

NSUKKA ART SCHOOL AND POSTMODERNIST IMPACTS ON MODERN NIGERIAN ART

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31621.83688

Abstract

Postmodernism has permeated modern Nigerian and because it is a violation of the norms of modernism, critics and art commentators have expressed their worries over the negative impacts, as a result of its various paradigms – techno art, conceptual art, installation art, video art and performance art. In their own opinions, it is empty, ephemeral, highfalutin and redundant and will affect the commercial value of artwork created in this genre or category. They also raised the issue of identity, provenance, creative colonization, as well as the relevance of its historic and anthropological legacies. Based on this, they are considering the future of art and artists creating postmodernist artwork. For intervention, the study examines postmodernist art in the Nsukka School and demonstrates its positive impacts and contributions to art development in Nigeria. Data for the study were collected from extant literatures and internet sources. The data were historically analyzed using technical and stylistic methods. The study found that postmodernist artwork not only exposes practicing artists to the global art spaces through art exhibitions but also enriches them through sales by some notable auction houses. Again, the works are acquired by some notable galleries and art collectors and have attracted significant attention in the media, the simple reasons this article argues are more than enough to show that postmodernism has impacted positively, therefore, lays to rest the politics of postmodernism, substantially.

Keywords: Postmodernist art, impacts, Nsukka School, modern Nigerian art

Introduction

In order for the discussion to be lucid and to also put a historical trace on the trajectory of the art development in Nigeria, it will be good to address the variable 'modern Nigerian art,' 'Nsukka School' and 'postmodernism.' Even though, modernity had been traced to the indigenous Bini artists of the sixteenth century who incorporated in their art forms, Euro-Christian concepts and symbols brought in Nigeria by the Portuguese (Uche Okeke, 1978), modern Nigerian art started in the early 20th century from Aina Onabolu (1882 - 1963), a self-taught artist, who later enrolled in formal art training in London and Paris academies, respectively. He later taught art in Nigerian secondary schools and “badgered the colonial government into appointing another art teacher to assist with the responsibility of instructing an increasing number of art students in Nigerian secondary schools. Kenneth Murray, the individual appointed in 1927 to fulfill this objective, provided a counter-narrative to Onabolu's Anglo-Nigerian prescriptions for art through his training of five pioneer students, one of whom was Ben Enwonwu (1921-1994). Ogbachie (2003, p. 179) noted that “he wanted them to invent a new form of production in relation to their new contexts of practice based on valorization of indigenous rural culture.” It yielded positive results in the sense that it catalyzed and revolutionized the art activities of Onabolu and refocused the direction of art pedagogy and practice and laid the foundation upon which new artistic era in Nigeria was built (Asogwa, 2012). As Ikwemesi (1999, p. 21) notes, “Murray's idea was later

appropriated most positively by the Zaria Art Society, a group of radical art students at the Nigerian Collage of Arts and Science, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) in the 1950s. It was to crystallize in the hands of its members, especially Uche Okeke, who described the idea as “natural synthesis,” and explored it further through Uli paradigm.” What can be deduced here is that it was Okeke's natural synthesis of the Zaria Art Society; modern Nigerian took its root, grew and diversified. It is convenient to say that stemming from Murray's transformational art training in the 1930s, the evolution of the concept of natural synthesis, no doubt, is Murray's baby, its art and theory, a codification of Murray's aesthetic philosophy and pedagogy (Ogbechie, 2008; Egonwa, 2001).

Nsukka School is an ideological nomenclature of the art department that stemmed from Uli idiom – body and wall paintings associated with the Igbo women of eastern Nigeria which was introduced as a creative resource by Uche Okeke (1933-2016) when he joined the teaching staff in 1970. Nsukka School is known for its crusading influences and contributions to art and national development (Oloidi, 2008, p. 14) because over the years, it has been playing a pivotal, if not a significant role in the development of modern Nigeria art. Because its products namely; Obiora Udechukwu, Tayo Adenaike, Olu Oguibe, Nnenna Okore, Ozioma Onuzulike, Bright Eke, Dilomprizulike, to mention but a few are scattered all over the world, doing exploits, it has become a movement with global manifestations (Oloidi, 2008). By this, it has made its creative intelligence and ideological self-felt, not only in Nigeria, but also in Euro-American nations. For instance, the focus on the creative efforts of Nsukka art by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA in 1997, is a clear testimony of this creative exploits and manifestations (Oloidi, 2002). Following this, The Nsukka School is critical in the development of modern art in Nigeria, following her unique modernist disposition (Chellaram, 2021).

