

## Simply David

Temitayo Omole

Programme Manager, Delegation of European Union to Nigeria and ECOWAS

### **A Legacy of Simplicity**

Everyone referred to him as Dr Jowitt – to which he would respond, ‘it is not Dr Jowitt. Just call me David!’ Those referring to him as ‘doctor’ in a sense of doctor of philosophy or PhD could be forgiven because their error is an honest mistake. Given that his full names are David Roger Jowitt, the acronyms of the first and middle names form the DR or ‘doctor’ that everyone preferred to call him.

Having cleared the air about the great misconception about his name, I must then immediately warn the reader that this piece is not about the fact that Late Professor David Roger Jowitt studied and spoke French, Latin, Spanish, German, and Italian languages. It is not also about the fact that in his spare time he took interest in Dutch, Swedish, Portuguese, and Russian. Or that later in Nigeria, David learnt and spoke Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, and Ebera very well, this piece is about the ordinary side of a friend I have known for nearly 28 years. It is a mix of story and reflections from a very personal point of view.

To begin with, an enduring legacy of Professor David Roger Jowitt would, arguably be his simplicity despite his incredible depth of knowledge and breadth of experience. For a man who studied history at Cambridge and travelled widely around the world, his views of the world affairs, the ups and downs, the complexity and simplicity of certain aspects of life must have shaped him to become a man who enjoyed every ironical moments of life.

A clear example of this, I found on David’s office door in the Department of English, Bayero University, Kano which read, ‘*Sabo da kaza ba ya hana yankata*’, which meant that familiarity with a chicken does not prevent it from being slaughtered. This was a friendly but clear warning to students who would not pull their weight and still expected to pass his course. The proverb which comes from Hausa culture became famous in the university as everyone including many students knew exactly on whose door the warning could be found.

### **A Culinary Expert**

With David we shared many memorable moments and exchanged ideas on many aspects of life in general from history to culture to languages, politics, music, and even cuisine or cookery. Professor David Jowitt was a good cook. No, a great cook, I would rather say. Every recipe was cooked to perfection. Nevertheless, that was not how I saw it initially.

David invited me to a meal first in early 1996. I was at his place and he set out earnestly to cook the meal. What fascinated me the most about David was the fact that he brought out all the ingredients, tools and equipment for the meal. The arrangement of the ingredient was like a carefully arranged orchestra placed in strategic location to ensure nothing was forgotten. I

saw David measuring salt on a mini-scale! He measured the quantity of everything including onions on the scale. He checked the slices of meat and the thinnest of the cut. Then, he brought out a clock to time the cooking! As a true African, I could not hide my curiosity or rather amusement.

Then, I asked the great question I had been itching to ask since I entered the house. 'Professor Jowitt, you mean every time you wish to cook your native food, you must read a book, go through this chemistry laboratory method of cooking?'

David looked at me, feigning ignorance, he asked me ironically, 'how then does anyone cook without a book?'

'We cook by heart, not by the book,' I answered enthusiastically.

'And do you always get exactly the same taste of the specific recipes you cook by heart?'

It was a question I had not considered. 'Ah, no one will notice,' I said.

'Well, we will and that is why we cook by the book,' David countered.

### **A Mentor**

David loved books – to read and to write. He had countless articles published in the newspapers, journals, magazines of repute from across the world. A man of diverse interest, David's articles and works covered many topics ranging from the history of the church to the monarchy, contemporary debates and topical issues, impact of technology on the older generation, and so on. As a friend I had the privilege of being amongst the first to read nearly every published work of his. He would send me a published copy or link to the online version after publication.

Surprisingly, talking about technology, David taught me how to use the computer. He gave me a ten-minute lecture on an old mainframe computer called Amstrad. He gave me full access to practice and use his computer. We have had many jokes shared about the impact of technology on older generations of people like himself. On one occasion, the biometric machine could not capture his finger prints. After trying many times, the young lady operating the system told David in the most polite way possible, 'excuse me, sir. I think your fingers have expired'! With a smile, David responded, 'You don't say'! The story made me roar with laughter as I had never considered the possibility of our dear fingers becoming expired or reaching its 'sell by date'! the conversation then led to a reflection on some of the things that modern life takes for granted especially within other Nigerian context without necessarily giving a thought to the possibility of how that might affect those who potentially are being left behind.

