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The name Josy Ajiboye has become synonymous with cartoons and cartooning in Nigeria. He has been in the field of cartooning in the country longer than any single individual—longer than Akinola Lasekan, pioneer of the medium, whose cartoons graced the Pilot newspapers between the forties and the sixties. This interview offers us an insight into the mind of one of the country's most popular newspaper icons.

# in a Sunday Leadcup

## GR:

I think it is important for you to give us a picture of your beginnings in Art. Please give us a feel of those times when you were young and growing up.

JA: In those days when we were kids, my father, Chief Obanla, was a very good singer and represented the country at various places and cultural undertakings. So in our house any object was a piece of art work. Be it a wooden post, *Opon Ifa*, *Ere Ibeji* and many other carved images. I mean, in those days these things were not looked at as we take them now. Then we took it as normal that every place was supposed to look like that until I came out to see things the way they were. Going to school, seeing people and meeting Europeans made me see Art in a bigger framework: that it is much more than I thought. As for drawing, I have been drawing right from the day I started writing ABC. However, my professional work started at African Challenge in 1962.

GR: You mean the African Challenge at Mushin here in Lagos?

JA: Yes. I went there not too long after I finished my GCE. At that time, all I read had to do with Art and while in school I was always drawing charts for the teachers... the wall charts of mosquitoes, animals etc. So while struggling for my GCE I went to Challenge because before then I had always received copies of their magazine and loved it. On my way to Oshodi, I saw the building and asked myself if this was the same Challenge I had been reading. For I had been



**Cartoonist  
Josy  
Ajiboye  
Looks Back**

reading it right from about 1955.

GR: You are referring to the famous Christian Challenge. Was it in pamphlet form or like a full magazine?  
(He begins to look for old copies and shows us how they used to look with the old prices on).

JA: Yes, I started reading the magazine from the 7th Day Adventist Mission School at Ekiti. The idea of the publication was to convert youths and educated young people into Christianity. I mean the magazine also had all the other subject matters such as news and all the other things normal magazines carry. But the only difference was that they used to spread the Gospel.

GR: Who are "they"?

JA: That is the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). The umbrella body under which all the ECWA churches were, including the Niger Challenge Publication which was then called Niger Challenge Press. Under this umbrella organization, the Americans came about a hundred years back. So when I got to Challenge I showed them my drawings and a lady, Miss Thompson, who came from Kent, was one of the missionaries that took interest in me. Actually, what happened then was that whenever somebody wished to serve as a missionary in Africa, a particular church in London would undertake the responsibility and the person would come first for two years. And if he or she performed very well and wanted to come back again they would again sponsor the person. Which was how we had all these missionaries. So they saw my drawings and said yes, this boy needed to be with them. That was how I became their trainee for about 5 to 6 years.

GR: You were mostly drawing illustrations?

JA: Yes, all the illustrations and covers for their publications and pamphlets.

GR: What was it like making covers in those days? Did you think out concepts?

JA: Ah! Very interesting. First, we were taught how to be economical: that is how from taking block red you can make it as if you had many more colors, etc.  
(He begins to demonstrate by taking the different covers he designed in those days...) We were then doing a lot of color overlays, which we now call color separation. You do a rough which shows roughly what it would look like and then on the finish you put a tracing paper on top of the text masthead and mark it out, and then place on the color.... With another sheet put on top of it again you then register marking. You see ... (He demonstrates)

GR: So, it was all manually done.

JA: Yes.

GR: Were you taught all this or you achieved these results from experimenting?

## JOSY AJIBOYE ON SUNDAY



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**JOSY AJIBOYE ON SUNDAY**



JA: We were actually taught the basics and from then I took off by experimenting with different percentages and grades of colors and textures. Apart from my doing the color separation, there was no other cost involved. I handled all the tones on just one plate. So, we were truly taught how to economize on our material.

GR: Did you pick your own photographs for these covers or were you given them? Who was behind the conceptualization?

JA: Once given a cover to do, the whole idea behind each cover at the time was mine. This was unlike the advertising agencies where you have a visualizer. No, not at all. I worked on *Yoruba Challenge*, *African Challenge* and did all the covers there. Then, you had to specialize in everything and there was no division of labor. You did everything, no other person. There was no luxury.

GR: So from Challenge, you moved on to where?

JA: Yes, I was with them from 1961 to 1968 when I resigned. By then I had a lot of experience with them at Challenge and had also taken a lot of courses in painting. I was experimenting with watercolors and the different pigments and with oil painting also.

GR: Did you have any formal training in painting?

