

## THE UNTOLD STORY OF A LEGEND IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CERAMICS: YAKUBU LEVY.

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### **Abstract**

*The literary presentation and documentation of the developments in the Nigerian contemporary art history have not sufficiently encapsulated the local and global feats of Levi Yakubu in order to give him the right of place in the ranking of who is who in the professional field of ceramics in Nigeria. This research aims at presenting this celebrity as an institution worth acknowledging and studying. The paper highlights his scientific and technological innovations and his contribution to industrial development in Nigeria as well as his role in modeling young generation of ceramists. It enunciates his personal identity reflected in his works .And then noted some of his local and international outings and the recognition, honour and fame that were accorded his efforts. The paper concludes by noting without mincing words that, the pioneering efforts of Michael Cardew and Ladi Kwali have produced a worthy offspring in the ceramic profession in the person of Levi Yakubu.*

### **Introduction**

The history of contemporary ceramics in Nigeria cannot be told without mentioning the monumental achievements and outstanding contributions of this iconic figure called Levi Yakubu. Ozioma (2009) noted that, many researchers in and out of Nigeria have decried the eclipse and death of art and design literature in Nigeria. This observation is not far from the truth when one considers the history of modern pottery/ceramic art in Nigeria. One has noted with dismay that a lot of published literature on contemporary history of ceramics in Nigeria have not captured very significantly the undeniable feats of many contemporary ceramic artist of which Levy Yakubu is one. Even when little is captured, it is not accessible to wider readership particularly in the academia.

Apart from the fame, awards or honours and monetary rewards enjoyed by this icon, the documentation of his works and personal contributions in print as scholarly materials should be a natural fallout in recognition of his contributions to the ceramic development in Nigeria and the world over. Today, the Chinese cannot write the history of ceramics development in their country without reference to the recipients of the most prestigious professional awards which Levy Yakubu is a beneficiary. The thrust of this research therefore is to document in academic print, the personal profile and works of Levy Yakubu for wider readership and recognition as a contribution to the literary

depository in Nigeria. Levi is a phenomenon worth an academic subject, studied alongside such icons as Ladi Kwali, Benjo Igwilo, Abbas Ahuwan, Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike and Michael Cadew who are the most celebrated figures in the artistic history of Nigeria.

### **Profile of Levy Yakubu**

Levi O'Ben Yakubu, popularly called (Dajo) is an indigene of Benue State of the Tiv extraction. Born in 1954 to a privileged cleric, Reverend Pastor Yakubu Amachi Dajo, who was among the first to welcome the European missionaries to the Middle belt. He inherited from his family a rich pottery tradition which spanned over four generations but dominantly occupied by the women folk. Through hard work and tenacity, he rose from obscurity to prominence and became the owner of the first pottery industry in Benue State. He is currently the President and Chief Executive of Dajo Pottery Limited, located at Km 5, Gboko Road, Makurdi, Benue State.

Levi Yakubu has a robust academic training which became the impetus and backbone of his entrepreneurship, dexterity and industry. He is a 1979 graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and measured in Industrial Design, specializing in Industrial Ceramics. In his words, he was denied a first class degree which edged him out of the world of "his firsts"- a coinage he adopted owing to his experience of being the first or coming first in whatever endeavour he ventured into, be it academic, professional practice, commerce and honours. Thanks to his mentors like Abbas Ahhuwan and Michael Obrain.

He holds an educational certificate in administration from the same university, a training that armed him with astute management prowess which helped him successfully manage his business enterprise. He equally obtained a professional graduate certificate in fine ceramics and pottery at the United Nations Ceramic Research and Development Centre (UNCRDC) Bundung in Indonesia. This is one of the exposures that equipped him with mastery skills in the prospecting and manipulation of ceramic raw materials, an act that helped him assert his unique identity in style, glaze formulation and application.

