

## IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Albert Awedoba, Professor of Anthropology, Institute of African Studies University of Ghana and immediate past Editor-in-Chief, CJAS.

**CJAS:** Good morning AA.

**AA:** Good morning.

**CJAS:** AA, thank you for sharing your thoughts with the Contemporary Journal of African Studies, CJAS. So, let's start by looking at your life at the University of Ghana and at the Institute of African Studies (IAS). In what year did you join UG as a student?

**AA:** Well, I came to the institute as a student in 1976-77.

**CJAS:** Later you joined the IAS as a Research Fellow, rising to become a full professor. Can you share a little bit about that journey?

**AA:** [In those days] you come here as a student, and eventually you would be sponsored by the University, as part of the staff training scheme, to do a course outside the country. This is what happened in my own case. So, for four to five years, I was out of the country. I was in Britain where I did my Doctorate in Social Anthropology, thereafter, I came back to the Institute and was appointed as a research fellow; that was in 1986.

**CJAS:** Can you share a little bit about the differences in your experiences as a student at UG with those later when you became a Research Fellow.

**AA:** Well, I've never really thought of making that kind of comparison because they are two different things. As a student you are a junior member. As a lecturer, or as a research fellow, you are a senior member. So, they're different, very different occupations, and thus different experiences that you're going through. So, you were once upon a time in a classroom, you were listening to ideas being shared with you, readings and all that. As a Research Fellow you find yourself actually standing in front of the class, trying to do and share what was done to you and shared with you. You also have to consider the time dimensions; I came to the University in the 1970s, I became a lecturer or a research fellow in the 1980s. Conditions were not quite the same, you see. In fact, the country's economy started taking a turn for the worse from the mid-1970s. So, before I left to pursue further studies outside the country, at that point in time the economy was bad. The Supreme Military Council, SMC junta, had lost power.<sup>1</sup> It was

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<sup>1</sup> The SMC, headed by then Colonel and later General Ignatius Kuti Acheampong, took over government in 1975 through a military coup that removed the elected government headed by Dr Kofi Akrifa Busia. The SMC were in turn overthrown by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council on June 4, 1979.

also the time when many academics had started leaving the country for Nigeria because conditions were so bad; in those days the basic tools for teaching and research were not available, neither were the basics for daily survival. Even the libraries had stopped receiving books, when in fact, previously, when I first came here as an undergraduate our libraries were well stocked. I would say that in my undergraduate days there was no book worth calling a published academic book that our university did not have a copy of, even the requisite departments had copies of those books. Whenever we students went to the book store we were able to buy the books we needed for our classes. Any book that I thought I needed I bought; they weren't very expensive. But then we got to a point by the late 1970s where all these disappeared. You would go to a library, and you would be doing ancient history. The current journals and books that used to be available vanished off the shelf. You would go to the book stores, and you didn't see much there either. So, these were my experiences, and this persisted for a while even up to the time that I returned from the UK after having completed my studies. Things were really not ideal for this country. Even as a student abroad, if you were able to save your stipend, and *I* did, and bought yourself a small car, which I also did, and you brought it to the streets of Accra, it seemed like magic. People couldn't understand how you did it because certain professors were walking; they didn't have cars. And I do remember one of our professors commenting on my car, and I was surprised. He said to a fellow professor, facetiously of course, "well, you could decide to swap your Mercedes for Dr. Awedoba's Nissan car". The truth of the matter was that, those who had cars had cars that they had bought much, much earlier. Things were really bad and the economy affected what was happening in academia as well.

**CJAS:** So as student in the 1970's, this was a time when, especially in the US, Britain, and in the Caribbean, this was the height of the Black power movement, black pride, and so forth; was that strong here in Ghana as well at that time? And if so, what was the climate like at IAS?

**AA:** Those were what you could call the "action days". There was so much euphoria, I still remember that. During the long vacations between academic years hosts of African Americans used to descend on this University and this Institute. We acted as hosts of sorts to these people coming to sample a life that they missed, people in search of their ancestors, people looking to reconnect with the African mainland. Nevertheless, I didn't notice much "consciousness" among Ghanaian students beyond popular culture such as the Afro-hairdo of those days and a keen interest in say, James Brown who had by then reached his apogee.

**CJAS:** You are an anthropologist by training with expertise in medical and

social anthropology, but you are also a linguist and cultural studies scholar more broadly. You are well known for your work on Kasena languages and literature and have taught and mentored many students and younger scholars. So, as you look back on this distinguished career, what would be the highlights for you? And what is your own favourite work if you have one?