With Uli, Uche Okeke sowed effective seed that pertained to identity (Agbayi, 2003) in 1970, immediately after the Nigerian-Biafran. Uli idiom became the only creative pool from where all creative ideas were drawn. It is to be noted that it is from Uli art that all kinds of creative vision emanated and was to later lead to the unprecedented “outburst of the experimental and exploratory spirit in a radical new direction” (Onuzulike, 2001, p. 7) that begot postmodernist art. Postmodernism is a cross cutting current of ideas that dissolves and violates all known art and media boundaries. It stimulates the intellect towards violating the convention, the more reason the “Nsukka artist constantly finds himself on the brink of creative necessity, making idealistic and artistic interface quite workable” (Alu, et al., 2024, p. 56). Its various paradigms are techno art, conceptual art, video art, performance art and installation art which Onuzulike (2002, p. 13) writes that “its mode has come under intense criticism as mimetic of Western artistic currents irrelevant to immediate concerns in a country defined by gross social, economic and technological underdevelopment.” For the fact that “yet there has remained an absence of meaningful critical assessment or scrutiny of the emergent installation artists as a focal point for resolving such notion of (ir)relevance and/or (in) authenticity” (Onuzulike, 2002, p. 13), the study relying on qualitative research method seeks examining the positive impacts of postmodernism, most especially to assuage critics and writers fears that postmodernism are anti-art, antithesis to classical cultural heritages of Nigeria and prioritizes global discourse at the expense of pressing local issues (Ikwemesi, 1997; Ikwemesi, 1998a; Ikwemesi, 1998b; Kalilu & Oladugbagbe 2022; Duniya & Adewumi, 2023). What these writers fail to understand is that the “artists who successfully engaged the postmodernist mode have applied it towards solving problems that are related to African and her peculiar circumstances. An “artist like El Anatsui has dedicated his work to the interrogation of African history: slavery, modern day emigration to the west and other

contemporary issue, using clay, wood and lately metal, all sourced from his immediate environment. Dilomrezulike has devoted most of his work to the problems that assail the contemporary Nigerian urban dwellers (Eneorji & Eseyin, 2016).

From Uche Okeke's Modernist Aesthetics to El Anatsui's Postmodernist Art

As mention earlier, "Uche Okeke's entry into the art department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, gave him, naturally the opportunity to present, or even impose, his already well-bred and tested ideology of Zarianism. His professional and ideological position centered on curriculum domestication, art functionality, art experimentation and art experimentation" (Oloidi, 2003, p. 48). The Uli idiom which Uche Okeke had been developing about eight years earlier became a source of artistic inspiration (Oloidi 2003) and made it possible for exploration, experimentation, interrogation and synthesis of this creative resource (Odoh, 2011).

By 1977, the art department of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, had already set a glaring example in intense artistic experimentation. The evidence of strong ideological, innovative commitment and theorization became very clear and the art emanating from Nsukka School set the pace for total change in naturalistic approach and restless search for the new creative voice (Oloidi, 2003).

In 1982, El Anatsui started a new mode of art production as a result of his restless experimental energy he was developing in the late 1970s, especially with his focus on manganese cum ceramic sculpture. This exhibition, Broken Pot was its outcome. It was also during this period that he started experimenting with wood slashing, burning and grouping (Oloidi, 2003). Fulfilled but after clarity, he developed the eyes of eagle and saw beyond the ordinary. He began to use aluminum, copper wire and nylon rope in the execution of wonderful works of art.

As noted Kleinbeaur (1971), work of art is "a man-made object with aesthetic significance; an aesthetic object which has resulted from a high level of craftsmanship." El Anatsui became recognized for his appropriation of craft ideas in the execution of captivating works of art. Notable art galleries and museums in United States of America, Brazil, Germany, London and other places around the globe started collecting his artworks and writers such as Tina Yapelli, John Picton, Gerald Houghton, Yukuya Kawaguchi, Elizabeth Lalousebek, Simon Njami, Elizabeth Peri Willis, Olu Oguibe and Anatsui's began writing about his artistic exploits. As a proof of his art influence, he was among the 100 most influential People in 2023, as published by Times Magazine, USA. In 2020, he was award Skowhegan Model for Sculpture, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, USA and in 2015; Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement Award, 56th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, among others.

