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A Special Edition in Honour of Unionmwan Edebiri

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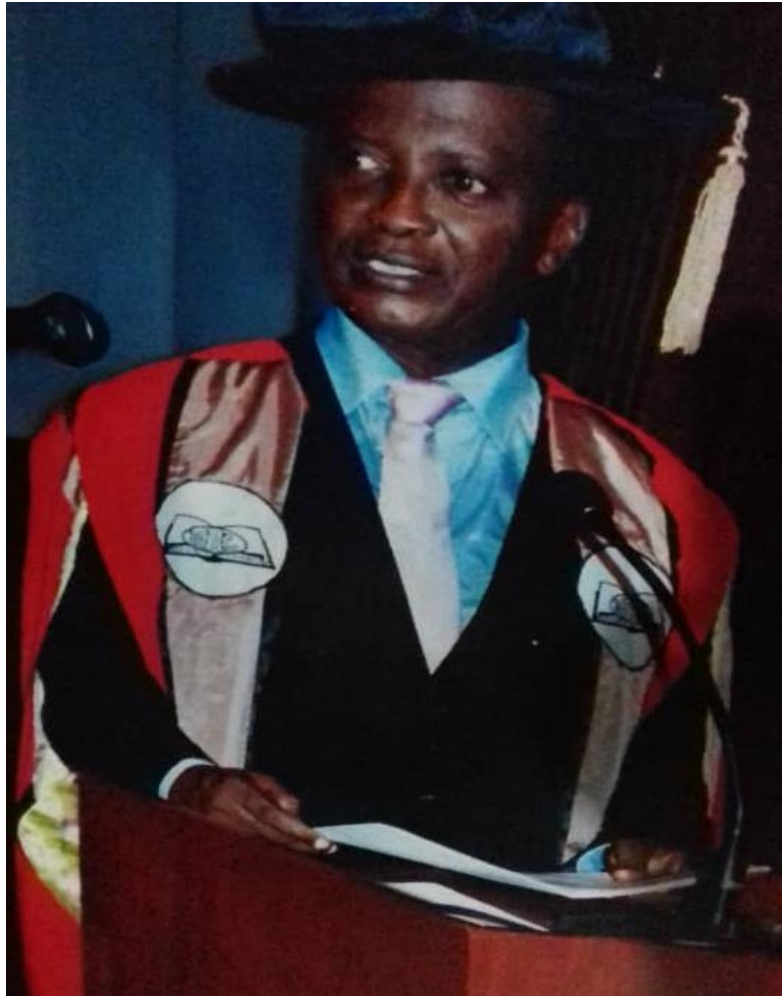
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**PROFESSOR UNIONMWAN EDEBIRI, OFR FNITI,
FUFTAN, FNAL, Ph.D. (Paris), B.L.**

Teacher, literary critic, translator and promoter of African arts culture, Unionmwan (Union) Edebiri is a Professor of French and a Barrister at-Law. He studied French in the Universities of Nigeria, Dakar, Tours, Caen, Paris and Dijon.

Born in Benin-City, Nigeria on 1st April, 1942, Unionmwan was awarded a Bachelor of Arts (B.A. (Hons) degree in French and Russian by the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1965. As an undergraduate, he showed academic promise when he won a University scholarship in Nsukka, a French Government scholarship for the year-abroad programme in Dakar and Edward Blyden prize for Academic excellence on graduation. He also demonstrated leadership as Assistant Secretary of the Student Union, Secretary of the United Nations Student Association (UNSA), Nsukka Branch, member of the 4-man University of Nigeria Delegation on an Exchange programme to Netherlands, member of the 2- man Delegation of the All-Nigeria United Nations Student Association (ANUNSA) to the 15 Annual conference of the International Student Movement for the United Nations (ISMUN) in Geneva, the ANUNSA Delegate to the ISMUN - OXFAM Conference in Oxford, the ANUNSA Delegate to the ISMUN workshop in Paris, and the pioneer President of the West African Confederation of United Nations Student's Association (WACUNSA).

