THE UNTOLD STORY OF A LEGEND IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN CERAMICS: Master Potter- LEVI O'BEM YAKUBU – MON, NPOM, FSNA (2)

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Abstract
The literary presentation and documentation of the developments in the Nigerian contemporary art history has not sufficiently encapsulated the local and global feats of Levi O'bem 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 iconic 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 modelling young generation of ceramists. It enunciates his personal identity reflected in his works as well as notes 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 O'bem 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 dearth of art and design literature in Nigeria. This observation is not far from the truth when one considers the history of contemporary ceramics 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 artists of which Levi Yakubu is a prominent 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 Levi Yakubu is for more than six times, a beneficiary. The thrust of this research therefore is to document in academic print, the personal profile and works of Levi 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, Abass Ahuwan, Danlamin Aliyu, Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike, Michael Cardew and Michael O'Brian, who are the most celebrated figures in Nigerian design history.

Personal Profile of Levi Yakubu

Levi O'Bem Yakubu, popularly called Dajo Pottery, is an indigene of Benue State of the Tiv extraction, born in 1954 to a privileged cleric Reverend Pastor Yakubu Amachigh Dajo, who was among the first to welcome the South African Dutch Reformed Missionaries who brought Christianity to the Middle belt of Nigeria in 1911.

He inherited from his family a rich pottery tradition which spanned over four generations but dominantly occupied by the women folk. By choosing pottery as a profession, he became the first male of Tiv extraction (with a population of more than 4 million people) to be a potter. Through hard work, dexterity 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 No.1Dajo Pottery Close, Km 5, Gboko Road, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria.

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 majored in Industrial Design, specializing in Industrial Ceramics where he emerged as the best graduating student of the ceramic section in that particular year. By that extra-ordinary performance, he maintained his position in 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 or honours. Thanks to his mentors like Ms Gerry Vandenberg, Derry-Jo Yakubu, David/Nina Clarks, Abbas Ahuwan, Michael O'Brian and several others.

He holds a postgraduate educational certificate in Administration from the same University in 1979, a training that armed him with astute management prowess which helps 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) Bungdung in Indonesia in 1990. This is one of the exposures that equipped him with mastery skills in the prospecting and manipulation of ceramic raw materials, an act that helps him assert his unique identity in style, glaze formulation and application.

His Professional and Scientific Innovations

Having taught briefly between 1980-1985 at the Murtala College of Arts and Science and Technology (now Benue Polytechnic) as well as School of Basic Studies, Makurdi, Benue State, where he helped establish Ceramics section of the Fine and Applied Arts Department, he resigned his appointment in 1985 in response to his vision, passion and drive for industrial development and established one of the most thriving pottery industries in Nigeria, the Dajo Pottery Ltd. The ban on importation of finished tableware ceramics by the military administration in 1984 was the tonic Levi needed to actualize his vision. To his credit, this has grown to be an industry with staff strength of over 50 people and has been in operation for the past 24 years without any single moment of inactivity unlike many other pottery industries that have since become history.

Apart from the production of tableware, ornamental and marble ceramics for which he is known, Levi Yakubu offers miscellaneous professional services such

as: master trainer, Nigerian Army Rehabilitation and Settlement Scheme (NARSS); master trainer, United Nations Development Programme; master trainer in the adult and non-formal education apprenticeship programme; master trainer with Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES) scheme of International Trust Fund (ITF) programme for Polytechnics, Colleges of education and Universities among several others.

Yakubu apart from managing his prosperous industry, he has served as a consultant to many organizations such as United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). 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.

