



F 1995 WAS AN annus tristitia for Nigeria, it was an unusual year of sadness for members of the art community. Last year was one year that most Nigerian artists and collectors would rather not remember, because it left some important members of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) as worms on a desert of salt.

Besides the not-so-famous, who went 'beyond the point of no return', death also encircled, in its extracting embrace, three outstanding Nigerian artists.

Still mourning the demise of Sina Yussuph, art teacher at the Yaba College of Technology, the artists hardly recovered from the transition of Abdul Ganiu Odutokun which occurred in a ghastly auto-mishap February 15. As if the loss of Odutokun, until then the Vice President of

for nothing. Whilst many would remember him for his tempestuous temperament, his works will remain a more permanent source of insight into the life assisting in a balanced future judgement of his life and period.

In life Eze may have been as cutting as a chisel and this adversely affects his relationship with some people but does not detract from the wholesomeness of his works.

Not many admirers remember that Eze, who is best known for his sculptors, actually started out as a painter.

Born November 1, 1934, in Umuobiala-Isikwuator, now in Abia State, he attended the Technical Institute and Trade Centre, Enugu from 1950 to 1955 and later studied (for one year (1963/1964) Technology and Technique of Materials at West Hampshire Technical College, England.

In four years (1960 - 1964) Eze had mounted up to fourteen solo exhibitions of his paintings: an almost inconceivable feat at that time.

A SCULPTOR'S Lonely Journey Home

Tribute to Okpu Eze

Maurice Archibong

The novelist Cyprian

the SNA, was not enough, the society was to lose its head (no pun intended) with the death, on October 1, of Okpu Eze, president SNA.

Death joked uncannily by snatching Eze on the National Day. Moreover, since the country's political considerations are often based on an East, West, North tripod, death itself refused to be appeased without this reflection. Thus from the West went Yussuph of the Yaba School; Gani Odutokun, head of Art at the Zaria School; and Okpu Eze who lived and worked most of his life in the East.

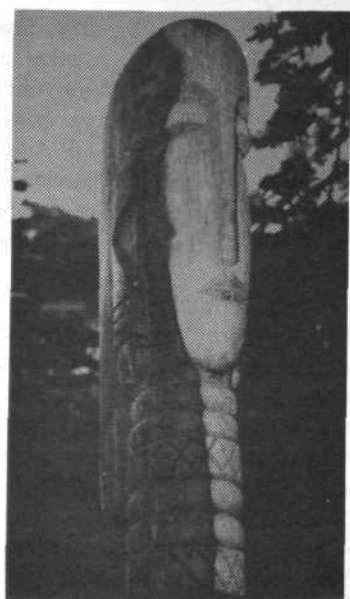
Not much was known of Okpu Eze the man, but of Okpu Eze the sculptor. 'The King's cup', as his name literally translates, was not the crown of the SNA

Ekwensi who later described him as 'a very honest artist' would be proven right, for not long after this he called off all public activity and retreated into the privacy of his studio.

Okpu Eze complained that art was 'not complete unless such issues as potency of theme, subject matter and formalistic excellence were addressed'.

In his critique of some Nigerian artists whose works fell short of his standards and drew his impatience he declared: 'this kind of art is like algebra: non-functional.'

To his critics who recently protested his favour of Italian art above Nigerian his defence was in a similar vein: 'as



though there can be Nigerian science or Nigerian mathematics', Eze told me before his death that he demurred attempts to compartmentalise art.

Throughout the period of his retreat Okpu Eze remained on his job in the public service as Works Manager, Federal Ministry of works and Housing, Lagos. This offered the artist much insight into bureaucracy which would prove useful when Eze returned to the art circuit in the late 1970s. In the intervening period, during which he withdrew, his fame had waned somewhat in comparison with some of his professional peers who waxed stronger in those years.

Eze was undaunted; he 'was able to recognise that life is a complex confusion, a methodical or systematic gamble but fertile rendezvous for the bold, the determined, the dreamer and the intelligent' according to art historian Ola Ololade, a close companion of Eze.

This consciousness propelled the artist in life. Far from appearing to be living on the fringes of existence like a lot of artists, Okpu Eze believed in the good life and lived it. He refused to be shrivelled by frugality, nor accepted to pound the streets in pecuniary pursuits.

On a second visit to Eze's Enugu home in December 1994 in company of the sculptor Chris Afuba, we were received by a graceful woman to whom we felt sure age had been kind. Mrs. (Lolo) Junu Nwadiobinma Okpu Eze did not look like a mother of six, not to talk of her being a grand-mother.

Of all the genres of visual art, it is perhaps only in sculpture that the West admits to having borrowed a leaf or two from Africa: Okpu Eze will be remembered as one germination of the seeds from that ancient tree of artistic flory. His disposition was cosmopolitan, an embodiment of synthesis; Eze's is a melting pot of creativity, ideology, cultural relevance and a free spirit. Which probably is the explanation for why his works were always life-size, often grandiose.

It is more of a compliment to his intellect also to say that Okpu Eze was a



Mathematics of the Cosmos

mystic. On August 14, 1992 he led this writer by the hand during a preview of his last major exhibition in Nigeria and predicted that the massive democratisation process that was being vaunted in Nigeria was only a mirage. This hollow promise of a return to civilian rule was captured in 'Parable of Transition' a 1992 wood and metal sculpture bedecked with chains. Democracy was depicted as a mouse in shackles chained to two poles.

There was also the 'parable of the Seed' produced the same year. Eze echoed the biblical axiom that as a man sows, so shall he reap, advising that some Nigerians should not sow the seeds of violence. Addressing Nigeria's political class, he produced a masquerade, the 'Illusion of Power' which portrayed power in all its hollowness.

However, in the 'mathematics of the cosmos' a confluence of borrowed forms and rhythms of world symbolisms

Eze relies more on the Nsibidi (ancient Efik mode of writing). Here the watchful eye denotes vigilance, a mathematical sign stands for infinity, sharing the same world with Nsibidi symbols in harmonious co-existence.

These works were in the procession of his sculpture exhibited at the National Museum from August 15 to 29, 1992 tagged 'New Dimensions: present of the past'.

September 18, 1995 was to be the last time I would see him. We had run into each other at the National Gallery of Art, Lagos. As president of the SNA he was busy preparing for Nigeria's participation in the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) exhibition in Geneva, Switzerland. A very successful outing for Nigeria, it was here that the president of Nigeria Copyright Council, Moses Ekpo got elected WIPO president.

On September 29, Chief Okpu Eze and other delegates returned to Nigeria; within forty-eight hours of their arrival, Okpu deceased.

The body of the late Okpu Eze, president SNA, 1990 recipient of Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) prize for sculpture, and member, Society of British Artists was committed to mother earth within his Institute of Contemporary Arts compound at Umuobiala, Abia State on November 4, 1995.

I felt that the poster which announced the transition and funeral ceremony did little justice to the immense stature of Okpu Eze who departs as one of Nigeria's most talented sculptors. So to some extent was the wrangling within the SNA itself. The SNA should otherwise have given its erstwhile general a more resounding final gun salute. **GR**