In 1965, he won a Federal Government of Nigeria Scholarship to study for a Master's Degree in France. He obtained M.A. French at the Sorbonne in 1968. The French Government then awarded him a scholarship to study for the doctorate degree. In 1970, he became the first Nigerian to earn a Doctorate d'Université (Ph.D.) in French Literature from the Department of French Literature at the Sorbonne for his thesis on "*L'individualisme dans l'oeuvre de Georges Duhamel*" written under the supervision of M. le Recteur Marius - Francois Guyard. Again, on the basis of his academic excellence, the French Government awarded him a scholarship to train for a French language Diploma course in 1971 and in 1982 he undertook a postgraduate summer course in French in the University of Dijon, France. Years later, for his legal education, he attended University of Lagos (1984 - 1990) and the Nigerian Law School. He was called to the Nigerian Bar in 1991.

He began his career in 1971 and has taught various aspects of French Language and Literature in University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, (1971-1974), University of Lagos, (1974-2007) and University of Benin, Benin City, (2009-2021). Edebiri also supervised several undergraduate projects, postgraduate dissertations and theses. He was the co-supervisor of the first candidate to obtain a Ph.D. in French in the University of Lagos in 1990. Many Universities in Nigeria have benefited from his services as external examiner for their undergraduate and postgraduate examinations just like some Nigerian and foreign universities which requested him to assess the publications of their staff for promotion to associate professorship and full professorship. He has served on the Editorial Boards of many scholarly journals and as an editorial consultant to some national and international reputable journals.

Understandably, in the University of Lagos where he spent most of his active working life/career, he held several positions, including that of the Co-ordinator, General African studies, headship of the Department of European Languages and membership of Governing Council and Senate and 13 of their Committees. Under his headship, the department of European Languages organised an ***International Conference on Translation and Interpretation in Africa: Past, Present and Future, Lagos, 11th – 13th July, 2005***. That was the first international conference ever organised by the Department of Modern / European / Foreign Languages or French in Nigeria. In the University of Benin, Professor Edebiri has been a major promoter of both the journal *Le Bronze University of Benin Journal for French Studies* and the biennial International Conference of French studies of the Department of Foreign Languages.

Unionmwan's research interests encompass Francophone African Drama, its birth, development, current trends, and_ specificity, assessments of traditional and foreign influences on it, and detailed studies on individual playwrights, 20 Century French Literature in Nigeria, Comparative Literature Translation and Cultural Studies.

Unionmwan's most important contributions to knowledge are in the area of Francophone African Drama in which he has focused on its birth, development, criticism, current trends and specificity, its role in national development, assessment of traditional and foreign influences on it and detailed studies of individual authors and troupes.

He has published books on these topics which contain selections of some of his studies previously published as articles mainly in foreign reputable journals. He has to his credit six books, two monographs, journal articles, public lectures and paper presentations in eight national and twenty nine International Conferences spread over 25 countries in four continents of the world.

It is worth mentioning that in the article Edebiri published in a Beninois (then Dahomean) literary journal on Jean Pliya, (their foremost writer), which "revealed" him to his compatriots who thereafter started to study him. Hence in the Beninois literary circle, he was nicknamed "le critique Nigerian de Jean Pliya".

Similarly, in an article published by Ethiopiques in Dakar in 1990, Edebiri was the first critic to draw attention to the emergence of Nigerian poetry in French. With regard to Comparative Literature, he contributed to it by being the founder and pioneer Secretary (with Professor M.J.C Echeruo as President) of the Nigerian Association for African and Comparative Literature which collaborated with the Department of English, University of Ibadan in organizing the Annual Ibadan African Literature Conference in the mid 70's. Edebiri also used his good offices to facilitate the participation of Nigerians in the Congresses of the International Comparative Literature Association on whose Executive Committee he represented Africa (1976-1982). In addition, he showed in one of his studies that, on account of its special circumstances, the traditional concept of Comparative Literature as "the study of national

literatures in relation to each other” or as “the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, (...) beyond national boundaries” is invalid when applied to the study of African Literature.

