weather observatory and you know Nsukka is very hilly (you know it could be cold at night and even discouraging and then that was a little more remote). The point I wanted to make is that we needed a theatre and it was one Professor Adiele Afigbo, when he was Dean who now said, "Kalu has made a point, let's think of building a theatre". He started what I designed, but unfortunately we couldn't finish it. What they have now at Nsukka is barely an apology. I actually designed a theatre house by myself, a concept of which I gave them as model, and which one businessman in Enugu was going to build for us but he got killed in a motor accident. So that is what I considered as a challenge in *A Harvest for Ants*. The others we could manage because of their cast. But I also considered space very challenging. You can see in Calabar we were a little luckier. We had the Studio Theatre, we had the Garden Theatre, then we had the Arts Theatre now Chinua Achebe Arts Theatre. So you could move a bit even though there were not quite as what there should be. But they brought us at least one man from Kenya



one Makini, who said he heard about this Studio Theatre, Garden Theatre and Arts Theatre, and the thing he wanted to do was Masters and Ph.D in Calabar. Unfortunately some people frustrated him out of the place.

**Dr. Johnson:** Prof., there is something, maybe, you have not thought of which you are going to declare today. Yes! You must go down to posterity. When you talk of Jerzy Grotowski, the "Poor Theatre" suddenly comes to mind. Yes, when you talk of Tyrone Guthrie, "blending intuition with technique" comes to mind, when you talk of...

**Kalu Uka:** (Cuts in) By the way, I watched all Tyrone Guthrie's productions in Canada, at the Ontario Shakespeare Theatre. He helped design and direct with Tonia Moichenitih.

**Dr. Johnson:** ...Yea, Prof. Every long standing director, theatre practitioner comes with a philosophy or an expression that captures his practice. Some call it approach, others call it style. For example, when you talk of Harold Clurman, his own style is the "Spine Approach", Inih Ebong for example had his "Cosmo-humo symbiosis", Effiong Johnson has his own "Impact-contact aesthetics". Prof. you have to give me your approach today, that when the name Kalu Uka is mentioned, in terms of theatrical practice, maybe from now, you say, "Oh Kalu's... that becomes speaking for him, for his ideas, for his concepts, for his directorial standing. I need that coinage, it must come from you today.

**Kalu Uka:** No problem, very, very simple. I have answered in all that I have said without giving it a name. For me, it is *Total Theatre*.

**Dr. Johnson:** Total Theatre? But that is an African concept...

**Kalu Uka:** Yes! I used it in Lewis Nkosi's *Rhythm of Violence*. What do I

mean? Every part of that building you call theatre building from the ceiling into the auditorium, into the control room down to the doors, down to the corridors become part of my "playing space". When I did that with *The Lion and the Jewel* at the North American Students Theatre Festival in 1980, in Philadelphia and I had, at the point when Baroka now takes Sidi out in the marriage scene, I had all of them go through the auditorium with Baroka holding the new bride and one party of the dancers taking one side, a third column of dancers taking the central isle, and there was no "curtain call" because for me, everything was there – total theatre. I used it also in *A Harvest for Ants* in Nsukka, particularly in Enugu. I used it for one play that was called *Habba Shrine* at Nsukka written by one Emeka Egbuonu. Meki Nzewi borrowed it from me and used it for what he called *Lost Finger* a music-drama at Nsukka. So, *Total Theatre* is always what I had always sought, believed in and practised, even though I've never given it that name. I'm only thinking of a label now as you are saying it. But again as you said, not only that it's African. It's not original. Remember that Jean-Louis Barrault, the French man, had used it, well, giving it a French interpretation. But then, I mean, music, I can't, for instance, direct a play any day without music, I cannot direct a play today without special approach to costume design. For me that is a *totality* of it. Like I told you already every part and everything coheres to give *total meaning*. For me, that is *Total Theatre*.

**Dr. Johnson:** Prof. Thank you very much. The Nigerian theatre has not really had a design that you can say "this is Nigerian". Many attempts have been made to identify what "Nigerian" theatre truly is. Could you help tell us what you consider to be a typical "Nigerian" theatre, in terms of its formation, in terms of its approach, in terms of its styles and current form. If you have to answer that question to an American who knows



American Theatre, a British who knows British Theatre, a Caribbean from maybe Trinidad and Tabago... what would you answer?

