"Introduction," The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature

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THE HERO IN IGBO LIFE AND LITERATURE

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Introduction

The initial premise from which the papers collected in this book originated was the firm belief that, through the centuries, through the millennia, every human community is bound to have developed some key concepts on which they operate. These concepts usually arise out of the people's attempts to adjust themselves to, and conquer, their environment in order to survive and grow in it. It is necessary, occasionally, to review these archetypes of the people's imagination. There are two main reasons. One is to understand the key ideas that impel or motivate the people to react in certain ways to certain issues. Another reason is developmental. The archetypes of the people's imagination constitute instinctive mobilizers of the intellectual, emotional, psychic, and religious energies of the people. Developmental change represents a confrontation between the people's culture and another culture. In this situation, the managers of that change, who are to guide the people in the efficient channeling of their resources towards development, must put these concepts into consideration. The idea of the hero belongs to this category of concepts.

The second premise is that there are times when a collocation of events arises which provoke a people to begin to demand certain kinds of actions and personalities. In Africa, in Nigeria, in Igboland, recently, there has been a revival of the need, or the expression of the need, for such personalities. In the cross-roads in which we find ourselves, it would appear that only the heroic is likely to save us. When such a situation arises, an intellectual challenge confronts a people to define the concept of heroism, and to specify the kind of person for whom they are clamoring. If people need heroes because the problems that confront them have become too overwhelming, it is a challenge to the intellectuals within that community to ensure that the wrong kind of person, the charlatan, does not take over and project himself as the hero and perhaps lead the people away from developing their genuine talents.

Charlatanism is clearly the perverse alternative to heroism. The charlatan takes on the charisma of the hero but uses it, not to do anything for his people, but to sustain his own sense of power. The charlatan misleads a community into acknowledging a kind of prominence which is not valid or useful to the community. The need
for definition, therefore, becomes more prominent in our transitional environment in which modern ideals of heroism have not yet found their rapport with traditional concepts. One question, therefore, which we must face in our examination of the hero in Igbo life and literature is this: In our transitional context, will our heroes be the type our people had in the past? Will they be types copied from our colonial masters? Or, can we as intellectuals define the kind of heroism most relevant to our context so that the young can aspire to be the kind of heroes that would solve the monumental problems with which we are now faced.

The challenge before us in this exercise, then, has been to review our past and its contextual definition of heroism, to explore our present and speculate on what heroism should mean. By looking at our literature, both traditional and modern, we have attempted to investigate whether types of heroism have been defined in such a way that they can be recognized as archetypes of our imagination to which future generations can aspire. This exercise in self-exploration is supposed to provide the Igbo and their neighbors with an understanding of what heroism means to the Igbo people and what kinds of heroes they can expect.

The traditional language of heroism poses some questions. The Igbo term, di (lit. master; expert; controller; husband) is applied in a variety of contexts to indicate mastery, expertise, control. Thus we have, for example, the following: dia (master of the land), dibia (master of medicines), dike (master of strength, or brave warrior), diji (master of yam farming), dinta (master of hunting), dibunu (master of the house), dimgba (master of wrestling), diochi (master of wine-tapping), and dimkpa (expert kidnapper, or an able-bodied youth). The last of these probably derives from the context of kidnaping during the slave trade. But to what extent do these terms relate to heroism in those activities? Does the spread of di's indicate that perhaps there was no centralized heroism but that heroism was expected in every sphere of life? So what were the fields of heroism in the Igbo past? Was heroism declared because of one act like killing a leopard, or was heroism a state such that the person was available to be appealed to in all relevant situations? Is it a lasting relationship between an individual and his community or a state which somebody achieved for himself which was not supposed to give him any particular privilege?
Other questions arise about the position of the hero. What was the relationship between heroism and leadership in the community? Did the hero, by achieving an heroic act, take over the leadership of his people or did the hero subject his achievement to be recognized and acknowledged by a leadership that was not tied up with any concept of heroism?

Another question has to do with the beneficiary of heroism. Who was served by heroism? Was it heroic for somebody to do something for himself or was heroism recognized when an individual did something which was of extraordinary benefit to his community? Though, again, the hero was recognized and praised, were not some restraints placed by the community on him? Or did the hero become his own master with no strings tied by his people. Answers to some of these questions were to be sought in the project which gave rise to this book.