Yakubu is a bundle and embodiment of ingenuity and resourcefulness in the ceramic profession. The creative impetus that propels him is unparallel 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" and that “I know my onions”. To his credit, he has overcome the problem of monotony of dark and dull coloured glazes common with most pottery studios across the country and is able to produce various shades and types of coloured gazes which help in defining whatever subject and concept he chooses to express on his works

One of his outstanding innovations is the invention of what he called “Dajo Wonder Burner”. A kiln firing burner that utilizes 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 1500^0C 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); thus, Yakubu 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- Dajo Ceramic Research and Development Centre (DCRDC) 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 and other global donor agencies 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 teaming 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 most contemporary ceramic artists 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 Levi Yakubu express himself through a combination of various clays, unusual forms, unique approaches and design techniques. By these processes, he produces exquisite works with unique cultural identity, political themes and other subject matters that present commemorative and investigative synthesis. His works are best described as a hybrid of tradition and modernity. They qualify as inspirational high end show pieces that can be preserved in galleries as monuments and works that capture historic scenes of the past and present Nigeria. Works such as the "African Queen, African Drum, The Virgin of Benue, The Lizard vases, Gecko on a Tree Stump, Victory for Nigeria, Adam and Eve, Wise Candle Girls, Light Through the Drum and Expectant Mother"- Plates I - XXXVII 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 inter-national 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 these that Yakubu devised a unique style of production that earns him a prominent place among ceramic practitioners world over.

His Digital Ceramic Technology approach employed to imprint images and sceneries on ceramic tiles, Plates III and V and other surfaces is one of those creative ingenuity characteristic of his works. By this technique, he created portraits of important personalities like President Nnamdi Azikiwe, President Olusegun Obasanjo, President Goodluck Jonathan, Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sir Abubakar T. Balewa, Chief Obafemi Awolowo 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.

Yakubu's Marble Ceramic Technique is another of such unique products in his productive endeavour. These two techniques have elevated him to a pinnacle of spotlight as the only ceramic industry in Africa that produces in commercial quantities, marble ceramic wares, floors and wall tiles using one hundred percent local materials.

The Intellectual Content of his Works

Many of Levi Yakubu's vases have a built-in intellectual content contrary to many private owners of pottery industries whose works only skew towards commercial and

practical purposes. His works have tremendously induced creative thoughts of much depth.He delves into his indigenous culture and adopts motifs, symbols, myths and legends and illustrates these on his works thus preserving these as subjects 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 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria/Africa, thus providing great conceptual framework upon which research themes can be generated.

His Personal Identity in Pottery /Ceramic Art

Yakubu, 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. He is true believer of the Bauhaus philosophy where form follows function. In the same vein, Carl J. Huisman, Professor of Art and Art Department Chair, Calvin College, Grand Rapid, Michigan, USA, in his letter of attestation/ appreciation to Yakubu, Oct 30th 2001, remarked, “your demonstration at the potter’s wheel of throwing and tooling, “turning” as you call it, were most beneficial to my ceramic students. I especially appreciated the excellent points you made about the importance of considering both the functional and aesthetic while forming pots.”

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, Levi Yakubu 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 Yakubu's works, we see a man truly made in the image of God- the Chief creator. In Yakubu, 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, Levi Yakubu 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 overshadowing his works. His subject matters whether they be aesthetic, functional and communicative are often clearly presented.

Honours and International Exposures

Levi Yakubu 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 unparallel to any of his contemporaries. He has had his art works exhibited at home and in several countries around the world. At the

international domain, he exhibited at Madrid, Spain in 1979; Stuttgart, Germany in 1980; Berlin, Germany 1990-94; Bandung, Indonesia 1990; Expo Sevilla, Spain in 1992; Munich, Germany 1992-4; Johannesburg, South Africa in 1994; USA in 2001 – 2014 and in China from 2007 – 2013. Over 100 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 18:16. Levi Yakubu can at best be described as a living epistle of this rendering. He is born a star and shines brightest anywhere he exhibits his ceramics. His professional exploits have earned him several awards and honours within the state, at the national and international levels, for want of space here is a rundown of just a few.

