



Three African Artists in Calcutta

In October 1962 76 pieces by these three artists were exhibited in Calcutta by Mbari of Nigeria, assisted by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Paris. The Indian Committee for Cultural Freedom has reported: "This was the first exhibition of original work by African artists in India and the exhibition was hailed by all sections of the public. One of the reasons for this was that in the public mind Africa was associated with colonialism, backwardness and racial and political conflicts, such as in South Africa and Congo. This exhibition provided an occasion to have an aesthetic view of Africa free from these issues of tension and conflict." We reprint here notes on the artists by Ulli Beier, with grateful acknowledgements.

Okeke

THE MOST STRIKING feature of these drawings by a young Nigerian is that they are so obviously African. During the last two decades it has been the preoccupation of many African artists to assert their African identity or personality. But how does an artist who has been to an English speaking school and was trained in art school modelled on the Stude assert his African-ness? Rightly many young artists in Nigeria are now seeking inspiration in ancient traditions. The times are gone when it was considered African to compose market scenes, lagoons with palm trees and women carrying water pots on their heads. An artist like Uche Okeke has no time for this superficial approach. He states that the young African must study and understand his traditional art and folklore "in order to come to terms with himself". For him it is not a matter of copying traditional Igbo masks or designs, but of understanding the deeper meaning of Igbo culture and art. He has gained security and certainty in his life from his understanding that Igbo culture was not a "primitive" or "savage" society but an organic and human system.

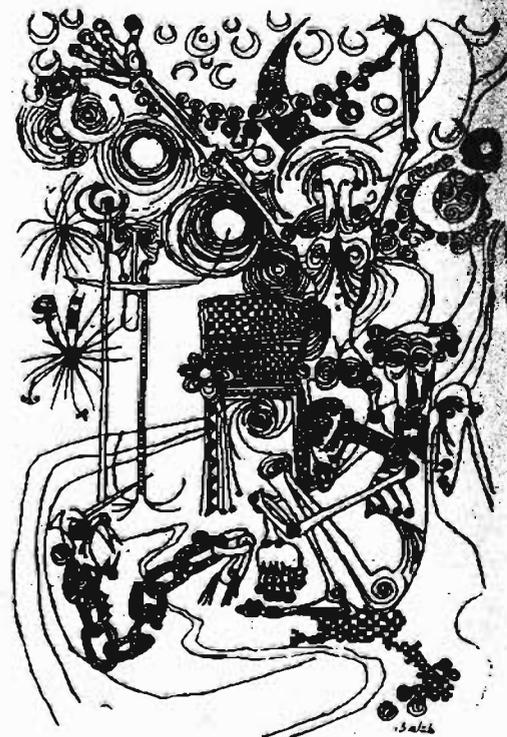
Uche Okeke is a keen collector of folklore and he has collected and written down several hundred Igbo folktales. (As yet unpublished, unfortunately.) It is the themes and characters of these tales that have in-

spired some of these extraordinary drawings. In these drawings Uche Okeke introduces us into an entirely new world of imagination. They are far more phantastic and surreal than anything to be found in traditional Igbo art. These drawings represent a new interpretation of Igbo folklore by a modern and individual artist. These frightening figures contain human, animal and plant forms. Yet nothing is contrived, nothing seems artificial. The figures have grown. One is not surprised by the artist's statement: "I allow every new idea to grow and mature into clear vision. During this period which ranges from months to years, all sentimental elements of my vision naturally disappear revealing the heart of my idea. The visible result of my idea is generally urgently executed."

There is a satisfying completeness about his vision. These legendary creatures are not merely frightening shapes, they are characters with a life of their own and even if one is not acquainted with Igbo folklore one is tempted to invent new stories and adventures of Nza the smart, or Ojadili.

It is with these competent and original drawings that Uche Okeke first made his name in Nigeria. But he has recently proved himself to be an exciting painter with a fresh and vigorous approach.

Salahi





Malangatana

IBRAHIM SALAHI is easily one of the most mature and original African artists today. He received his formal art training in London at the Slade School of Art. When he returned to the Sudan he had acquired the techniques and the conventions of European academic art. His work in those days was not more and no less interesting than that of any gifted art student. Attractive landscapes, competent portraits—but the artist had not yet found himself. And he was extremely conscious of this fact. He felt that somehow or other he had to find his African roots again. But what were these roots? In Khartoum there was no tradition of woodcarving to draw on, as in West Africa, and there was of course no painting. Nor was there much other stimulus for an artist. Up till today the city has no art gallery and artistic work is nowhere employed on public buildings.

The artist had to withdraw into himself; and no wonder much of Salahi's work is extremely introspective. Nevertheless he was extremely sensitive to whatever stimulus he could receive locally. And looking around him, he found only two art forms that played any important part in the people's lives and they were: Arabic calligraphy and decorative pattern design such as is found on baskets, calabashes, etc.

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TO SOME ARTISTS the world is mainly a visual experience. They paint what they see, either reflecting it faithfully, or commenting on it. But there are other artists who are not so much interested in the surface of things or in the optical experience of the world. They are concerned with the things that lie *behind* appearances. They want to express feelings and ideas, and not only their conscious emotions but also their subconscious sensations and experiences.

Malangatana from Mozambique is such a painter. His pictures are not describing anything—they are visions. The world of Malangatana is not *pretty*. There is fear, suffering, horror. There is murder, witchcraft and rape. There are human beings, frightened, frustrated or savage. There are spirits: monstrous, bizarre, awe inspiring.

The first encounter with Malangatana gives us a deep shock. He shocks us, because we feel that he has got hold of some kind of undeniable truth, because what

he has to say is close to the bone.