**AA:** Thank you. I don't know whether I have a favourite work. It's difficult for me to pinpoint a particular work; maybe some people can, but I can't. Anything that I enjoy doing, I automatically find something of interest in it for myself, and perhaps I can consider that as a kind of achievement in itself. However, I do think back with fondness on my days as a student of linguistics. I wrote my thesis on a very interesting subject—"noun classes in the Kasena language"—that examined the way nouns are classified. The criteria used to classify those nouns are very exciting as well as very challenging. I couldn't understand how the Kasena language went about classifying things, so, I set up this idea of genders. I distinguished nouns using ideas from Bantu languages, languages that used a system of classes. My language, the Kasena language, also had something similar to that but the question was, what went into the collective minds of the speakers when they decided to classify something here rather than there? So, I thought very hard about it, semantics seems to be part of it; the *meaning* of words is very important. But then I also saw so many seeming contradictions, so many cases violating the semantic rules and so the question became, with these "contradictions" or "exceptions", what then really goes into the classifications? So I came up with a hypothesis that the issue was not only about semantics, it was also about the "shape" of the words themselves, in particular the endings of the words enabled people to collectively classify them as belonging to one class or the other. I took the idea from John M. Stewart who was a professor at the IAS and an authority on Volta Comoe languages. He published a paper in 1976 on 'The final light syllables of Akan (Twi-Fante) and their significance for Volta-Comoe reconstruction.' Communications from the Basel Africa Bibliography Vol. 14: 93-160. He was speculative, but I thought I had concrete evidence of light vowels in Kasem. The idea was explored in my MA thesis supervised by Professor Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu under the title 'Nominal Classes and Nominal Concord in Kasem.'<sup>2</sup>

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2 Other papers of mine that benefitted from the concept include: 1989 The Status of Some Preverbal items in Kasem' in Afrika und Uberssee Band 72/2 p.191- 209: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin; 2002 The Phonetics and Phonology of Kasem. Language Monographs Series No. 5 Institute of African Studies; 1984 'An Examination of the Phelps Analysis of Kasem Gender III' Papers in Ghanaian Linguistics No.4 Mensah and Dakubu (eds.) p.59-77: Linguistics Circle of Accra / Institute of African Studies, Univ of Ghana, Legon; 1980 'Borrowed Nouns in Kasem Nominal classes' Anthropological Linguistics vol.22 No.6 p.247-253: Archives of languages of the World, Indiana University, Bloomington; 1992 'Light and Heavy Vowels in Kasem' Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere 30, p. 135-153: Institut für Afrikanistik, Universität zu Köln, Germany.

I re-examined what I had found and I realised that Kasena is a language with ten vowels, and you find words with the same vowel endings and yet they belong to different genders or different classes. What then explains this, I pondered, if it's not semantics? Is it even possible that the semantics can themselves be played around, or can the sounds of the language also be played around to achieve certain objectives? So, that is how I came up with this idea of "light" vowels and "heavy" vowels which enabled me to simplify the classification as well as the phonology of the language. I thought the nature of the vowels triggered certain effects, what I called "perturbations", within the word and that accounts for certain things happening even with the shape of the words. Whether you are going to have glide formation, vowels sequence and things like that. I had actually tested this out. It gave me a lot of pleasure to be able to contradict what very important linguists had written in those days – and I'm talking about people like Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle. They had actually produced a book entitled "The sound pattern of English" (1968) in which they attempted to account for the Kasem vowel changes by transformational rule, they weren't writing just about English, they universalised their work to prescribe general phonological rules. However, the rules that they had advanced, when applied to Kasena, were just too complex and I found the solution to be much simpler if one simply made a distinction between light vowels and heavy vowels. I thought that was a big achievement; even today I still think it is, because it enables me to understand and sort words in Kasena and find answers to quite a number of things. For example, how and under what circumstances glides and vowel mergers and sequencing result.<sup>3</sup> My hypothesis also helped me explain how some Kasem particles are really verb derivatives, by analysis. The clue for me lies in the tonal structure and the perturbations resulting in vowel combinations. It also helped explain how aspectual distinctions are carried and the implication for the analysis of serial construction in Kasem; basically, it helped simplify the phonology of the Kasem language and the grammar of noun classes.

However, when I left linguistics, I wasn't able to pursue it and thus prove my point for broader applicability, so when I say vowels are "light", there is an empirical basis for saying this so it's not just a hypothesis. I wanted to go beyond just positing around ~~what I had discovered~~ about the Kasena language, to proving that this notion of "light" and "heavy" vowels actually exists. But how do you prove this? You need instrumental means to prove this, as you would in a phonetics laboratory, but unfortunately, we didn't have the technical resources to assess the differences and qualities between the light vowels and the heavy vowels.