David's help in teaching me computing on the Amstrad proved pivotal later on when Windows 95 came out and the whole system changed considerably. David would call me to help with things like how to do italics in Microsoft Word. I would respond and say, 'Professor Jowitt,

that is very easy’, to which he would respond, ‘yes, yes, I know. Everything is easy when you know’! How true that indeed was, and still is – that everything is easy when you know.

In his own way, David ‘built’ people through his incredible capacity for compassion and ability to relate with the challenges of human existence. One example of this was his support for my continued stay in Kano after the National Youth Service Corps. I had just finished the national service and I was quite open to many possibilities including returning to the south of Nigeria from Kano where I had not managed to secure a job at the time. David saw me and we had these conversations;

‘Tayo, Tayo’, David always called my name like a typical Yoruba person repeating the name twice, even when speaking on the phone. ‘And what are you going to do, now that you have finished the service?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I will return to the south and try to look for a job,’ I said. David then immediately told me to stay on and that he would continue to pay my NYSC allowance until I got a job. I clearly did not see that offer coming. So, I asked him just to be sure, ‘Professor Jowitt, and what would I have to do in return for the stipend?’ David laughed and said, ‘Looking for job is the job!’

The salary of a professor in 1996 was not a lot. Despite this, David paid me the monthly allowance I was earning from the National Youth Service Corps of One Thousand, One Hundred and Twenty One Naira until I got a job. He was also the person who brought me the first major job I got after graduation with the Voluntary Service Oversea (VSO) to do an 8-State evaluation of the teaching of English Language in Nigeria. That job became the launch pad for the field of work I currently consider as my profession.

### **A Man of Faith**

One must not fail to mention the strength of David’s faith as a Christian. In a world where the western popular culture has overshadowed faith and all things spiritual, especially Christianity, David chose to have faith, to believe and to live according to the principles of the faith. He paid attention to the Church calendar while taking active part in every spiritual exercise such as fasting during the Lenten season, the observance of ash Wednesdays, going for confession as a Catholic and many more. David produced many incisive articles for the famous Catholic publication, *The Tablet* and other faith-based publishing outlets. One of his last works centred on the history of the church.

Exploring the subject of faith was always fascinating with David. Through him, I was introduced to a wonderful summary of world faiths in a book titled, ‘Every Wind of Doctrine’, written by Hobart E. Freeman. The book left a great impression on me on the similarities and differences in faiths amongst the peoples of the world. It is always important to understand what others believe in order to appreciate their points of view and live in harmony. Times

without number we pondered and analysed together the contemporary challenges of faiths in the world today. He was never judgmental about anyone or their faith.

David's philosophy of life comes from his Christian background and personal commitment to serve God and humanity the best way he knew. He demonstrated this in his keen attention to details in his teaching, modelling and mentoring young people around him. He was appalled at the gradual erosion of quality within the academic system, and agonized about the ever-increasing depth of laziness or the *laissez faire* attitude of the new generation of students.

### **A Chess Player**

We played games together. David taught me how to play the chess game. At the beginning, David won nearly every game. Of course, it can be annoying to be losing games! So, I began to pay more attention. Chess game requires very keen attention. Then for the first time while playing with David, I cornered the King on the chessboard. I had worked out that there was no way I could lose that game. So, with an air of pretentious sobriety but great enthusiasm that I was winning, I said to him gently, 'Would you like another game?'

Life is a game. The fun in it is usually best when your path crosses with a good player, a team player, a friend, a mentor and someone who could become the beacon, the milestone and a pathway to your progress on the journey of life. David was such and many more for the lifetime he spent in Nigeria, working, serving and building many to become functional members of our society.

Although David never married and never had any children, the people that lived in his household viewed him and related with him as a father. In the early morning, David would call for prayers and which included a short Bible study. Family prayer is a tradition that I myself practice in my family. I recall a letter that David wrote to me a few years ago after he had stayed a few days with us and participated in our family prayer time. He specifically mentioned the prayer time as memorable for him. Of course, in my family, one of my sons plays the guitar and another plays the piano while I am the vocalist during praise worship sessions.