In the 1980’s Edebiri launched a collaborative project to pay tributes to prominent and aging Francophone African writers while they are alive instead of awaiting their demise to pour encomiums on them. His first choice of writer was Bernard Dadié, the Ivorian versatile writer-poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, folktale teller etc. The project was a huge success. Of the 33 chapters published after peer reviews, 26 were in French and 7 in English. The contributors were some of the foremost critics of Francophone African Literature like Lilyan Kesteloot, Jacques Chevrier, Bernard Magnier, Philippe Decraene, Clive Wake and Dorothy Blair. The French Government, through its Centre National des Lettres sponsored the publication of the book, *Bernard Dadié: hommages et études (essais réunis par Unionmwan Edebiri)*, Ivry-sur-Seine, Editions Nouvelles du Sud, 1992. The Government of Côte-d’Ivoire, through its Ministry of Culture organized its public presentation in Abidjan under the Chairmanship of the Nigerian Ambassador to Cote-d’Ivoire, His Excellency J.O Coker who, by a happy coincidence, was one of Edebiri’s first students at University of Ife. That public presentation was unique in that a book written or edited by a Nigerian on a Francophone writer was officially launched in the writer’s own country. Even more significant is that the book put an end to the then prevailing practice whereby Western critics got African critics to contribute chapters to books which they edited. For the first time in African literary criticism, a Lagos-based Nigerian edited a book to which several Western critics contributed chapters. Most significantly, the book remains the most important work of reference on Bernard Dadié.

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Union Edebiri has delivered a number of public lectures at home and abroad notably, he was Guest Speaker on "the Traditional and the Modern: An Aspect of Narrative Techniques in the African Novel", Annual Conference of the Dutch Association of General and Comparative Literature, Amsterdam, 18 August, 1976, the 1st Chief (Dr) Jacob Egharevba Memorial Lecture, (5% December 1995), the 1997 Convocation Anniversary Symposium of His Majesty Oba

Michael Adenuyi Sonariwo, the Akarigbo of Remo, 18 July 1997, Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Jos (9 February 1998), 50% and 60 Anniversary celebration of Urhobo College his alma mater, 1999, March 2011 and Guest Lecturer on “Drama and Culture in Francophone West Africa”, African Studies Programme, University of Washington, Washington, U.S.A, April 26, 2011.

He was the founder and pioneer Secretary, Nigerian Association for African and Comparative Literature. (1976). He represented Africa on the Executive Committee, International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), 1976-1982 (the first Nigerian to do so), he was a Senior Colloquium Officer at FESTAC’77 and a member of the Governing Council, Nigeria Institute of International Affairs (1986-1992). He was Centre for Black Director/ Chief Executive Centre for Black and African Civilization (CBAAC) Lagos where he instituted CBAAC lectures at which speakers with impressive credentials spoke such as Ambassador Dudley J. Thompson, QC, High Commissioner of Jamaica to Nigeria, Ambassador Walter Carrington, U.S Ambassador to Nigeria, Ambassador Kofi Awoonor, Ghanaian Permanent Representative to the United Nations, and Emeritus Professor Ali Maz. (1992 - 2000), He was a member (nominated for Culture), Nigeria Bar Association. (1999 - 2000), member (the only Nigerian) of the International Colloquium Commission of the Third World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN IID, Dakar, (2005-2010) and Chairman Forum of Professors and Heads of Departments of French in Nigerian Universities. (2007-2008).

Unionmwan contributed immensely to educational development/ development of education at the State level through membership of the Board of Directors of the Ethiope Publishing Corporation, Midwest Ad-Hoc Scholarship Committee, Governing Council of College of Education, Abraka, State Library Board and planning

Committee for the Establishment of a Bendel State University and other Institutions of Higher learning which recommended the establishment / founding of Bendel State University, now Ambrose Alli University.

