



FESTSCHRIFT FOR A LIVING MASTER:
ESSAYS, REFLECTION AND EXHIBITION

In Honour Of

**JERRY
BUHARI @60**

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PROFESSOR JERRY BUHARI AT 60**

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JERRY BUHARI: AN EXTRAORDINARY MENTOR

BY

Blaise Gundu Gbadon

I first encountered the renowned Jerry Buhari in early 1997 when I had settled in to begin postgraduate studies for my Master of Fine Arts degree in Painting in the Department of Fine Arts of the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. My admission was in fact that of the 1995/1996 academic session, but all admissions that year were scraped due to some policy I am not sure I understand anymore; it was probably due to reforms taking place in the postgraduate admission process at the time; our set was eventually lumped up with the next one and we got our training underway; General Mamman Kontagora was sole administrator then, and the university wore a stern disciplinary air.

Coming from Nsukka, I was viewed with some level of levity I suppose. The lecturers questioned me endlessly. I spent several sessions with Jerry Buhari in the Sculpture Garden and he would ask me about studies in Nsukka, who my teachers had been and how it all went. I doubt if I ever convinced any of them that I was worth much. I doubt if I ever wanted to prove anything to them. Little did they know that the real circumstance that would have prompted me to choose between Nsukka and Zaria for an MFA degree in Painting had been Professor Obiora Udechukwu's decision to leave Nigeria for the USA to take up an appointment with the St. Lawrence University in Washington DC.

At that time I hardly imagined that I would leave Nsukka for elsewhere. I had gone to Nsukka as a teenager. In between the excitements and the low moments I had run off to the seminary to train as a priest and returned a few years later to complete my first degree. Upon my return, the sincere way in which Obiora Udechukwu received me, gave me cause to want to

remain there to basically become a lecturer. So with my mind made up I resolved to stay on. Imagine the deflation when it became obvious that Professor Obiora Udechukwu was going away because the system was convinced he wanted to usurpate leadership from the stranglehold of then Vice Chancellor. So I walk up to him, in the middle of my Youth Service Scheme, having purchased an application form from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, and I ask him to act as a referee. To my surprise he agrees, writes it and tells me that Jerry Buhari is in Zaria and I would be in good hands. My late dad had cause to read the reference letter and told me that with such recommendation I would get a job anywhere on earth and felt convinced for the first time that I had indeed had a fulfilling education in Nsukka.

It may have been that endorsement from Obiora to Jerry Buhari which made my entry into Zaria so significant, I cannot tell. For at the point of admission in that 1995/1996 session the major supervisor allocated to me was no less a person than the legendary Gani Odutokun himself. But before I could meet him he died in a ghastly motor accident that claimed several lives. Before he left Nsukka for Zaria to commiserate with the Fine Arts Department, Chika Okeke-Agulu who had been working on the Africa 95 project and had interacted with Jerry Buhari, Ayo Aina and other Zaria Art School artists, broke the sad news to me. I was devastated. I had lost a chance to be mentored by so large a personage.

Upon commencing formal studies I was then allocated another supervisor, Dr. Gutip who had only recently completed his PhD and had an inclination towards well dictioned English and maintained traditional values of teaching art and theory. But soon after he too died. At this point I was sure that I was destined for an orphanage status. Then comes in Buhari who gets allocated to me as the next major supervisor. He picked up from where Dr Gutip left off and we got bonding. The minor supervisor, as they were then called was Jacob Jari, who I came

to learn was a class mate of Jerry Buhari at some point in their studies at undergraduate level. This combination was quite heady, I can assure anyone who wishes to know. For these two were intellectual giants and you could hardly impress any one of them easily. What I do I do? I just take it slow and steady, I concentrate on my studies, write meticulously and do studio practice like never before.

It paid off for I soon got endeared to them and could finally breathe. Buhari would often invite me over to his house. I remember taking long drives in his car to pick up his two sons, Etegebe and Baba, from school in GRA and return to his home to a refreshing lunch offered by his ever welcoming wife, Mummy Ruth. His home became open to me, and I could visit anytime. He offered his library and expanded my horizon. He read the chapters of my dissertation and offered guide for improvement. He scrutinized my paintings and ensured they fell in line with my objectives.

At the end of my MFA degree studies and having acquired the certificate he introduced me to the late Professor Charles Counts of the Department of Creative Arts, University of Maiduguri, who for four years had been scouting for a painting lecturer to fill the vacant space left after the death of Roberts Ogenyi. I accepted even though I was sure Buhari would easily have offered me a place in Zaria if it was possible. My Dad was still alive then and I visited him in Vom, near Jos in Plateau state, to tell him of the development. The letter of introduction was in my hand and my father told me that since it was the same person who had asked me to hang around Zaria for a possible opening who was asking me to go to Maiduguri then it was okay, I could go. So I did; and see how God has blessed me. A wife and four children are my reward.

It did not end there. Throughout the years I spent in Maiduguri Professor Jerry Buhari kept in touch and always offered his advice whenever the occasion called for it. At the point in time

we got admitted into the PhD programme in Painting in the 2009/2010 academic session as the pioneer set he it was who provided the real impetus upon which we relied upon to gain understanding of the import of the Doctoral degree in Fine Arts that we were embarking upon. His guidance was superb. He taught us tirelessly. On several occasions we would meet in the evenings and go through our lecture sessions till very late at night after which we would then go out and probably eat suya together by Suleiman Hall before parting ways for the night.

His personal library housed in his office became our study centre and he often reviewed our work, helping us develop a sound theoretical ground for the challenges of the PhD we were so eager to acquire.

With what words can I describe this most amiable of personalities; this fulcrum; this firm foundation; this father figure; this stronghold; this most humble of men? I lack words to describe him. I can only say that he is an extraordinary mentor. I pray that as he turns 60 he will remain steadfast in his commitment to training and grooming artists for as long as he can... for we who are coming behind him are not fit to wear his shoes.