David enjoyed Nigerian cuisines to the best. In fact, a great secret between us was the Sunday afternoon pounded-yam and *egusi* soup at Sabon-Gari, Kano. Each time I got a knock on my door after church, I knew we would be going out for pounded-yam that day. Occasionally, David would surprise me by conversing in Igbo for a long period and then interpreted the message as such, 'Tayo, Tayo, the summary is that I have asked for *Ofe Owerri* or *Oha* soup for dinner, today,' It was always a refreshing change where food was concerned as he would try to cook cuisines from different cultures other than his own.

### **A True Nigerian**

Initially it was unclear to me how David was able to endure the varying and harsh weather of Nigeria especially in Kano where it could be excruciatingly hot during the dry season or unbearably dusty during the cold season as a result of the dusts from the Sahara Desert. That

he stayed for so long and never complained was yet again, a demonstration of his commitment to serve in Nigeria. David loved ironies, whether in literature or in life. We would deconstruct the plots and narratives of characters in a given novel. Ben Okri's *the Famished Road* was an example along with many others. The discovery of new novels and young writers interested David a lot. Through him, I got to know about Biyi Bamdele-Thomas, the acquaintanceship of whom he made on one of his visits to London. One of the best examples of the ironies of life we share many times was his perception of what British citizens complain about compared with the reality of life in Nigeria.

In the end one can safely say that David did not only live amongst us, he became one of us, even culturally. For example, David would speak with high level of respect about his senior sister, Mrs Audrey Jones. The tone he would use was very similar to the way a Yoruba person would show deep and sincere respect to a senior member of the family. He loved his family and he communicated and connected with them as often as he could. Given the challenge of telephone services in Nigeria many years ago, David would still make the effort to drive to the Post Office in Kano to go and make a call to his sister, Audrey in London. What a relief when the mobile phone finally arrive Nigeria in 2001! I spoke with Audrey on a few occasions and I could not help but notice what a sweet British voice she had! On meeting Audrey in person in September, 2023, I confirmed it that indeed, she has a beautiful voice even at 87 years of age! And the facial similarity between David and Audrey is fascinating to note.

Audrey writes with her left hand, as David did. She recalled that David used to call my name twice on the phone whenever we spoke. She said, 'and I would hear David say on the phone, 'Tayo, Tayo', which made her smile because she found it fascinating and different to call someone twice just like that.

### **Funeral and Cremation of David's Remains**

The funeral of David in London took place in his neighbourhood Catholic Church – Saint Edmund's Roman Catholic Church in Beckenham. It was interesting to see many Nigerians from all walks of life coming to pay their last respect. Some travelled from north England to be there. Friends of his from the 1960s were there. One of his oldest and best friends, Reverend John Ohen was there with his family. David was his best man at his wedding more than 50 years ago! Again, it is impossible not to be fascinated by the friendliness of David and his capacity to maintain his pool of friends from the past through regular communications. The homily was befitting. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Ishaya gave a moving eulogy as well. It was impossible to do justice to the many good qualities of David when I had only two minutes to speak in the church – but speak I did!

It is quite amazing how even the process of death, dying and funerals have been taken to the next level in the United Kingdom, and perhaps, across Europe in general. Yes, I have seen graveyards in Paris, Flanders and many other European cities, and have marvelled at the incredible organisation of graves with neat avenues and street names, beacons and maps to help people find the graves of their loved ones. David requested to be cremated should it happen

that death met him in the United Kingdom. Cremation simplifies the process of repatriation of the remains as the ashes could safely be transported and buried in the country he loved so much, Nigeria.

The Beckenham crematorium is about seven minutes' drive from the church. The casket was made of a beautiful English wood, brown, elegant, dignifying and simple. The process of cremation is automated and the end product is the fine ash that is then beautifully packaged for handing over to the family to be disposed off in accordance with the will of the deceased. I had read about ashes of the dead, the requirements for safe transportation, certification and health advisory. The solicitors overseeing the affairs of David ensured that I had all the necessary paperwork. Everything was very precise, I must say, like clockwork!

### **Return of David's Ashes to Nigeria**

But how could I possibly fail to get David to smile from heaven should he be watching me bringing back his ashes to Nigeria! That would be a sacrilege – David and I would always find the funny side of life in everything. I already foresaw that there could be potential issues at the customs in Nigeria about the ashes but I could not really say exactly what those issues might be. Passing through Heathrow was not an issue as all the paperwork was correct and accurate. So, I crafted the sentence I would use to explain to the Nigerian customs.