So, from 1970 to date, Nsukka School has been experiencing dynamic levels of creative activities; leading to many unpredictable creative shifts and adventures that is yielding breathtaking artwork that crystallizes the art school into one of the most respected in modern Nigerian art scene to the extent that its relocation and domestication of ideas, tools and techniques has become a creative sanity in our cultural and national environment (Aniakor, 1991). Unequivocally, there are more than enough evidences on the outcome of postmodernist art creation in Nsukka School. This is because Nsukka artists are ceaselessly drawing from the fountain of this artistic mode or genre as they are being swept along by the tide of postmodernist art. These artists, no doubt, exhibit the aesthetic, conceptual and ideological affirmations of postmodernist art. They are true to their craft and purposeful in their individual approaches.

El Anatsui: Performance art, Installation art and Influence

As pointed out earlier, with *Broken Pots* and *Offerings to the Weather*, El Anatsui flagged off postmodernist sculpture and performance art in Nigeria. One important goal of the *Broken Pots* series, notes Oguiibe (2004, p. 98) “was to remind the viewer that the relics are not only artifact but reliquary also; a reservoir of memory from which the past, like an encryption, may be decoded and reassembled into narratives.” He further noted that:

With this earthy substance, with grog composed of crushed potshards and using manganese trailings, sometimes melting in pieces of glass, he created terra-cotta works, that are dark gray and blackish in colour. These ceramic works resulted in the well-known exhibition in Enugu and Nsukka, and in the 1982 exhibition at the Goethe Institute in Lagos. Anatsui took to the idea of the inevitability of destruction and continuity, death and immortality, hate and love. Although a broken pot does not return to its original shape, it is not negated. It passed on to another level of existence (Oguiibe, 2004).

Some of the works consist of pots which were deliberately worked to reveal their inner organic content as a sculptural mass, as if a dress is worn inside out. The result was quite refreshing (Aniakor, 2005).



Fig. 1: El Anatsui, *Offerings to the Weather*, performance, 1984. © The artist.

Offering to the Weather (Fig.1) is quite potent. Ottenberg (1997) noted that *Offering to the Weather* was a huge mound of earth on top of which El Anatsui had placed a large black pot he made on top of it and called it *Alter*. In the performance, six persons covered themselves with white shawls. They carried out a ritual to the weather spirits. Ottenberg views it as an excellent example of Anatsui's ability to innovate and one of his most postmodern works.

Also, El Anatsui's body of work created with aluminum stripes and other tin metal stripes, copper wire and bottle tops is evocative large size installation sculptures (See figure 2, for example). In recent times, “Anatsui's experiments in these metal sculpture installations have overshadowed most of his earlier works in wood, mostly because of the astonishing beauty and technical sophistication of these new art works” (Okeke, 2012, p. 204). The creative process of these sculptures involves the use of copper wire to string together hundreds of bottle caps and aluminum strips of different

colours. For Okeke, they have the flow of cloth hanging on colourful filigree. The “colourful, fabric-like wall sculptures juxtapose not only the social and political but also the cultural history of Africa, borrowing from the stylistic and conceptual idioms of Western art practice.” In the exhibition catalogue, *Earth Growing Roots*, Tina Yupeli says “these shimmering textiles allude to the use of both cloth and liquor as currency by European slave traders on the West Africa coast.” She further noted that they refer to the traditional woven Kente cloth and stamped Adrinka symbols of Ghana, the reductive imagery of geometric abstract painting, the pressing ecological issues of consumerism and waste, and the historical and ongoing impacts of the global marketplace. The works crease, drape, undulate and fold with infinite variety in order to adapt to, and conversely transform their environments.



Fig. 2: AG + BA, aluminium, copper wire and nylon rope, dimensions variable, 2014 © The artist.

In terms of mentorship, El Anatsui “is a creative mentor to many notable Nsukka-trained artists whose concern for the impact of man's modern technology and consumerist culture on the natural environment has been very significant and thought-provoking” (Onuzulike, 2005, p. 43). For Oloidi (2003, p. 7) “what have forced Anatsui's postmodernist formalism high up on the agenda for a great many artists, have been the exhibitions of mainly young artists' works that he has curated.” In 1999, Anatsui curated an exhibition, *Promoter of Nigerian Art 6* in Goethe Institute, Lagos. Onuzulike (2001, p. 9) reports that “the multi-purpose hall of the German Cultural Centre was nearly filled to the brim with 'strange' metaphorical works..., propelling the Lagos 'vanity' collectors into an endless roam around the exhibition hall.” Also, at Mydim and Nimbus Galleries, Lagos, El Anatsui presented 10 artists in the 'New Energies' exhibition in 2001. According to Okeke (2012, p. 74) “this exhibition revealed media process and gestures, emphasized an ideology of recycilia of that transform discarded consumerist waste such as plastics, wires, cans, cartons,