Present questions also confront us. During the days of partisan civilian politics, it became clear that, of all the major groups in Nigeria, the Igbo were the least centrally organized. Whereas others were capable of achieving hierarchy and a chain of command and privilege, the Igbo could not. Has this anything to do with the Igbo conceptions of heroism? On the other side of the coin, since heroes are made by the recognition which people give to them, have the Igbo been able to create any heroes? Have they been able to raise any people to the height where everybody else in Nigeria have had to accept that they are great? These questions bring us to the interface between scholarship and life.

To what extent can our study of the literature indicate the advantages and disadvantages of the nature of the Igbo concept of heroism, and how this relates to leadership? This has to be seen in terms of the dual nature of Igbo existence. At one level are the achievements within the Igbo culture area of individuals and groups. The other level relates to the achievement of the totality of the Igbo nation in the larger context of Nigeria. We need to explore in more detail the various facets of the people's contemporary life and see whether heroism in those areas is valuable in terms of the people and their national situation.

The core of what we discuss is the archetype of the people's imagination. This is most clearly manifested in literature. We should therefore, try to cover all the aspects of literature that relate to the
heroic ideals. We need to survey the oral literature - proverbs, songs, tales, myths and legends. We need to collect stories told about real people and discuss these in so far as to what people admired most as the qualities of leadership and heroism.

In looking at the written literature we should consider it as a source of drawing up these archetypes: what heroes or failed heroes the writers have presented to us. We also need to consider the writer as the creator, not only of heroic characters, but also of the consciousness of heroism. This refers to the inspirational factor which the writers can generate by energizing people’s imagination to make them aspire to heroism. Thirdly, we can see this literature as a reflection of the mood of the artists; the artist then becoming the finer point of the African intellectual. That is, explore what is the intellectual attitude to the possibility of the concept of heroism as reflected in the attitude of the writers to the possible heroes.

These were some of the social and intellectual challenges that propelled this project. So, what is the hero? What does one do to be a hero? Is one born a hero or bred into heroism? Or selected by his people to become their hero? Or does he stumble into heroism? What kind of characteristics are expected of the hero. What kind of suffering or punishment must he go through to become a hero? And what kind of achievement (personal or public) must you make, to be so recognized? In terms of the Igbo, are there social and historical pressures to recognize or fail to acknowledge heroes? Is heroism necessary? And if heroism is necessary, what has our literature tended to do to help our people recognize heroism, and give it appropriate place and regard in the community?

There is an intellectual challenge to define heroism in such terms that the generality of the people can recognize and acknowledge it and benefit from the advantages that arise from having heroes within the community.

A team of Igbo scholars selected by co-editor and originator of the project, Professor Nwoga, assembled at Nsukka in the long-vacation of 1983 to take up this challenge. After a series of brainstorming sessions in the residence of Professor Nwoga, the ideas which have given rise to the papers collected in this book gradually crystallized. Wider perspectives on the subject were also broached and these called for the widening of the original small circle of inquirers to include other scholars. As the project progressed over
the 1983-1984 and 1984-1985 academic years, more scholars who learnt about it from those already recruited rushed in their proposals and each new proposal opened up yet another important vista in the search for the definition of the Igbo hero. By the beginning of the 1985-1986 academic year, the responses had become so overwhelming that it became necessary to organize a forum for the exchange of ideas on the subject as a whole. Thus was born the idea of a series of seminars on Igbo Life and Culture. The theme of the first seminar which took place at Nsukka from May 15 to 17, was naturally "The Hero in Igbo Life and Literature". The seminar not only brought together all those already working on various aspects of the subject but a host of new enthusiasts and also a welter of new insights. At the end of the seminar, we had in our hands over forty papers from which the papers presented in this book were selected.

At the seminar itself, the papers were discussed under four sub-themes, namely:
1. The Igbo concept of the Hero:
2. The Hero in traditional Igbo Life and Literature:
3. Continuity and Change in the Igbo Heroic tradition: and
4. The Hero in Contemporary Igbo Life and Literature.