**Kalu Uka:** (Cuts in) This question you are asking is so important, but it was answered in 1977. It was answered at FESTAC. By the time we got through with FESTAC, I remember the late Ezenta Eze at Nsukka. He came back, he said, "Kalu do you know the era of the scripted drama is gone? Is finished in Nigeria? What we now have is dance drama with or without spoken language". If you notice, for our people, you can do dance alone and they will be satisfied. If you notice, any of the plays we are doing, we inject either integrally or by accompaniments or by embellishments, so much dance and song because our people do believe in "spectacle". So I think the force that identifies Nigerian drama is dance drama as opposed to musical. I am not talking about Opera, I'm not talking about Operata but dance theatre which is not dance, which is not theatre in the Elizabethan/Greek, sense, because we don't even have advantage of the Greek Chorus, even though we have our side commentators. You can put your Uko Akpan there, what in my area, they would call Akukonegu (story-telling-in-dance). And so for me, it is Dance-Drama. That is the shape; the identifiable mark of Nigerian Theatre, wherever it comes from. You have seen a script of my *Ikhammaa*? You know that all the statements that they have to make at the judgement scene is made through dance and music?

**Dr. Johnson:** Yea, Prof. what problems plague the Nigerian Theatre as at now?

**Kalu Uka:** What is plaguing Nigerian Theatre right now is what I call, "The New Technology of Entertainment". And I will try to explain it this way. Before Nigerian Theatre itself was born, if

you remember in this country, we were a country of lovers or Indian films and Cowboy films. People went to cinema, big cinemas. If you come to Aba, there will be three or four cinema houses, you go to Calabar, you have this and that, go to any big town in Ibadan, go to Lagos, it was all, and those cinema people, (by the way, nobody even thought of live theatre, first because, of course the script hadn't quite come. When they came, they were either in churches or in little places. They had not become the main stream. We didn't even have them being taught in our Universities. We didn't have them being taught in our secondary schools or primary schools even though I told you about my introduction through "concert" but "concert" was finished there and forgotten. There was no continuity of the tradition. Then we started: University and Secondary Schools formed dramatic Clubs and we started doing theatre. Two wrong things happened, we did theatre on the platform at the end of the dining hall in the secondary schools. (That was not really Theatre). That was a continuing of the "concert" tradition. Then by the time it was coming, we were now teaching. We made it look as if it was just a campus thing, town and gown. Bring the people from town, let them come and see what we were doing inside and that's it. We didn't commercialize, we didn't branch out. Then while we were doing all that and producing people like you who would not only write but entertain and do that, then came the mixed blessing thing. That is what I call it. It is called the Home Video. But before Home Video, remember that Nigerians were lovers of pornographic films that some hotels specialized in showing. But when video films came, people were prepared to discard the pornographic films and put in home videos. I will tell you one or two things that happened to us in Enugu, when we went back to one cinema in Enugu. You know cinema always broke up around 11.00p.m, then you have to go long distances back home. Cars were being snatched, people were



being robbed. The immediate impact of the war was such that even cinemas became less fashionable, visiting theatre houses was affected. Nobody even talked about them. So people did not invest, people did not develop them because of the insecurity. I don't know whether the problem has been eliminated altogether, because where you still had live theatre as theatre, there were even no reasonable theatre lighting equipment, not to talk of other more sophisticated equipment. No one was investing in theatre. Read the assessment of this by Hugh Heffner in his book on the theatres in America in Frank M. Whiting. You will see that it has also happened that way in America. Finally, we have stopped using theatre as propaganda (I remember what we used to use in Road Safety: Dramatic skills to illustrate things). And you know that in Russia, long time (I don't know whether they have stopped) they used theatre; in China, they used theatre to promote the communist ideology. Take it to the community; show them what it will be. If it is the problem of water, food shortage, the kind of things that drove Ngugi into establishing theatre for development (T.F.D.). I think you people can redo that, in other words, find a new direction for theatre. Whether the government or the authority that is around will tolerate if you become too critical is another matter.

**Dr. Johnson:** Let's come to theatre in the university where most of us have been teaching. Is the curriculum well-structured to produce a rounded Theatre Artist who can go out there to practice his profession?