He has rendered and continues to render services to various Agencies of Governments, Universities, professional associations, educational institutions and other bodies. Union is a Member, Specialized Committee of Assessors for Humanities Board, Nigerian National Merit Award, Presidency, Abuja, (Since 2016), Member, Comité scientifique du Musée international des arts et civilisations du Vodum-Orisha, ANPT Presidency, Porto-Novo, Benin Republic (Since 2018), Foundation President, West African Institute of Translators and Interpreters (Since 2018), Member, Board of Directors, Centre for Edo studies, Benson Idahosa University, Benin City, (Since 2018), Chairman, Board of Governors, Iduraise Education Centre, Eyaen, Benin City, (in 2015) and Member, High Academic Board, Université Louis-Charles de Montesquieu, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire (Since 2016).

The many honours, recognitions awards and fellowships bestowed on him testify to the high quality of his intellectual, academic and administrative attainments. They include the organizing committee's selection of Unionmwan as the African representative to represent the African contingent at the Podium during the Opening Ceremony of the XII Congress of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures, Sydney, Australia, 25 August, 1975 declared open by the Governor- General of Australia, his membership of the 6-man African Literature Monitoring Sub-Committee of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), the only Nigerian on the Sub-Committee and his appointment in 1997 by ADIFLOR and the Biennale de la Langue française as Coordinator for the distribution to the Nigerian educational institutions of French books worth over NS550M donated to Nigeria mainly because they

considered him to be, in their own words “a personality whose impartiality and integrity are not in doubt”. Unionmwan was elected to represent Africa on the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), (1976- 1982). He has been awarded fellowships and awards such as Fellowship of the Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters, (FNITI), Fellowship, Institute of Benin Studies (FIBS) Fellowship, University French Teachers Association of Nigeria (FUFTAN), Fellowship, Nigerian Academy of Letters (FNAL), Leopold Sédar Senghor Research Fellowship, Quidah’92 Award by the President of Republic of Benin, Special Award by the President of Senegal, Benin Achievers Award by HRM Omo n’Oba n’Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, the University of Lagos Long and meritorious Service Award and the ultimate national Award, the National Honour of Officer of the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR) conferred on him by President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Professor Unionmwan Edebiri has taught 4 generations of professors and is proud of the accomplishments of his former students who have distinguished themselves in the public service and private sector as current and former ministers, ambassadors, high commissioners, sports and Oil & Gas executives. His marriage on 5th July 1975 to Mojisola Edebiri (née Awolesi), the daughter of late Oba Moses Sowemimo Awolesi, CON, Erinwole I, the 17th Akarigbo of Remoland, Ogun State was blessed with four children and lovely grandchildren.

Professor Akanbi Mudasiru ILUPEJU
The Editor- Eureka-Unilag

REMERCIEMENT

Je suis très ému des mélanges qu'on m'offre.
Et beaucoup plus ému d'autant qu'ils sont des mélanges de très haute qualité.

C'est, sans aucun doute, un témoignage du respect, de l'amitié et de l'amour que ces différents auteurs et acteurs nourrissent à l'égard de ma modeste personne.

Je tiens à remercier monsieur Akanbi Mudasiru Ilupeju et son équipe du département des langues européennes et des études d'intégration de l'Université de Lagos, de même que leurs collaborateurs, pour les sacrifices consentis dans la réalisation de ce projet.

C'est un vibrant hommage qu'ils m'ont rendu par l'effectivité de cette publication.

De tout cœur, je prie l'Eternel de les combler de ses grâces.

*Professeur Union Edebiri,
Professeur de français,
Avocat à la Cour Suprême du Nigéria,
Président de l'Institut des interprètes-traducteurs de l'Afrique de l'ouest.*