JA: Yes, during my time at Challenge they would train me in-house, and they paid for me to attend the Yaba College of Technology, where I was taught by Paul Mount, Yusuf Grillo, Solomon Wangboje, M.A. Adebayo and Jake Oyewole, all of the Fine Arts Department. These courses at the time were for professionals—people already working outside. I did this for about 2 to 3 years before returning to my base. Also at that time, people would come from companies like Afromedia, Lintas and so on. Jubilee Owei was also there, a very good teacher and of course Simon Okeke whom I liked the best. Simon would handle a form and without pretense of strokes create great art.

GR: What was the art scene like in Lagos at this period? Who were you painting for? Or was it solely for galleries? Were you painting portraits for high society?

JA: Around that time there was a place, a gallery in front of Christ Cathedral Church in Lagos. Then the gap between the church and the lagoon was just about enough for two or three motors to be side by side before you get to the ships in the lagoon. Just a bit further down the lagoon was the place called "Exhibition centre." This was the only place for art in those days. I discovered the place around 1965. The only real place you would go for art and the place was really functional. Everybody knew the place. At that time, in fact, there was one professor Maurice Fauvet, a French man and professor of Fine Arts. He would have his exhibitions at King George V very close to the National Museum. A wonderful artist, he would be on a large boat with his wife, packed full of oil colors and there he would paint. He did not exhibit at the center, instead he would be on his boat ... So, basically, those were the two places I

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can remember that exhibited art. The patronage at the time was 70-80% European, though I disliked this very much.

GR: Was it around this time that you had an exhibition opened for you by the renowned Ben Enwonwu?

JA: Ah! What happened was, yes it was around this time. You see, then, one Mr Harold Fuller, the Deputy Director of SIM literature in West Africa, was about to go back home after his four-year stay. It was decided we honor him and I did with another colleague watercolour drawings in which the biggest size was 15" by 20". My missionary mother suggested the idea of her calling Professor Ben Enwonwu to come open the show for us. She picked up the phone and asked him and he replied immediately to say he was coming. Just like that. And that was how we got Enwonwu to come that day. It was great. He came with Dotun Okunbanjo.

GR: The Otunba, the photographer?

JA: Yes, so this is what was happening then. I was practicing my art and I used to comb all the stores for books at the former Kingsway or UTC Stores and all around the Tinubu axis. The *Daily Times* was then under the IPC International Corporation, which was under Mirror Group. We had access to all the magazines you can think of. In fact, *Newsweek*, *Readers Digest* and any magazine that mattered then was imported by *Daily Times* and we all read them all. It was around this time that I started doing cartoons. Just about the time the civil war broke out.

GR: Why did you start cartooning?

JA: At that time Increase Coker of the *Morning Post* saw my drawings and asked me to come. I showed the editors my drawings. Abiodun Shogunle who died about a year ago was the *Sunday Post* editor. Remi Illori was also there and Magnus Barahatz, the *Morning Post* editor. So they saw the drawings and said, "We need you." I gave them some cartoons, which they used during the Civil War. After the war, the *Daily Times* then, on seeing my drawing somewhere, asked for me to come. Dosu Oyelude was the news editor, and was planning the pages. He worked directly with Sam Amuka. Sam Amuka asked Dosu to give me some illustrations to do and insisted he wanted to see me on discovering some cartoons I had done in the past. He then persuaded me to work with them at the *Daily Times*.

GR: Is this the same Sam Amuka, publisher of *Vanguard Newspaper*?