### **His professional and scientific innovations**

Having taught briefly in a college of Arts and Science as well as School of Basic Studies, Makurdi, Benue State, where he helped established ceramics section of the fine and applied arts department, he resigned his appointment in response to his passion and drive for industrial development and established one of the most thriving pottery industries in Nigeria, the Dajo Pottery Ceramic Industry Ltd. To his credit, this has grown to be an industry with staff strength of over 30 people and has been in operation for the past 19 years without any single moment of inactivity unlike many other pottery industries that have since become history.

Apart from the production of table wares, ornamental and digital ceramics for which he is known, Dajo Pottery offers miscellaneous professional services such as master trainer, Nigerian Army Rehabilitation and Settlement Scheme (NARSS) and master trainer, United Nations Development Programme. He is also a master trainer in the adult and non-formal education apprenticeship programme and master trainer with SIWES scheme of ITF programme for polytechnics, colleges of education and universities.

Mr Yakubu apart from managing his prosperous industry, he has served as a consultant to many organizations such as United Nations Industrial development Organization (UNIDO). He has been engaged in the capacity of a visiting lecturer and

Artist in residence to several Colleges and High schools including the famous Calvin College in Grand Rapid Michigan, Trinity College Illinois, Dordt College in Iowa and Abraham Lincoln/Denver Christian High Schools both in Denver, Colorado U.S.A.

Mr. Yakubu is a bundle and embodiment of ingenuity and resourcefulness in the ceramic profession. The creative impetus that propels him is unparalleled to that of any of his contemporaries. This has earned him several breakthroughs in the ceramic profession that caught the recognition of the international community. Through painstaking efforts in scientific investigation, he has successfully developed 15 recipes for marble pottery from one single recipe he brought from Indonesia. He has developed a recipe that can be used for the production of electrical insulators. When asked why his glazes are so unique, both in composition and appearance, he simply replied, "I understand my materials"

One of his outstanding innovations is the invention of what he called "Dajo wonder Burner". A firing kiln burner that can utilize four different types of fuel, kerosene, diesel, LPFO and waste engine oil. He equally developed a recipe for the production of refractory bricks that can withstand a firing temperature range of 1500<sup>0</sup>C using the local raw material content approach. This is in consonance with Cardew's ideology that potters particularly in the developing world should not be solely responsible for throwing, glazing and decorating of their wares, but should initiate and employ technologies that facilitate production process and raw material beneficiation. According to him, "a potter is one of the few people left who uses his natural faculties of heart, mind and hand in a balance, a whole man" McCready (1996), Dajo functions as a Chemist, Physicist, Engineer and Artist.

By these achievements, he has got the singular privilege of establishing the first private ceramic research centre in Nigeria. This is a facility that is to be equipped with high tech equipment and research facilities. This project is heavily supported by the Chinese government in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the field of ceramics. In a few months from now, this project will wipe away the tears of teeming ceramists who are always stranded when they want to carry out research experiments and analysis of samples. This alongside with his pet project, the Dajo Academy constitutes the future outlook of Levi Yakubu's professional practice.

### **Levi's works: a crossbreed of traditional and contemporary ceramics**

Dajo pottery crossbreeds the existing traditional approach to pottery production and contemporary techniques to execute his works. He seems to adopt the ideological posture of the post-modernist which seeks to accommodate the co-existence of traditional ceramics with its heterogeneous cultural approach and advanced high tech ceramics. This approach one believes is adopted to cope with modern challenges of industrialization and at the same time keep pace with the revival of cultural activities being projected through art.

It is interesting to see Dajo express himself through a combination of various clays, unusual forms, unique approaches and design techniques. By these processes, he produces works with unique cultural identity, political themes and other subject matters that presented commemorative and investigative synthesis. His works are best described as a hybrid of culture and modernity. They qualify as inspirational show pieces that can be preserved in galleries as monuments and periodic windows of the past and present Nigeria. Works such as the "African Queen, African Drum, The Virgin of Benue, The

African Lizard” Gecko on a Tree Stump, Victory for Nigeria, Adam and Eve, Wise Candle Girls and Light Through the Drum and Expectant Mother, bear credence to this attestation.