- Certificate of honour at the National Festival of Arts and Culture- Port-Harcourt, 1982
- Certificate of honour and distinction at the National Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos 1988.
- 1st prize at the 1st National Science and Technology week exhibition in Makurdi 1988
- A Corporate Model Award by National Union of Journalists (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). The National Council for Arts and Culture conferred on him NCAC national Award for the promotion of Nigerian culture through Visual Arts-(2007). On the 11th of April 2008, the senate and the Ahmadu Bello University community, his Alma Mata, hosted and conferred on him the Vice Chancellor's 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 the international level, he won the prestigious African shippers trophy for Nigeria in Dakar Senegal in 2002. In October 2007, the National Council for Arts and Culture Levi Yakubu with the NCAC National Award for the promotion of Nigerian Culture through Visual Arts. In 2008 and 2010 he won 1st Prize Position in Product Design and Best Exhibitor respectively during the African Arts and Crafts. In 2007, Levi Yakubu debuted at 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. Levi Yakubu, founder of Dajo pottery, the only African ceramic company that participated in such an Expo in over 1700 years yet again clinched the most highly coveted excellence award in ceramics. He bagged this same award in 2008- 9, thus going down in history as the only African ever to achieve such a feat. Oct 2011, saw Levi Yakubu participating and winning in the Ceramic Excellent Work Category at the 1st ever International Grand Prix for Ceramic Art in Jingdezhen City, China. This feat qualified Nigeria to be signatory to the International Declaration on Ceramics. This document was signed for Nigeria by the Hon. Minister for Trade and Investment. By this Nigeria can host the international event any time she chooses.

These are just few among several others of such awards.

Conclusion

Master Potter-Levi Yakubu has successfully carved a niche for himself through the discovery of the marble ceramic technique and the adaptation of digital ceramic technology in executing his works. This is where his identity clearly stands up. The symbols of lizard Plates I, II, IVM XIX, XXV & XXVII - XXX and Tiv traditional colours of black and white Plates III, X & XI 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.



Plate I: The African Lizard



Plate II: Lizard on the Tree



Plate III: Digital Ceramics on Tiles



Plate IV: Lizard on Tree Trunk



Plate V: The Award-winning Fisher Man



Plate VI: Tree trunk Tea pot



Plate VII: Variety of wares



Plate VIII: Variety of wares



Plate IX: Ant hill



Plate X: Flower vase with Tiv colours



Plate XI: Pot with brush strokes



Plate XII: Pawpaw tree trunk and a Hut



Plate XIII: African Queen and King



Plate XIV: The Cheetah Vases– 3piece set



Plate XV: Mushroom on tree stump (Candle)



Plate XVI: Adam and Eve (After the Fall)



Plate XVII: Adam and Eve (Before the Fall)



Plate XVIII: Adam and Eve (Modern day)



Plate XIX: Tree stump Lamp Base (with Lizard)



Plate XX: Pawpaw stump teapot (Papaya)



Plate XXI: The Elegant African Queen Vase



Plate XXII: African Traditional Grain Silos/Huts I



Plate XXIII: African Traditional Grain Silos/Huts III



Plate XXIV: African Traditional Grain Silos/Huts II



Plate XXV: Lizard Pot I



Plate XXVI: Light through the drum



Plate XXVII: Lizard Pot II



Plate XXVIII: Lizard Pot III



Plate XXIX: Lizard Vases



Plate XXX: Lizard Vase



Plate XXXI: Expectant Mother
(eyes on the Hill)



Plate XXXII: Expectant Mother
(eyes on the Hill)



Plate XXXIII: African Mask



Plate XXXIV: African Mask



Plate XXXV: Wise Candle



Plate XXXVI: Giraffe Vase

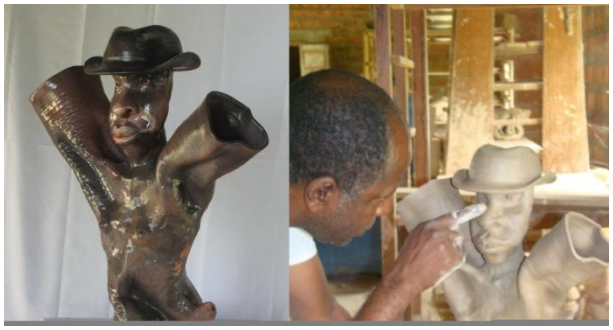

Plate XXXVII: Victory for Nigeria



Mr. Levi Yakubu MON, NPOM, FNSA

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