The new international rule of travelling requires that all luggage is scanned with the huge scanning machine so that nothing untoward could get into the country. My suitcase and computer bag passed through without issues. Then the bag containing the box of the ashes was scanned and the young customs officer said, 'what is in the box?' Looking rather academic, I responded and said, 'ah, that is the *finest biodegradable box of urns the world has ever known*. And it is destined to be rested in Jos, Plateau State'! I am very sure the guy did not understand the full meaning of my response because he then said, 'please come and explain in the office'! I followed him into the small office and told him, 'Officer, perhaps I didn't make myself clear enough. This box contains the ashes of late Professor David Roger Jowitt who lived, worked and served Nigeria for over 50 years of his life. He requested that he should be buried in Nigeria. As his friend, I am fulfilling a commitment I made that I would ensure that his wishes were fulfilled with regards to where he would like to be buried. I have all the certificates if you would like to check them out'.

'You should have just told me like that outside. Please go. I am sorry for the loss of the Professor!'

Thinking about it, David left me with yet a couple of ironies to ponder on for many years to come. David stayed with my family as he had often done in recent years. Consequently, I was the last friend to take him to the airport on Saturday 24th of June, 2023 when he flew to London for holidays. It also turned out that I was the last friend to bring the ashes of David back in a beautiful box after his cremation in London to Nigeria. Again, it would appear that we loved

David so much, we ‘buried him twice’ – first in London and then in Jos – a thought that would have made him smile had he been around.

As a mark of how much David was valued, the President of the English Scholars’ Association of Nigeria (ESAN), Professor T. Y. Surakat and his team, and a strong contingent from the University of Jos, were at the entrance of the airport to meet me and receive ‘the finest biodegradable urns the world has ever known’!

### **Nigerian Citizen**

David had two ambitions throughout his life – to become a Nigerian and to publish his memoirs. Again, we discussed the fact that it was indeed right and proper for him to become a Nigerian citizen. But on the other hand, I was intrigued by the level of commitment that would endear our country Nigeria to someone of David’s calibre especially coming from an advanced economy as Britain! This was a theme I simply could not resist exploring with him. With a smile, David said, ‘It is the people, the warmth, the incredible capacity to love, respect and be enthusiastic in the face of daunting challenges. It is the can-do-spirit of Nigerians that is the fascination ... I would like to be buried here’.

Juxtaposing the desire to become a Nigerian with the new generation of Nigerians leaving the shores of the country in droves to become citizens of other lands, again became another paradoxical situation where David was concerned. As we were preparing for the ceremony of the citizenship, my neighbour had migrated to Canada. My wife’s niece and her family have relocated to Canada. My panel-beater had migrated to Oman. My laundry man was planning to go to Canada. Yet, David, a Briton, wanted and was looking forward to becoming a Nigerian!

The story of becoming a Nigerian after nearly 60 years of living in the country is fascinating, the details of which readers would have the opportunity to see in his memoir in the coming months or so. On Saturday 27th of May 2023, Professor David Roger Jowitt was officially awarded the citizenship of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Professor Yemi Osinbajo, the former Vice President graced the ceremony. Beautifully dressed in the Nigerian native attire that he loved so much with a matching red cap like a chief, David was beaming with pride and pleasure at finally being able to refer to himself as a citizen of the country he loved and served for so long.

It is true that David started his memoir long ago. His commitment to full teaching and academic research did not really give much spare time to finish the work as early as he would have loved. We discussed many themes in the memoir on many occasions. The account of his life in Nigeria is worth reading to see how much commitment he had given to Africa in this regard.

Professor David Roger Jowitt, that humble son of a seamstress mother and a factory driver father took the gene for hard work and completion along with him. David finished the revision of his memoir, exactly seven days before he died! As he would have said, ‘That is another one

done!' The publishers are currently working on publishing it for the public and should be out at any moment soon.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, when we eventually meet on the other side, you know what the question from me to David would be, 'Would you like another game?' For now, alas, after 28 years of friendship and several games of life, Professor David Roger Jowitt, my friend and mentor can no longer play another game with us. David's final words were 'my faith is stronger than I know, Jesus is Lord!'