According to Akinbogun (2003), the global challenge that faces the ceramic industry today is to develop new clay bodies and technologies that will keep pace with modern trends in all facets of human existence. The twentieth century is witnessing several new applications of ceramic materials. There has been a growing international recognition of ceramic raw materials and their outstanding engineering and technological properties suitable for varied applications. This is calling for more research into the use of ceramic raw materials and the technology that will enhance their potentials for product development.

Alkali (2002), also noted that, in the face of a saturated market for ceramics, product differentiation and originality are essentially the most important demand determinant. Thus the quest for new styles and products that could distinguish from competitive offerings is imperative for the survival of any pottery establishment. It is in response to this that Dajo devised a unique style of production that earned him a prominent place among ceramic practitioners world over. His digital technology approach employed to imprint images and sceneries on ceramic tiles and other surfaces is one of those creative ingenuities characteristic of his works. By this technique, he created portraits of important personalities like President Olusegun Obasanjo, President Goodluck Jonathan and many others in the history of Nigeria. Artistic illustrations and other works with political and religious expressions have been installed permanently on walls of buildings and floors.

Dajo’s marble technique is another of such unique products in his productive endeavour. These two techniques elevated him to a pinnacle of spotlight as the only ceramic industry in Africa, that produces marble floors and wall tiles using one hundred percent local materials.

### **The intellectual content of his works**

Dajo’s pots have a built-in intellectual content contrary to many private owners of pottery industries whose works skew towards commercial and practical purposes. His works have tremendously induced creative thoughts of much depth and have established a theoretical framework by which they can be examined.

He delved into his indigenous culture and adopted motifs, symbols, myths and legends and illustrated these on his works thus preserving these as subject of investigation. There is a rich confluence of inspiration and subject matters in his works that can present exciting sources of information to historians, anthropologists and archaeologists. His works tell so much of legendary stories associated with the Tivs and other tribes, thus providing a great conceptual framework upon which research problems can be generated.

### **His personal identity in pottery/ceramic art**

Dajo unlike most contemporary artists does not share the view that art and beauty are separate entities. He believes that ceramic art work should please the viewer and the ultimate user as much as it serves some function in the home. And if it will please the beholder, it must be embellished with aesthetic features. He believes that aesthetics, harmony and proportions are natural attributes and accompaniments of beauty. Thus he employs the principles and elements of design in a deeper dimension to create originality of forms and other qualities that appeal to potential users. He combines art

and science to develop products that appeal and satisfy the aesthetic and functional specifications of the public. A true believer of the Bauhaus philosophy where form follows function.

The personality of any potter is hardly rigid when he approaches creative processes to produce works for the community he wishes to serve. He approaches the creation of his works with interpersonal involvement. He sees himself as being inspired by external forces, be it the market forces, highly placed personalities or common users. And so, Dajo is best described as a conformist working within universal concepts established by the social, commercial and professional systems he belongs to. However, being a human being, the individuality in him is often betrayed by his works.

According to Nzewi (2006) the artist could manifest his personality or craftsmanship but such individualistic inclination must not eclipse or obscure the utilitarian requirement of the art he produces. So in Dajo's works, we see a man truly made in the image of God the Chief creator. In Dajo, we see a great quantum of creative or artistic ingenuity, inquisitiveness, intellectual as well as an extrovert and an exotic personality. If art were to be a religion, Dajo could have been no less a sacrosanct personality. Being a careful and focused individual he does not allow absurdities of modern art trends to influence or be seen in his works. His subject matters whether they be aesthetic, functional and communicative are often clearly presented.