papers, metals sheets, and other popular industrial products into stunning and fascinating works of art. It was with their visual diagnoses of ecological feature that they in fact; present a system for reengineering the art environment through the use of recycled media.” Their artwork amazed the audience. This exhibitions triggered controversy among critics. But irrespective of the controversy, El Anatsui encouraged artists to delve into the creation of postmodernist art because it is the art of tomorrow (Eneorji and Eseyin, 2016).

Textile Agency in the Select Installation Art of Nsukka Artists

In Nsukka School, textile art hinged only on tying and dyeing of fabrics, printing and so on. However, over a decade ago, due to the overbearing influence of El Anatsui, some artists have extricated themselves from the conventional textile production and are using both textile and non-textile materials such as wood, cotton, ropes, metal, acrylic-yarns and appliquéés to create works of art. This has widened the horizon and extended the frontiers of textile art, as works of art that is purely experimental both in forms and contents have sparked off a radical shift to the use of textiles to make socio-political and socio-economic statements; the reason textile art has achieved a level of acceptance and creative popularity. Because of this, the historical notion that textile is merely a utilitarian clothing material ceases to apply. It is the avid desire and the restive search for a new mode of textile expressions and directions that culminated in the total rejection of the stereotype, thereby beginning the culture of postmodernist textile art.

To buttress this point, ten installation pieces out of many deserve to be discussed because of their self-sufficient nature and uniqueness. Chime and Nwanna (2023, p. 29) observe that the “growing textile wastes in landfills and streets of major cities in Nigeria have become a general concern. In view of the problem, it has become necessary to rescue some of these textile waste materials from landfills and streets and turn them into art by up-cycling those textile waste materials.” One of such works of art is Humphry Umezurike, popularly called Dilomprizulike's Wear and Tear (Fig. 3) made of discarded clothes. For him, it exposes the often overlooked and underrated elements of the African-Urban communal life which largely influence it. The alienated situation of the African in his own society becomes tragic. Because of struggle inside him, a consciousness of living with the complications of an imposed civilization is not in doubt. No longer can he go back to pick up the fragments of his father's shattered culture; neither is he equipped enough to keep pace with the white-man's world. With this and other installations, Dilomprizulike who is a product of Nsukka School has gained a prominent position in the international art scene, to the extent that in 2005, his work was exhibited in Africa Remix at London's [Hayward Gallery](#). [He was a resident at the Gasworks Gallery where he prepared a piece for the Victoria and Albert Museum. With local rubbish, he created Busy Street for the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in Israel in 2010. The piece was a reflection on Israel's consumer society. The above impacts positively, on modern Nigerian art.](#)



Fig. 3: Wear and Tear, discarded clothes, 2000. © The artist

Textile is central element in the artwork of Eva Obodo. This can be glimpsed from Prisoner's Clothesline (Fig. 4). In this work, the artist sewed trousers; blouses, shirts and knickers with jute and used blue, yellow and pink dye to draw some Uli symbols on them for surface enrichment. These "clothes" are in turn, hung on a rope tied to two vertical poles on wooden pedestals to form a free standing installation. The installation provokes deeper conceptual meanings and as such is located within the confines of postmodernist art, given that installation, assemblage and grouping of textile elements are purely the hallmark of postmodernist art.

Obodo has exhibited his postmodern installation in Kó and Afikaris Galleries, Lagos and Paris, respectively. His work, Crosses too many to Carry has been sold by Afikaris. He won the 2013 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship Award, 2002 Dakar Biennale, Senegal and 2001 Osaka Triennale, Japan Awards, a positive impact of postmodernist art on modern Nigeria art.



Fig. 4: Prisoner's Clothesline, 2021, Jute, dye, cloth, wood, metal, plastic
127 1/2 x 83 1/2 x 33 7/8 in 324 x 212 x 86 cm. © The artist.

Writes Thackara (2018) “Nnenna Okore engages in a “slow, arduous” process of weaving, dying, winding, and teasing materials like burlap, wire and paper – sometimes sourced from West Africa – to create dramatic textile installations that resemble the undulating fabrics forms of artist, El Anatsui, who was once Okore's teacher. *Down to Earth* (Fig. 5) suggests a vivid red whirlpool giving way to a waterfall, or even the breakdown of (human) organic matter.”