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3 Until I came up with my light/heavy vowel feature no linguist had succeeded in accounting for why U+I results in WI and UI or U+A results in WA or UA in Kasem. Not even world renowned linguists like Chomsky and Halle, E. Phelps, John Callow, and others could account for that phenomenon in Kasem.

**CJAS:** When did you took up the position of Publications officer and editor-in-chief of the IAS flagship journal?

**AA:** I believe that was somewhere around 2010. The late Emerita Professor Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu had been the IAS Publications officer and editor of the then *Research Review* for many years and was responsible for shaping the journal. I used to be editor of the *Universitas*, which was the University of Ghana's interfaculty journal. So I guess that I was brought on board to take over editorship of the journal because I had the needed experience.

**CJAS:** The Contemporary Journal of African Studies (CJAS) is one of the university's foremost journals and you've helped lift it up to where it is now. Do you have a favourite issue or set of issues? Or something you are particularly proud of that you brought to the journal?

**AA:** Thank you. I don't really have a favourite issue. But something I am proud of is the introduction of Digital Object Identifiers for the journal.<sup>4</sup> I attended a workshop hosted by African Journals Online (AJOL) in Accra, and that is where I got the idea that you can insert that kind of object in your journal, and also that when these kinds of things are done the reading public begin to notice your journal. Well, now that I think about it, there was one paper that stands out in my memory though. Professor Kropp Dakubu had told me, I don't know how she found out, that a paper in one of the issues that I edited ended up becoming a "highly recommended paper". This was a paper by a Gambian academic which I edited and helped to shape out.<sup>5</sup>

**CJAS:** So, can you describe some the most exciting aspects of your work as CJAS editor as well as what have been some of the challenging aspects.

**AA:** It's exciting when you are able to get good papers, papers that you think are high quality, papers that will market the journal, then you are very happy especially when you get responsible reviewers who provide useful comments that can help authors improve their work. But it's not always easy dealing with the reviewers. There have been cases where you get a very lousy reviewer. The reviewer says publish so you think you've got a good complement of papers to work with, but then, when you start looking at the papers more closely, you wonder about some of them even though you've already been given the impression that the paper is publishable. Sometimes papers are so full of mistakes—grammatical errors, syntax and so forth—that they require a lot of additional work that we as editors

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4 A digital object identifier (DOI) is a unique alphanumeric string assigned by a registration agency (the International DOI Foundation) to identify content and provide a persistent link to its location on the Internet. The publisher assigns a DOI when your article is published and made available electronically.

5 Akpojevbe Omasanjuwa (University of the Gambia) 'Turncoat Colonial Administration: The Gambian Experience.' *Research Review* (New Series) Vol.27 No.2, 2012

should not be doing. Let me give you an example of a more serious error that you would expect a reviewer, an expert in the field, to have discovered. Let's say a paper has something to do with maritime issues and says that an activity is situated within the waters of Ghana, specifically around say Tema. I look at the latitudes and longitudes and find that it's actually closer to the equator, so it can't be Tema because where the latitude zero and longitude zero cross is far away from the territorial waters of this country. So, we cannot let this stand because maybe even if many of our readers will not notice anyway, there's that one reader who is going to someday notice that there's something wrong here. So, I don't know if you are happy when you, as editor, are able to detect these things and prevent a looming disaster from happening, or you are sad that even your expert reviewers fail to catch these kinds of things. It's particularly disturbing when you send a paper to say, someone at a top university in South Africa where their standards are supposed to be very high, their universities are always rated among the best, and you expect a good review, and the reviewer simply says "oh, yes it's good, publish it". Then I start to wonder, about someone who is a senior lecturer and can't even provide a thorough review. On the flip side, however, there are also those cases where somebody says don't publish, and doesn't provide a real basis for the assessment. I look through and don't see anything questionable; indeed I see an excellent paper, the kind of paper that you want to have in your journal, from someone who has a track record in the field. Then as editor you have to get further reviews because you are convinced that this is a paper you have to publish.