Although this proved to be a diachronically convenient arrangement, it nevertheless tended to oversimplify the issues raised and to distort or smooth out a number of subtle and at times complex relations between the arguments in some of the papers. It was clear, at the end of the seminar, that no single, orthodox "Igbo concept of the hero" exists: what we came up with were a wide variety of A.definitions" some of which turned out to be diametrically opposed to one another. Indeed, while a number of definitions affirmed the prevalence of the "archetypal hero" in Igbo Life and Literature, others denied the very existence of the phenomenon or by circumspection or equivocation arrived at other kinds of positions. In this book, therefore, we have decided on a different kind of grouping adopted at the seminar. In place of "The Concepts of the Hero", we have "Definitions" (Part I) and in place of the other three groupings, we have "Explorations" (Part II), "Projections" (Part III) and "Presentations" (Part IV), respectively. There is, of course, no foolproof mechanism, in these groupings, against overlapping: but they do possess an internal logic of the papers and texts presented.

In Part I (Definitions), we have four papers which attempt to
define the character of the hero in Igbo Life and Literature. It is true that definitions will be found in most other papers elsewhere in this book, but as will be seen, shortly, the papers in this group are specifically concerned with defining the Igbo hero while, in others, the definitions are more diffuse and rather subservient to the wider explorative, projective or textual-critical concerns of the papers.

As already mentioned above, the "Definitions" offered in the papers in this book present no single image of the Igbo hero. In Chapter 1 ("Heroes and Charlatans"), Nwoga presents the Igbo hero in the context of the socio-political realities of modern Nigeria, focussing on the paradox of the villain masquerading as hero, the charlatan who, in a state of anomie, the culturally alienated post-civil war Igbo society might mistakenly rally around as hero.

The presence of such charlatans and the psychic predisposition for the Igbo to accept them as hero does not however suggest that there have been no heroes in Igbo life and literature over the millennia. In Chapter 2 (The Archetypal Hero in Igbo Oral Narratives) Azuonye outlines traits and incidents in the life of the Igbo hero of tradition which clearly fit into patterns of the kind found in the study of lives of heroes not only in other African societies, but in Indo-European and other cultures. A similar approach to the definition of the Igbo hero will be found in Chapter 12 (Okafor) and Chapter 23 (Chukwuma). From this universal perspective, Azuonye's paper debunks the idea that the Igbo are "a people without heroes" and argues that the Igbo are rather a people with "forgotten" or "neglected" heroes, an argument which harks back to the predisposition to accept charlatans as heroes discussed in Nwoga's paper. For Azuonye, the inborn potentiality to project the heroic image, has, in the Igbo case, been redirected under the pressure of colonialism and religious conversion towards the acceptance of alien heroes. This, it would appear is the psychological reality which underlines what Inyama, in Chapter 19, describes as the "missing hero" in Igbo literature and what Maduakor, in Chapter 21 describes as "the death of the hero" in Igbo life and literature. Inyama's "missing hero" is clearly the hero of tradition discussed by Azuonye and Chukwuma in Chapters 2 and 23—the kind of hero which has survived in the consciousness and contemporary literature of other societies but which has all but disappeared in Igbo consciousness and contemporary literature. Maduakor goes further to pronounce such
an archetype dead, making it difficult for the Igbo to appreciate and hold on to a leadership ideal conforming to traditional heroic models. Could this be the reason for "the prevalence of the failed hero in the Igbo consciousness" earlier discussed by Nwankwo in Chapter 20?