### **Honours and international exposures**

Dajo will undoubtedly go down in history as the most decorated and celebrated ceramist in Nigeria and indeed Africa. He is the most internationally recognized potter whose feats are comparable to none except the legendary Ladi Kwali of blessed memory. His international exposure is unparalleled to any of his contemporaries. He has had his art works exhibited at home and around the world. At the international domain, he exhibited at Madrid, Spain in 1979; Stuttgart, Germany in 1980; Berlin, Germany 1980; Bandung, Indonesia 1990; Expo Sevilla, Spain in 1992; Munich, Germany 1992; Johannesburg, South Africa in 1994; USA in 2001 – 2014 and in China from 2007 – 2008. About eighty local and international exhibitions are to his credit.

There is a biblical saying that “The gift or talent of a man makes way for him and causes him to stand before great men” Proverbs 81:16. Dajo can at best be described as a living epistle of this rendering. He is born a star and shines brightest any where he exhibits his ceramics. His professional exploits earned him several awards and honours within the state, and at the national and international levels, for want of space here is a rundown of just a few.

- Certificate of honour at the Port-Harcourt festival of arts 1982
- Certificate of honour and distinction at the national festival of arts and culture in Lagos 1988.
- 1<sup>st</sup> prize at the 1<sup>st</sup> National Science and Technology week exhibition in Makurdi 1988
- A Corporate model award by NUJ Benue State chapter for his contribution to Nigerian Arts and Culture in 1998
- Vocational excellence award by Rotary International for his outstanding contributions to the development of ceramic industry in Nigeria 1990.

At the national level, he was conferred with three prestigious awards and honours by the then President Olusegun Obasanjo regime in recognition of his meritorious contributions in the development and promotion of the ceramic industry in Nigeria. These were Member of the Order of the Niger – MON (2000), National Productivity Order of Merit – NPOM (2004) and National Local Raw Material Content Award – NLRMCA (2006). On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2008, the senate and the Ahmadu Bello University community, his Almamata, hosted and conferred on him the VCs plague of honour in recognition of his performance and the final winning of the most coveted Ceramic Golden Excellence Award in Jingdezhen in China.

At international level, he won the prestigious African shippers trophy for Nigeria in Dakar Senegal in 2002. In October 2007, Levi Yakubu (Dajo) participated in the international ceramic Expo in Jingdezhen City, China. About 800 ceramic companies and 10,000 dealers of ceramic products from 40 countries participated in the show. Dajo pottery, the only African ceramic company that participated in such an Expo in over 1700 years. Dajo yet again clinched the most highly coveted excellence award in ceramics. He bagged this same award in 2008. Thus going down in history as the only African ever to achieve such a feat. These are just some among many of such awards.

### **Conclusion**

Dajo has successfully carved a niche for himself through the discovery of the marble technique and the adaptation of digital technology in executing his works. This is where his identity clearly stands up. The symbols of lizard and Tiv traditional colours of black and white are the common features of his works which confirm his heir ship to the artistic heritage of his ethnic group. There is no illusion or element of exaggeration when one places Levi Yakubu as the most outstanding figure in the history of contemporary ceramics in Nigeria. It is no surprise if these superlative outfits earned him such honours at both local and international levels. By Yakubu's achievements, Nigerian pottery is once again elevated to the pinnacle of world ceramics. Okunna (2002), once lamented that "the story of modern pottery would have been rather different if ceramic art practice in Nigeria had had the fortune of many more Ladi Kwalis emerging from pottery communities scattered throughout the length and breadth of the this country". This research has put on record the emerging story of an individual that has satisfied the yearnings of professor Okunna. Today, the story is indeed different and will continue to be different so long as Levi yakubu remains active on the art scene. He has many offspring in the making and no vacuum will be left again.

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The African Lizard



Lizard on the Tree



Digital ceramics on tiles



Lizard on tree trunk



The Fisher Man



Tree Trunk Tea Pot



Dajo's show room



Dajo's show room



Ant-Hill



Flower vase with Tiv Colours



Dajo's exotic vases



Tree trunk with fruits