**Kalu Uka:** Yes! Most of the curricula, I would say, are well-structured but like I said earlier on, there is no way you structure a programme without revisiting it, at least every five years. So we must accept that they are still subject to revisions that will bring them up to date. Two, in bringing them up to date, you

must now tie them to relevances in your society, that is a very soft, very hard, very delicate ground to stand on. But I will give you an example. Here we have a concept of design-costume design, set design, furniture design. Do you know that there are some of our students who, without any further training, have taken what we taught them here as design, gone into the world and have succeeded in designing things? Let me give you one very interesting example... We had a girl who was doing a programme in Calabar Television; that time she was called Madam Tinkoriko, (I don't know whether you remember her). In 1990, Imaikop Orok, Sampson-akpan and I and a whole team from Akwa Ibom State, went for NAFEST in Kaduna. Because I had had a bad experience in 1973, taking my students from Nsukka through Kaduna to Maiduguri for performance, and we came out to Kaduna to eat. We went to Hamdala Hotel. They did not allow us to eat because we didn't wear tie. Hamdala, you must be "properly" dressed i.e. in jacket, tie before you go in and eat or you wear National dress. We had come there, we were hungry, so they really had some ties hanging around there, so they would give you. They gave me, I just slung the thing around my neck. We went and ate but I decided not to go to Hamdala again. By 1990, we came to Kaduna, I didn't bother to find out whether that old stupid colonial tradition was still there or not, but we were looking for a place to eat and we will not go to the "Food-Is-Ready" places to eat. (You don't want to have trouble). Then Sonny Sampson-akpan and Imaikop came and said to me, "We have found a place we will eat and eat "Edikan Ikon". I said, "What do you mean? He:è?" They said "here!" So they took us to this place, a wonderful Restaurant. The wall was made of bamboo, beautifully painted. It had a name, but it is the caption under the name that was interesting. Name caption: "A New Concept in Hunger Management" (laughs) and it was that "Madam Tinkoriko" who graduated under me, in Unical Theatre Arts



who owned it, and who had specialized in Management from Theatre. We were overwhelmed. When we got in, she said, "Prof. there is nothing you will not eat here, any day, you will eat here, till this programme you came for is over, that you will pay for. It is all on me. I said "No, no, I am here on government business. They have given me money to feed". She said, "you can take the money back to Government". And within ten minutes she would bring you 'fufu' of the warmest order and any kind of soup you want (I don't know how she does it). Madam Tinkoriko used the ideas of management which she learnt only in Theatre. She hasn't been to any other management school. Apparently, one Alhaji saw her, picked her up, financed her and told her to set up the kind of place she set up - "A NEW CONCEPT IN HUNGER MANAGEMENT".

**Dr. Johnson:** (Cuts in) Interesting!

**Kalu Uka:** I was going to see my brother in Shell Dev. Coy of Nigeria some years ago. I saw two people working in the rig. One studied Engineering and the other did Theatre Arts in Unijos. "You did what?" "Theatre Arts?" And you are here? "Yes sir". When we have to run scenery and rig the scenery, it's the same thing we are doing". So theatre is one place where you can apply the knowledge but we mustn't do it as if we have now become an Engineering setup or something. We must still remember that we are theatre, because theatre itself is the meeting ground of all the Arts. That is why we are richer than languages, than English, than History, than Music and all because it is in theatre they all meet. So in the University, what we need now is to give that integrated training to our students, and go on encouraging them as we do here, of inclining them towards that and where their talent seems tilted to, but without letting them deceive themselves into thinking that this means that they are

"specialists". They are not specialists. So we integrate them and when they go out into the world, they can look after themselves. You and I keep saying that "orientation" is necessary so that they learn to speak well. So, all is not lost for theatre but the challenge is still there because of the nature of our society and our societal values.