The "failed hero" syndrome is indeed not only a threat to Igbo solidarity in the socio-political environment of the Nigerian State in which the Igbo find themselves; it is also a potential threat to the very survival of the nation. While other national groups are busy clubbing together and rallying round acknowledged leaders and heroes, the Igbo press and other media as well as the putative Igbo leaders themselves and their followers are seen to be busy cutting to size anybody that appears to be emerging to any significant position of power. Nobody appears to remember the adage that "Egbuo dike n'ogu ulo ehi ogu ama echete ya" (If the hero is defeated in the home front, when the battle erupts outside the home, he will be remembered). More and more, the Igbo seem to be manifesting in their behavior and statements, the maxim that "nze adighi ibe mma" (People do not like the accolades won by their peers). On the other hand, those who struggle up into prominence, whether because of the lack of a tradition of authority, or because they felt that they tended to be selfish and overbearing. It has almost become a vicious circle. A continuous tradition of heroism based on selfless and self-sacrificing service to the community begets ritualized gratitude and celebration which in turn inspire the urge to heroic endeavors ad infinitum. But caught up, as we seem to be in a tradition of charlatanism based on selfish and exploitative disservice to the community, one can only look forward to ritualized ingratitude and celebration which in turn inspire the urge to villainous alienation from communal goals. The papers in this book do not offer any explicit key to the breaking of this vicious circle but in their critical exposes of the parameters of heroism in traditional society vis a vis the tendencies in the contemporary society, there are both suggestions that a reach-back again to pre-colonial tradition might be salutary.

The traditional parameters are defined by Egonu in Chapter 3 (The Hero in the Igbo Folk Imagination). He stresses the idea of merit or personal achievement, conformity with and respect for social norms, and the impermanence of the heroic status. Because
there is no place for the idea of "once a hero always a hero" in the Igbo ontological scheme, anyone who wishes to be acknowledged a hero must maintain a continuous string of personal achievements for the benefit of the society in order to continue to remain a hero in the eyes of his people; otherwise the individual concerned would lose the heroic status. In his historical overview of "Heroes in Igbo Society" (Chapter 4), Oriji accepts these parameters in broad terms but focuses on the relativity of the specific types of achievement in various past and contemporary historical epochs which the Igbo evaluate as heroic and, projecting into the 1990's he suggests that with the continuation of what he calls "slumpflation", the "new heroes will be honored by their knowledge and creativity which may help Nigeria become a self-reliant nation". Such heroes would of course be "Nigerian heroes" rather than "Igbo heroes" unless one envisages a time when "Nigeria" and "Igbo" aspirations would be exactly coincident.

The various views presented in part 1, of heroism and the hero in Igbo life and literature, are reinforced, extended or modified in various ways in the rest of the essays in Parts II and III and illustrated by the texts presented in part IV.

Part II (Explorations) examines the manifestations or explorations of the Igbo heroic idea in various genres of Igbo traditional arts, myth and ritual. The forms explored include Igbo masquerade drama (Ugonna, Chapter 5), Igbo dramatic rituals and festivals (Okafor, Chapter 6 and Amankulor, Chapter 7), Igbo folktales (Ikonne, Chapter 8 and Acholonu, Chapter 9), Igbo heroic legends, traditional and contemporary (Ezi-Nwanyi Patricia Nwoga, Chapter 10 and Okeke-Ezigbo, Chapter 11), Igbo Minstrelsy (Okafor, Chapter 12), Igbo oral literature generally (Emenanjo and Onwuerne, Chapter 13 and Egudu, Chapter 14) and Igbo ritual symbolism and myth (Aniakor, Chapter 15 and Agu, Chapter 16).

Ugonna (Chapter 5) is concerned with the ambivalent attitude of the Igbo to the human hero and how this has given rise to the emergence of Mmonwu (masked performances). Like other human societies, "The Igbo", says Ugonna "needs the hero; but, peculiarly, the Igbo cannot accommodate the hero since the hero demands obedience and servitude which the (democratic and egoistic) Igbo man does not spontaneously give. And since the Igbo cannot readily serve a human hero or indeed any other human except their parents,
they transferred their parental hero worship to a masked personage who, they have been enculturated to believe, is an emanation of their hallowed ancestors. The passing away of the traditional society has given rise to the breaking down of this mythic and ritualized projection, hence the anomalies which seems to have overwhelmed the Igbo society.