JA: Yes. Also at that time Alhaji Babatunde Jose and

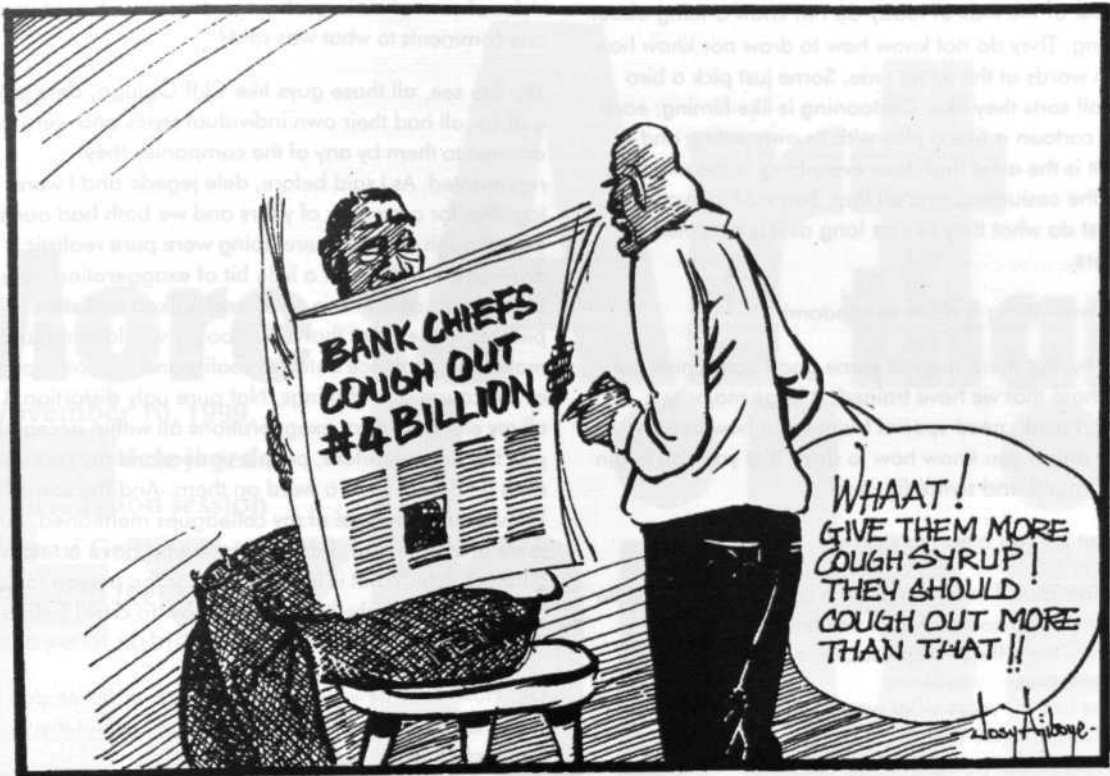
## JOSY AJIBOYE ON SUNDAY



Henry Odukamaiya, recently manager of *Champion* newspaper, all convinced me to work for them at *Daily Times*. But after working for so long with the Christian missionaries, I was somewhat reluctant and it took them a lot of time trying to convince me.

GR: What kind of cartooning were you drawing then? What was your approach to the work you were doing for them?

JA: Ah! Baba [Akinola] Lasekan [known more popularly as Lash] then, the old man who used to do cartoons for *Pilot* right from the time I was a young adult, had a great influence on the cartoons of that time. That is, in his support for Nnamdi Azikiwe's political party. I probed the idea and always wondered if there was another way of drawing my own cartoons. I wanted to be as unbiased and unjaundiced as possible. I did not want to be seen in the light of being for Zik or against Awo. Even though it is interesting that at the end of the day Baba Lash was employed by this same Awolowo after the Civil War. The Ife University gave him a Senior Art Fellowship or something to that effect. My missionary mother gave me tremendous confidence and I was so good at anatomy. She, at the time, used to bring in from London magazines like *Punch* which had a great impact on me with all its satire and funny cartoons. It used to make me laugh so much.



GR: Who were the cartoonists of the time?

JA: He was the only one we could refer to then, Baba Lasekan. Even though Papa Aina Onabolu was another great artist. He stayed more in education and used to travel all around, and could not combine all the aspects of the arts. There was also another man called Chuks Anyanwu who is dead now.

GR: So you were not into political cartooning? What did you then adopt or create?

JA: Well, actually at the time I was trying to create an identity for myself. A style which people could easily identify as a Josy Ajiboye cartoon without having to put my name on it. I used to work with Sam Amuka who used to collect all my cartoons and there was this trivial conflict where I would try to make the point that I was only hired to illustrate. Sam was always his jovial self, he would look at me and shout comically: just do it for me. So I continued to do the cartooning and he encouraged me even with money. I evolved with them and he later created a space for me as *Sunday Times* Editor. A regular space that entailed me doing cartoons of a mixture of politics and social commentary. Also, politics then was only about the military and their beneficiaries. In fact, I once had a problem when Obasanjo was in power and was about to hand over to Shagari: my passport was seized for about four months. It was later returned to me.

GR: Was this due to a cartoon you did?

JA: I should think so. The one I did of a mouse. In fact I never thought it would be understood. I drew a mouse and the map of Africa. At the center where Nigeria is

located I drew a cat with the mouse dying in its mouth with blood dripping and wrote a note on the mouse saying "Democracy: that helpless...." You know a very simple cartoon. But [with loaded] meaning perhaps because that was when they were still arguing about the two-thirds political issue.

GR: Where does the inspiration come from for such powerful cartoons?

JA: I watch people a lot and just love where and the way I live. I have to be with the people all the time. When you live within these places then you see a lot that people go through. Life can be very hectic and difficult. But despite these problems they still manage to laugh and smile. As for politics, I must confess I learnt a lot when I was staying with my dad who was a chief and had to solve a lot of problems. It gave me a strong moral sense and he affected the way I make my cartoons.

