

Elegy GANI

MAURICE ARCHIBONG

Although he passed on February 15, the memory of Gani Odutokun continues to rattle in our minds. Had he lived, he would have turned forty-nine on August 9. The deceased was not a kill-joy and why we got robbed of one chance to smile even in this pallid ambience is hard to tell: Gani left 21 years short of the prescribed three scores and ten.

It is difficult to recall the first time you met Gani Odutokun. Come to think of it many people do not recognise him the first time. Gani (as he was fondly called) was a familiar name both locally and overseas as an accomplished painter who had also risen to the position of Head, Department of Fine Art (DFA) Ahmadu Bello University.

On the other hand Gani's physique was not reflective of his immense professional stature; a man of diminutive frame coupled with an hearing aid to his right ear and three strokes of tribal mark on each cheek, Gani could have passed for anybody and for many who had not known him already it was difficult to tie the person with the name.

Until March 15, 1995 you could count on Gani for being one of the viewers at the opening of many major exhibitions. Coincidentally most of these

major shows involved products of the Zaria School of Art; even though many of them have found their berth far away from their alma mater. One such occasion was the opening of an exhibition featuring paintings by Prof. Uche Okeke at the German cultural centre (Goethe Institut) in 1993 to celebrate the artist's sixtieth birthday.

Although his hands were always full, Gani would squeeze out time to be there but at the opening of Mu'azu M. Sani's show at Alliance Francaise Kaduna on June 15 Gani wasn't there. At the Goethe Institut last July 8 when Mrs. Albertsen - Marton formally handed over to her successor Richard Lang, Gani wasn't there either. He couldn't be for he

was now no more.

It's hard not to remember the good moments shared together and this is often one reason we miss a departed friend so. I had gone to Zaria this last June to interview Prof. Jimo Akolo who turned sixty on September 20. As I descended the spiral stairway within the DFA building where Gani's office used to be I felt a peculiar hollowness. Having arrived rather late in the day about 7 p.m. I wasn't banking on meeting the lecturers I sought but there was always a chance. By a hair's breadth I had missed Jerry Buhari, I was told. Jerry Buhari, Tonie Okpe, Kefas Danjuma, Prof. Jimo Akolo, Mu'azu Sani, these and others I could reach within the next twenty-four hours *sepibus paribus* (all things being equal) but Gani I would never see again on this plane: it was a hurting feeling.

Before this visit, the last time I was at Samaru, about a year earlier July 1994, I had left a much happier person.

My arrival coincided with the presence of Professors Uche Okeke and Obiora Udechukwu, among others, who had come as external examiners. Prof. Okeke had left earlier in the day and Prof. Udechukwu would be leaving the next morning. During the brief rendezvous by way of a send-off in honour of Obiora at the Senior Staff Club the writer would once again enjoy the privilege of sharing a table with some of Nigeria's more famous and celebrated academics, as they reminisced about their student days at the ABU



(Prof. Udechukwu would have been another product of the same school but for the civil war).

From this meeting and others which offered a view of Gani at close quarters one can recall his gesticulations and echoes of Gani's hearty but subdued laughter.

Although he appeared a man of irrepressible spirit he had his low periods too. Clad in his usual simple Safari suit he hissed resignedly at the price which he weekly had to spend on petrol to run his car. An unselfish man he wasn't only concerned about himself: at N2,000 for fifty litre volume he could no more offer lift to half as many colleagues as he used to. This was in the thick of the fuel scarcity which plagued the nation for the better half of 1994 consequent upon the treacherous political distortion of June 23, 1993.

The astronomical fuel price, however, did not deter Gani from driving me all the way to Zaria motor Park which is quite a distance from Samaru.

It is impossible to forget the last time I met Gani. An Austrian sculptor Josef Beier had come from Linz to conduct two workshops in Nigeria.

Beier's first workshop was at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria while the second held at the Yaba College of Technology, on

Saturday, February 10 1995 products of the efforts of the participants in both exercises came on view at Goethe Institut Lagos.

When Gani and his crew had not arrived by 6 p.m. of February 8 (two days before the opening) there was apprehension within the art circuit; more so when we had gathered that Gani and some five others had since left Zaria by road for Lagos.

However the next morning to our relief (transient as it turned out to be) Gani et al arrived same day but late in the night we were told.

The show opened as scheduled. But before the opening one noticed an unusual frequency in prayer on the part of the technician. It was as if he had a premonition of what was coming.

Another hint could have been in Gani's attitude that evening. He was unusually cheerful, it was as though he had foreseen his liberation from the mundane drudgery we call life. Even his sculptures were coated in uncharacteristically bright colours.

As it typical of time which flies when you are having fun; soon it was time to go home.

Before departure time however I had engaged Gani in a brief chat as had come to be our practice in the last five years.

Gani had asked me how I managed. It was a

reference to my ubiquitous presence wherever a show was on. This led me to ask him the cause of Mr. Bolaji Doherty's death.

Bolaji Doherty, an architect had run the famous Avant Garde gallery in Kaduna. Avant Garde wasn't just another needle in a hay stack, it was like an oasis in a desert and I had been there to see the opening of **Themes and Schemes**, an exhibition of paintings, drawings and photographs by Jerry Buhari, Akin Afuwape and an Italian Ezio Marizol last December 9.

Bolaji Doherty couldn't have looked livelier; he was there but by January he had passed on. What happened? I lamented to Gani who told me that he was not sure, but promised to keep me posted on his return to Zaria.

As fate would have it barely five days later words came as if in a nightmare that Gani Odutokun had passed on in a car crash which also claimed the lives of Dr. Hattie Hilliard an American visiting lecturer at the ABU, Ms. Ester Ada Onyilo another lecturer and the prayerful technician.

You begin to wonder why they had to travel when they did. Would they be alive today had they gone by another means?

If they had to go so that what will be may be (Quelle Sera, Sera) I still find myself seeking solace in the proverb that 'good men must die but death cannot kill their names'. Adieu Gani. **GR**