**Dr. Johnson:** Prof. if you had to go to school afresh, what would you read?

**Kalu Uka:** I would read Theatre and I would stay a University teacher. I will have to say this so many times. Take a play like *Amphitryon* 38. It tells you very clearly that there are, in the whole world, only thirty-seven comic situations. It doesn't matter how you look at them. And the writer of "Three Eight" thought he was inventing the "Thirty-eighth" but it was only to point to the fact that it is still "thirty-seven" situations plus. And when you read theatre and do theatre well, Dr. Johnson, as the students come to you in that office where you are looking after Students' Affairs, do you know that there is no situation or problem that they can bring to you that you would not have before encountered in Theatre? So I think theatre gives me that knowledge. There is a philosophy in it. It gives me that in-road into looking at life and seeing the ridiculous, the glorious, the commendable, the condemnable, the laughable, you know. I like to remain a humanist. In other words, I would like to remain a theatre artist and a university teacher.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you, Prof. You are seventy and you look very strong. You look very agile. You look very good. Your contemporaries are being helped by walking sticks. Others are bedridden. What is the secret?

**Kalu Uka:** Frankly, I think... you are a man of God. You read the WORD, the BIBLE. Frankly I think it's God's Grace, his



overwhelming Grace. I can't understand it myself. But as far as human beings are concerned, I would also say it is because I have led a very modest life. I've never believed in extremities and I've never indulged in extremities because I think that extremes destroy. I've had crises in my life but I have found succour. Succour is Christ, the opposite of crisis. I also think and I want to say it, that I am well married and have a good stable family. So, there is an inner joy. I don't mean just "happiness" but "joy". Yes, I lost one of my children in a road accident some year ago, (only God knows why that happened) but the others that are left are doing very well. I've never had to lose sleep thinking what's wrong with them, where are they going, what are they doing and so on. Even right now, in my retirement, I don't give them any trouble. They are so independent and so well-focused. My first son has his own house in Port Harcourt. The other one has his own big modern place in Abuja and he has a family. All the three boys are happily married. The two girls are just waiting to join them. And so I call myself BLESSED. And it is God's doing. There was a time I used to describe myself as "self-made", but that is a limited concept. "Self-made" in the sense that, when I was to go to University, there was no money. But I found a road. In *Daily Times Newspaper*. Where I was living at Isselle Ukwu, near Asaba and boarded a pick up van and went to Lagos and went to Federal Scholarship interview and I came out number one. But that doesn't mean I made myself, God made me. Dr. Johnson, in 1962, I graduated in June, got a job with Radio Nigeria, which is where I started as a Broadcaster in Lagos. September, I got a Commonwealth Fellowship. I didn't apply to anywhere. Till today I don't know where it came from, but I went to Canada and studied as a Commonwealth Fellow. On so many thousand dollars I was living like a prince but I never forgot to give thanks to Yahweh. In 1979/80, I got a cable out of nowhere, from America, giving me Senior Fulbright Fellowship, at a time

when only white people were enjoying Fulbright. 1978/79 was the time Black people enjoyed Fulbright. I went to Prof. Echeruo and asked, "Did you recommend me?" He said, "No". Who recommended me? Nobody! None of my colleagues in Nsukka knew. And it was a fellowship that said, "Come with your wife and five children under (18) eighteen". And they were all under eighteen. So I went with all of them.

**Dr. Johnson:** Interesting.

**Kalu Uka:** Yes! Till today, that is why I cannot leave my house any morning without thanking God. Some of my colleagues think...you Christians like to sound fanatical in everything... but for me, it's God's grace.

**Dr. Johnson:** Interesting to know that...

**Kalu Uka:** (cuts in) I have never... I was telling Mr. Duru once when he was being pestered by the landlord where we live, to pay rent. I said why are you delaying the rent? Go and pay this rent. Later, I said, "Well, I don't know because one, I've never lived... (and I've worked for thirty years)..., I've never lived where I paid rent to any landlord. University said you will pay so much percentage of your salary. They took it. If they took more I didn't know, if they took less, I didn't know. Wherever else I lived when I worked in the Missions Schools, they gave me a free house". So I've never clashed with a landlord or a landlord's wife or a landlord's children, I don't even know what it means to be a landlord. So my life has always been sort of protected like that. When we were small, my mother would take me to the farm, they will load yam and things for other people to carry. My own, my mother would carry. She said she didn't want me to develop hunchback. So they will come and take, and take, and I will cry until there will be only one yam left (laughter) that I carried home. My mother said



that the only thing I ever brought to her was firewood or a basket of mushrooms all by myself. So, I am very thankful to God. If He gives me twenty more it is all right. If He gives me ten more, it's all right. He already says three-score and ten. But any extra could be 'wahala' but I don't pray for 'wahala'.