GR: This is all so interesting. I get the impression from you that there is no formal training for cartoonists in general. Is it therefore difficult to begin to discuss about particular styles, etc? Is everything therefore done on impulse?

JA: I mentioned Pa Lasekan because he actually initiated it all. My cartooning on the other hand has no relation to what Baba Lasekan did. I developed my own style after studying the different jokes in magazines like *Punch*. etc. All we got from school was how to draw. If you know your anatomy very well, to be a good cartoonist, you must have a sense of humor which you either pick up from your peers or are born with. The cartoons of today are really

poor. Most of the kids of today do not know a thing about cartooning. They do not know how to draw nor know how to match words at the same time. Some just pick a biro and do all sorts they like. Cartooning is like filming; each piece of cartoon is like a play with its own setting and drama. It is the artist that does everything in the play: the writing, the costuming and all that. Some of the young artists just do what they like as long as it is accepted by the editors.

GR: So, everything is done at random!

JA: Exactly. But there are still some good cartoonists out there—those that we have trained. A large majority, however, I think, need special training on how to draw. As it is, it is only if you know how to draw that you can begin to play around and stylize figures.

GR: What do you mean to stylize?

JA: For instance if I want to draw a caricature I should be able to draw the normal figure first before I begin to exaggerate the different expressions.

GR: In the last 20 years what were the most exciting times you had to cartoon? The Abacha years or when Babangida was in power?

JA: Ah! It depends. Those people who were locked up under Abacha or who were shot would not find that period funny at all and so it is relative, really.

GR: So, as an artist, you have a moral concern?

JA: Oh yes! I always do whenever I have to do anything that has to do with politics. I always weigh the two sides morally. Like the issue of our politicians today who are stealing billions of naira for instance. All my life I have never seen a million in cash on a top of table, not to talk about the millions they steal everyday. And yet we all own houses of our own.

GR: Another thing we would like to ask is that in all the years you have worked as a cartoonist would you say that there are some newspapers that have developed a cartooning style that differs from the others?

JA: It mostly depends on the editors of the art sections in these newspapers since we do not have separate cartooning departments. However, I would say *The Guardian* is the only newspaper house that has started a cartooning section with the sole aim of developing relevant cartoons.

GR: Do your cartoons have a life span?

JA: Ah! Interesting. Some last a minute, a day and some forever. But I believe those with the shortest life are political cartoons. I mean, it all depends on the circumstance. If there is a case that lasts for a few months, the longer the possibility of the cartoon and so on.

GR: Recently we published an article in which various

styles of several cartoonists were discussed. Could you add any comments to what was said?

JA: You see, all those guys like Cliff Ogiugo, dele jegede and co. all had their own individual styles and were not dictated to them by any of the companies they represented. As I said before, dele jegede and I were together for a number of years and we both had our styles even though what we were doing were pure realistic drawings. A mixture of a little bit of exaggeration here and there. In my case I have never really liked to distort pictures to the point that an onlooker would complain. I make sure I balance between reality and the comical side or caricature side of things. Not pure ugly distortion. I do all my elongations or exaggerations all within acceptable practice and, therefore, people understand my cartooning even if I do not write a word on them. And the same thing I would say of several of my colleagues mentioned. But there are some who, I do not know why, have a totally different style. What is important is for the person to know how to draw. A baby has to know how to crawl before running.

GR: How come newspaper cartoons never developed into comic books and magazines, not to talk about the business of animation?

JA: Don't say never, please. There have been attempts. It's just the economics of everything. I mean if you ask me to pool all the cartoons I have in this room they are enough to put several books together. The problem is in the poverty of our thinking. The interest is just not there. Ignorance should I say! Misplaced priorities....I don't know. As I told you, my purpose of being in art has nothing to do with money; it's life for me. But things have got so bad, we do not even have any cultural magazines any more.

GR: What is wrong? People like you should be in university sharing your experience and knowledge. Lecturing all over the place.

JA: I do not know. I mean look at America and the whole Disney thing. We have our people leave here with all the expense, to go to Disney world, whatever the cost. They forget that this whole concept was developed by a cartoonist.

GR: Ah! It is interesting you bring this up. Because I think I should rephrase my earlier question. What I really wanted to ask was why we have not been able to develop our own popular characters. Did you have a character in your career?

JA: Because of the time devoted to politics I did not have the time to create one. I plan to do so as my main target of bringing up my children has been fulfilled...they are all adults now, and in fact, they all studied art. One is even a lecturer. GR