But whilst the pursuit of the heroic ideal tends, in general, to bring out the best in the individual towards some concrete achievement beneficial to the society, some of the explorations presented here reveal the negative sides of the quest. The Igbo oicotype of the universal archetype of the trickster hero represents not only a paradox but the reality of moral ambivalence in Igbo society (Chapter 9, Acholonu); as a role model for behavior in Igbo society, the trickster archetype, representing extremes of cleverness and foolishness as well as of resourcefulness and machiavellianism, may account for the situation in which sheer villainy may at times be appreciated as heroism. A social ethos informed by such negative values may admit of extremes of cruelty as part of a general lack of tolerance for weaker beings, vices of the kind exemplified in the behavior of Achebe's Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart. In Chapter 15 (Aniakor), we see how the artist who carves an Ikoro - the ritual symbol of a community's heroic spirit - must be waylaid, on his way home and sacrificed to the ikoro he has carved so that he will not be able to carve another ikoro for any other community. Here, as in many such instances, the pursuit of heroism in Igbo society appears, from another ethical perspective, to be coterminous with ritualized criminality.

A major paradox arising from these explorations is represented by the papers of Chidi Ikonne (Chapter 8) and Ezi-nwanyi Patricia Nwoga (Chapter 10): while Ikonne perceives a surprising paucity of heroines in a society in which womanhood is commonly defied and attributes this to patriarchal male-chauvinism, Patricia Nwoga's exploration of Mbaise and other traditions reveals the existence of heroic, at times, Amazonian women who dominated world of men, a fact which turns up readily in other studies, especially studies of the heroic traditions of the Ohafia Igbo (Azuonye, Chapters 2 and 27). This is not the place to attempt to resolve the paradox represented by these mutually contradictory explorations. Suffice it to say that the image of the subjugated and dominated women in the Igbo
folk tale seems to represent a role-model created by a latter-day patriarchal order which does not appear to have had the power of overriding the essentially matriarchal foundations of the Igbo society and the republican order which leaves room for the achiever, irrespective of age, sex or status, to take the center-stage in the affairs of the society. One question that has however not been broached by any of these explorations is the rationale for the exclusiveness, to men, of the ritual symbol, Ikenga, the archetype of the hero, in a society which appears to maintain such an open-door to hero hood. Or do the womankind in Igbo society have their own counterpart to the Ikenga of which little is known at the present time? At the conclusion of seminar on which this book is based, such questions were left to be answered in the second seminar on "Women in Igbo Society" (held in 1987).

In Part III (Projections), we move into the area of contemporary social and political realities. A conspectus of the various contributions here reveals a consistent "failure" by Igbo leaders today to project the archetypal images explored in Part II. This failure, it is argued in various chapters - Chapter 17 (Edith Ihekweazu), Chapter 18 (Chidi Maduka), Chapter 19 (Nnadozie Inyama), Chapter 20, (Chimalum Nwankwo) and Chapter 21 (Obi Maduakor) - has been rather tragic for the Igbo man's realization of his communal best self in an effort to adjust to the challenges of a modern, multinational state, especially since the end of the civil war. The archetypal hero of the kind found in traditional Igbo epics and which in other cultures have continued to manifest themselves in modern popular literature as in James Bond, is clearly "missing" argues Inyama (Chapter 19) in the modern Igbo novel, a situation which underlines the tragic break in continuity with a nobler and more purposive past. This situation seems to explain what Nwankwo (Chapter 20) describes as the prevalence of the failed hero in the Igbo consciousness". Divorced, as it were, from our traditional heroic roots, the contemporary Igbo sees the hero as a threat and rather than celebrate him as was the case in the past, he tends to discredit him. Against this background, one can better appreciate Obi Maduakor's challenging discussion of the Death of the Hero in Igbo Life and Literature (Chapter 21) and Chidi Maduka's examination of leadership, however of the Igbo intellectual (Chapter 18). Clearly the tending of modern Igbo society seems to negate the possibilities, projected by Egudu (Chapter 14) of
remodeling and revitalizing contemporary Igbo leadership by
drawing from the archetypes revealed in our oral literature.

Part IV (Presentations) includes full length texts with English
translations and notes featuring representative examples of the Igbo
hero from heroic legends and epics (Okpewho, Chapter 22;
Akanazu, Chapter 24; Azuonye and Udechukwu, Chapter 25;
Ezinando, Chapter 26; Azuonye, Chapter 27). Some of these texts
have been published elsewhere but most are appearing in print for
the first time in this book. Apart from supporting and reinforcing
the arguments of the papers, especially those in Parts I and III, they
provide autonomous evidence which will go a long way in altering a
number of preconceptions especially in European sources about the
provenance and existence of heroic literature in non-monarchical
societies.