**Dr. Johnson:** It won't happen!

**Kalu Uka:** And then again, Dr. Johnson, I must mention this. I've always loved to relate to people very positively. Some of the ways that people try to annoy me in Calabar and Nsukka, if I had followed them, maybe I would be agonizing but I think I forgive too easily or forget too easily. I don't carry any extra load on my mind. I sleep with my doors open, literally. Most of the time my wife would ask...why are you leaving this place open? I say I want breeze, she will shut the door...so if you are relaxed and in the good books of your God, you will keep looking good. And if you know that your life also is to be lived for other people. There used to be an American VOA programme, I used to listen to in those days. It said, "if you meet somebody without a smile, give him one of your own". I like to give a smile in more ways than one to others. People played so much politics with my promotion at Nsukka, that when I look back on them now I just laugh and say "great", They really have been serious". So I decided on one thing, I would never do it, (go and ask... Abasiattai here) I rescued him in Calabar. By the time I got to be Dean, this man's appraisal for Professorship had been waiting for nearly four years until the Vice Chancellor called me and said "What do we do?" I said. "VC let's call him and ask him whether he would like us to start afresh or forget it". And Abasiattai agreed. We started afresh and within six months we got him his Professorship. He was looking like this, "Can an Igbo man do this?" That was when Ime Ikkiddeh told him, "I was not an Igbo man, I was an Ibibio man too. Because for me, it's

unwise to look at our skin and say whether this is an Ibibio skin or Yourba skin or Igbo skin...". It is very difficult for me. Johnson, I have never been in any government job, parastatal or non-governmental job recommended for me by an Igbo man. It has always been non-Igbo people.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you. Two more questions and we are done for today.

**Kalu Uka:** (cuts in) No, go on. I'm impressed you have all this time because I thought you would have done five minutes and say "well, let me go-o. Besides, you are asking all these good questions, from your head, off hand! I am impressed. Go on!".

**Dr. Johnson:** Prof. what would you like to leave as a word of advice for the upcoming ones, the young lecturers in Theatre discipline or lecturers as a whole? Many of us would like to celebrate our 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary...

**Kalu Uka:** (Cuts in) I am praying for it. And like I said, until all of you become at least senior lecturers I am not quitting the scene (laughter). One, people should learn to trust themselves. Don't over-indulge in anything even when you have the opportunity. Be disciplined. Read and work hard. If you are not rewarded today, maybe tomorrow. Don't give up, don't say 'ha this system bla bla bla... Dr. Johnson remember a dream you had of some masquerades. I interpreted it and told you and we moved forward. The masquerade himself is still there but it cannot touch you. Reason – hope for higher, look up higher and have confidence. Yes, human beings will be there because you have to interact with them. Then, you must be satisfied with what you have, don't say "oh look at my brother there, he has ten buildings in each of ten cities. He has this and this, I must be like that" and lead yourself into something else. Marry a good woman and your life will be longer. If you marry a bad woman, you will be in trouble,



which means pray and wait and spend time to select. It is one thing to sleep with a girl, and quite another thing to want to marry her. And you will see that the girl you want to marry is not always the most beautiful or the one that was closest in your life but the one appointed for you by your God. And finally, learn to tolerate people, accommodate them as much as possible. My mother used to tell me long ago, if ever, you have any reason to disagree with anybody or regard him as enemy, don't let him know the colour of your mind – keep him guessing. So, there are things I keep saying that my life is a life that has been lived without fanfare and I mean it. But it is not a life that has not been lived without welfare.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you Prof. Finally, what would Prof. Uka like to be remembered for?

**Kalu Uka:** In academics?

**Dr. Johnson:** Anywhere! Universally, holistically. Just mention the name, Prof. Uka, the name rings a bell *per se*. What bell will it ring about Prof. Uka?

**Kalu Uka:** Should it be for me to answer or should it be for people like you to provide? Well, I'm somebody who modestly and in all humility traveled his road very well.

**Dr. Johnson:** Thank you, Prof. it's been wonderful holding you up for this long session.

**Kalu Uka:** Thank you, Dr. Johnson.