Indeed, for every issue there are always headaches: one is never certain that things will work out until they actually work out. Sometimes you can even come out with a journal issue and subsequently you see mistakes, you see errors and then you bite your fingers and ask yourself how this happened. So, you try to do an inquest to find out where things went wrong so it doesn't happen again in future. For example, two years ago, we published a paper without its accompanying maps; it had maps and photographs submitted as separate attachments, but we did not notice them. It was only after the paper had been published, and the issue was out that one of the authors noticed the omission and said, "Where are the pictures that we submitted?" I asked, "did you submit any pictures?" he said, "yes we did". The authors should have alerted the editor about the omissions much earlier when we sent the revisions and galley proofs to them. I have seen what amounts to gibberish in another journal which the editor didn't notice but, it was not the editor's fault, it was due to the fonts. I think there were special fonts there that didn't translate well whatever software the journal used. There are always these things; you want things to work out, you think everything is alright but, when the issue is finally published there can be something that is not alright. It's always a huge relief to see the journal finally

published, and without any errors or omissions. You cannot sleep until that point because you don't know what possible surprises await you the next day.

**CJAS:** Thank you for these very useful insights into some of the behind-the-scenes editorial work. So, finally, as we conclude, if you could give some advice to young African women and men in an African university today, what would it be?

**AA:** They should pay attention to their work, they should try to be as creative as possible; they don't necessarily have to accept everything that is out there. In the area of publishing, they should bear in mind that sometimes when you send papers to external as opposed to local journals, there are two things that can happen. Firstly, it is in fact possible that they will publish a paper that we would not have published here because the paper doesn't tell us anything new, so there's no story there. However, the editor and reviewers of the external journal may not be familiar with the Ghanaian literature on the subject and see the paper as fantastic, so they jump at it and publish it. So our students need to be very careful about that, and make sure they provide a thorough review of the literature—because it can come back to haunt them when a more informed scholar makes a critical review of the published work; would they still consider this as a top-notch paper? Thus, there are often good reasons to consider publishing in local journals and not just target only the international journals. Not all of them are journals worth publishing in, and one must be very discerning. But secondly, at the same time, there are also issues with the so-called international journals. You submit the paper and they don't publish it because they don't know your name. Possibly if you were operating from the United States that paper would have been published so many times over. So, we also need to gather a bit of courage when our papers are not being published in some of the journals that we are targeting. When I was a student I was publishing papers in the school's journal and senior scholars would cite my work or other work in that journal although it was more or less a student journal. Young scholars today also have to be very cautious about predatory journals which are in abundance today. I've actually reviewed people's promotion applications and found that their work included some items published in predatory journals. Personally, I don't care too much where something is published, what is important to me is the quality of the article itself. However, we do know that for many of these predatory journals there's no due diligence and they just publish anything with all the mistakes. You don't want your work associated with such journals. In any case, the assessor of your promotion application will most likely assess you negatively when they find a paper with mistakes which any serious journal should have spotted. It's true there's a pressure on all of us to publish in this university, publish or perish

as they say, but Legon scholars in particular need to be cautious about cutting corners.

**CJAS:** Thank you, that's really good advice for young academics coming up. What would you say to the first-year student who walks through the gates of this university for the first time, what advice would you give to them? Or perhaps someone who joins IAS for their graduate work?

**AA:** They should take their work seriously. They should enjoy themselves, certainly, because this is a time of your life, if you don't enjoy your youth you'll never get it back to live. So, do enjoy the culture of the university, take advantage of everything but don't also forget that you are here for a purpose, you are laying the foundations for your future so take it seriously. Many young people come into the University wanting to be in one particular programme, for example, business administration. I wanted to study business administration but I didn't get it, maybe because I didn't read the "right" subjects for my "A levels", for example I didn't read Economics. So, I had to settle for something else and I ended up doing languages. I had studied Latin in secondary school, except that nobody was doing Latin at UG, I was the only one still doing Latin, they were all doing Classics, not "proper" Latin. But my Latin background helped me a lot with languages. So, I will say that, what is important in life is to take your work seriously. You see, the final outcome is what matters, the beginning is just a beginning so don't be despondent about what you've been given. You want to do a particular subject, you didn't get it, you were given some other subject, take that subject seriously, see what you can do with it. Maybe that subject also has certain advantages that people don't know about because they are all fixated on a particular discipline. It shouldn't be so, and I would also say that employers should bear this in mind because all the disciplines can teach us something vital about life to enable us make the right kinds of choices later on in life, wherever we find ourselves. The kinds of decision that you take are very often informed by your academic background and what I see is that all the disciplines are teaching us one thing, how to think objectively, how to make a decision, and ask certain kinds of questions when you find yourselves in certain situations.

**CJAS:** Thank you very much for your time.

**AA:** You are always welcome, thank you as well.



## References

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