It is indeed rather impossible to exhaust the theoretical and
other questions which the subject of this book provokes. But it
would appear that the basic questions raised at the beginning of our
project have been answered, at any rate up to a certain degree.
Clearly, the concept of the hero exists in Igbo life and there is a large
body of literature, presenting and promoting this concept. This
includes legends, myths, epics and even folktales and folksongs. The
heroic idea is also reinforced in panegyric and elegiac poetry and
conversely through satire which lampoons anti-heroical behavior.
Our findings however reveal that there has been an unfortunate
discontinuity in the heroic concept between our traditional and
modern literatures and life-patterns. Thus discontinuity appears
however to have come about as a result of the civil war. Prior to the
civil war no such continuity appears to have existed.

Igbo leadership, exemplified by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (popularly
known as Zik), appears rooted in the traditional heroic ideal and
Igbo leaders of the nationalists era were as celebrated as their
traditional forbears. Such heroic adulation seems to have ended with
General Odumegwu Ojukwu, the leader of the movement for the
secession of present day eastern states of Nigeria including the
greater part of Igboland under the name of the Republic of Biafra.
The end of the civil war (1967-1970), waged by the Federal Military
Government of Nigeria to bring back the eastern states to Nigeria,
saw a completely new situation marked by the emergence of
alienated leaders such as Ukpabi Asika, the Administrator of the
East Central State—One of the three states into which the territory claimed by the Biafran secessionists was divided by the Nigerian Federal Military Government. As summed up by Echeruo:

There is a difference between a defeated sovereign nation and a defeated non-sovereign people. A defeated sovereign nation would lick its wounds and begin to re-build. Its leaders would speak to its people - talk of reassurance, even if it is overstretched. There was no leader to do that hence the loss of the impulse to re-emerge, that enterprising spirit. I don’t think it would go on for very long. It was the consequence of a genuine leadership not having emerged that was partly to blame for all the suffering. Chief Asika, unfortunately, was partly to blame for all the suffering. Chief Asika, unfortunately, was not the figure to say to ex-Biafrans; 'We fought, we lost'. He had no way of saying that. He was in no position to say that. He could only say, 'You fought, you lost'. And he did say that. And therefore, he drifted apart from the people and the people from their roots. (Nsukka Journal of the Humanities, No. 1, June 1987, pp. 172-173).

It is however instructive that Asika and his mode of leadership have been completely rejected. The Igbo psyche is not completely turned inside out. There is a clear limit to the privileges which the Igbo will allow their leaders and even their gods. Heroism or divinity, for the Igbo, can only be sustained through continuous virtue and selfless service to the community, as Egonu (Chapter 3) has argued. Once a hero or god turns against his people, that hero or god would be swept away. The phenomenon of the missing, failed or dead hero in contemporary Igbo life and literature does not seem to arise so much from the beleaguering of the Igbo psyche as from the emergence of anti-heroes, traitors, charlatans and villains where the hero should have been. The re-emergence of what Echeruo describes as "genuine leadership" will, it is to be expected, restore traditional conceptions of the hero to Igbo life and literature.
Notes on the Contributors

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Jas Ndakaku Amankulor, who died in New York in January 1994 while serving as a Visiting Professor at New York University, was a Professor of Dramatic Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Chike Aniakor, currently a Visiting Fellow at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, is a Senior Lecturer in Art History and former Acting Head, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Chukwuma Azuonye taught oral literature at the Universities of Ibadan and Lagos, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he chaired the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages; a Senior Fulbright Fellow in the Department of Folklore and Folklife at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, he is currently Chair of the Department of Black Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

Helen Chukwuma, a Professor of Oral Literature and former Head of the Department of English Studies, University of Port Harcourt, was a Senior Fulbright Fellow in the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio (1991-1992).

I.T.K. Egonu, a Professor of French in the Department of Languages, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, was a Commissioner in the Government of the Imo State of Nigeria.

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Edith Ihekweazu, who was a Professor of German Language and Literature in the Department of languages, and was Dean of Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, was killed in a motor accident in October, 1991.

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