Why is it, that one keeps coming back to his *overish* visions? Why do we not avoid the unpleasant truth of his monstrous world? Malangatana compels us, because he is absolutely *sincere*. Nothing is self-conscious; there is no pose. And as we get used to his startling images we discover among his apocalyptic visions a very human person: tender; poetic and very lonely.

The spirits and monsters in Malangatana's pictures are not folkloristic. They are not illustrations. Malangatana is chiefly concerned with himself. Like every modern artist he has to go through the agony of coming to terms with himself, of establishing his own set of values, his personal truth. It is the agony of the modern artist that is reflected in his work.

Although Malangatana is only 35 years old and has been painting for only three years, he already ranks among Africa's most important painters. ●

A page of Ibrahim Salahi's drawings and doodles will appear in The New African of 28 March 1964.

Text-Book for the Immature

H. B. Kimmel

The Morning After by Brian Crozier. (Methuen R3.60)

IF THE PEOPLES of the newly independent states are often immature, defiantly turning on their elders as they do, they need a text-book to guide them. They have it at last.

Impressionable Africans and Asians must know their seducer—this is communism while socialism and even planning are bad company too. The ex-guardian, now in the role of suitor, however, has nothing but honourable intentions. Mr. Crozier cannot understand why the new leaders, professing socialism, seem resistant to the appeal of private enterprise. As an apologist for capi-

talism he is far too patronising to win converts. The doubts one feels on reading 'I am a Western Liberal' in the preface are confirmed, rather embarrassingly, by indiscretions like 'that amiable irrationality which seems to be characteristic of Africa', 'the charm of Africa' and by anthropological howlers like 'the Burman mentality.'

To pick out all the absurd notions in this book would require more time than the 'few scattered weeks' it took the author to write it but here are two quotations most likely to antagonise even an ordinary 'liberal'—'there seems no reason whatever why it should be immoral for the Katanga to secede from the Congo and moral for, say, Dr. Banda's Nyasaland to secede from the Rhodesian Federation.'

About the 'Common Market' he has this to tell us—

'Sir Abubakar's attitude was as incomprehensible, in economic terms, as Dr. Nkrumah's'. Much is irrelevant in a book that attempts to review independence.

According to the author, India's prospects, despite a handicap of built-in socialism, are better than China's—after all, the tortoise reached the winning-post before the hare. One wonders whether Mr. Crozier drew on this African image intentionally. Whatever readership he had in mind, his ill-timed reminder that Kenyatta was the prophet of Mau Mau is not likely to promote the sales of the book in Kenya.

What will finally damn him, however, is a curious statement to the effect that there is not much substance to the 'myth' that the colonial powers grew rich at the expense of the colonies.

Projecting his ideas into a South African context, what would his solution be? His answer would lie in the observation: 'the federal system is the only one that can offer proper safeguards for minority peoples.'

If the South African orgy is segregated, one hopes, even if there is a hangover, that at least the morning after will be spent in mixed company. ●

To the Editor

The New World

SIR,—Can you help us to procure material for a new periodical which is going to appear in Denmark?

The name of the periodical will be *Den ny Verden* (The New World), and it is our intention to bring articles and literature from non-European countries to throw light on the cultural, economical and political conditions in those countries. We attach a great importance to obtaining as many and as good contacts as possible to people in these countries, and I therefore take the liberty of asking you if you would be willing and able to give us some information about material concerning South Africa, which might be suitable for our periodical.

Besides articles and literary contributions we are very much interested in getting as much illustration material as possible, photographs, drawings etc.

The periodical is going to appear five times a year, the first time in January 1964, and we would be very grateful to you for publishing this letter as soon as possible in order that we might, if possible, in one of the first numbers, bring some authentic material from South Africa.

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Salahi

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BOTH THESE ART forms formed important starting points in Salahi's search for new forms and expression. The swinging rhythm of Arabic writing is felt in nearly his entire work. To begin with he drew many pictures which were simply decorative treatments of Arabic words or verses from the Koran. Then the doodles which decorated the letters began to gain a life of their own and develop into figurative images. We begin to have haunted human images peering through bold sweeping calligraphic patterns. But even where the drawing is completely figurative one can recognise that the basic shapes have been derived from the Arabic alphabet.

The use of decorative pattern is most notable in some but can also be found in many other drawings. The basic elements of these patterns may actually be derived from traditional Sudanese designs, but Salahi makes these patterns swing in a way in which no traditional design can. These patterns seem to have *live*, breathing surfaces.

And here we must remark immediately on one important element in Salahi's work. The traditional formal elements he has used are in themselves aesthetic and rigid. Sala-

hi's line on the other hand is extremely *sensitive*, it moves along nervously, tenderly and its movement is highly expressive of the artist's personality. Salahi's line has a life and expression of its own which is quite separate from its representational function.

These then, are the formal and structural elements of Salahi's drawings. But in strange contrast to their aesthetic perfection which borders on elegance, is the powerful, disturbing contents. Beneath the balanced design there is a strong magical element.

Out of Salahi's pictures eyes are looking at us, or *through* us. Eyes that seem to be asking, or pleading, or warning. Eyes that make us feel ill at ease. To whom do these eyes belong? Are they human, spirits, gods or masks? In Salahi's work there are no clear divisions between the natural and the supernatural. The dead and the living, Gods and men seem to mix freely. It is this quality that gives to many of Salahi's images a mask like appearance. When I looked at these drawings for the first time I felt sure that some of the images were inspired by Ivory Coast masks, for example Senufo funeral masks. But a closer look at the masks shows that there is hardly any formal resemblance. Salahi's art is not derivative. It merely happens to evoke similar responses in us.

Salahi's images are not inspired by objects seen. They rise from the dreams and fantasies of the artist's mind. They are visions, disturbing and compelling visions. Having once come into contact with Salahi's images we shall live with them for the rest of our lives.