Okore has received international acclaim for her art. She has exhibited her artworks in some notable museum like Mattatuck Art Museum and Memphis Brook Museum, among other. She has received upon other numerous national and international awards the prestigious Fulbright Scholar Award in 2012. She has carried out time-honoured commissions, as well as art projects, of which a good example is the “And the World Keeps Turning” installation in Brugge Triennale, Belgium in 2021, impacting positively on modern Nigerian art.



Fig. 5: *Down to Earth*, burlap and dye, 2017. © The Artist.

In *Hanging in balance* (Fig. 6), some sticks have been joined together and intricately wrapped with fabrics. Also wrapped with fabrics are two round shape objects and placed in between the sticks. Here, the fragility of human essence was employed, making thin branches to bear heavy load (round objects), which is a typical example of how life hangs in a balance. Erasmus Onyishi deployed wrapping technique to bring three-dimensional objects to life, thereby, creating artworks that break away from the convention. He has won the 2014 edition of the National Art Competition organized by the African artists Foundation (AAF) and the Nigerian Breweries. This shows the positive impact of postmodernist art in Nigeria.



Fig. 6: Hanging in balance, wood, rubber, and fabric, 2013. © The artist.

On Top (Fig. 7) hankers after the quest for survival, depicting somewhat, a survival of the fittest, where those privileged to get to the top, stay put while those who are unlucky remain at the bottom, fighting to climb the ladder to get to the top - a scenario classifying individuals into social classes. For Nnorom, these social classes thus, hold some truth and conspiracy, binding them together. Nnorom's body of work is typically constructed from pieces of Ankara/African wax print fabric scraps collected from tailors or cast-off clothes from homes along with waste foam from furniture workshops that are wrapped and stitched into bubbles of various colours and sizes. Through technical processes such as sewing, rolling, tying, stringing, and suspending, he navigates the boundaries between textiles, painting and sculpture in a poetic fashion. Among other residences, Nnorom has completed a residency in the UK at the Art House, before he was announced the overall winner of the M & C Saatchi Group and Saatchi Change Prize Gallery Art – a testament to the positive impact of postmodernist art.



Fig. 7: On Top, cloths, 2021. © The artist.

Figure 8, is entitled *Idi n' otu: The last Resort*. In this installation, the artist dyed into some pieces of jute flags belonging to different countries and used them to cover a cone-like structure formed with sticks. On the top of the structure are bunch of sticks out of which five flags are hoisted to fly at full mast. Right at the center of the of it, is a woven fiber dyed with green, ochre and brown colours that cascades down, covering the entrance of the tent. The work forms an impression of a nest and at the artist uses it as a clarion call for unity amongst nations of the world. This work and others are testimony that Chukwuemeka Nwigwe has joined the league of the emerging artists who have cut their creative teeth and are also putting on the garment of postmodernism in Nsukka Art School.



Fig. 8: *Idi n' otu: The last Resort*, fabrics, jute, sticks, twine, metal, 2008. © The artist.

Odetta Žukauskien (2023, p. 2) observed that “the textile approach is formed through art practice, encouraging experiments with materials, metaphoric concepts, and ideas.” She further observed that “postmodern thinking has liberated textile art from the narrow definition of applied art. Fabric, as a warm, soft, and flexible material that absorbs personal and collective experiences, has inspired the intimate and monumental works.” With knitting method that required a lot of concentration and tenacity, Rita-Doris Uba grouped, assembled, as well as installed dolls of white and red, white and blue and other colour combinations. Her understanding of colour relationship plays an important role in enhancing the aesthetics of her works. Her colour schemes are emotive and communicative. Through the use of cool colours, warm colours, complementary colours..., she succeeds in creating feelings of joyful exuberance, peacefulness, restfulness, and restiveness and tension (Odoh, 2015). Thematically, *People of Umuofia* (Fig. 9) takes after the name Umuofia, Okonkwo's village in Chinua Achebe's epic novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The work insinuates abandonment, neglect and degradation to knitting method of textile production, which she reinvigorates, with a view to turning this conventional method into a conceptualized body of work (Okoro, 2021). “Despite the limitation of textiles to the creation of conceptual works because of its applied art status, she has continued to push the boundaries to open up new channels of expression. Her work is creative, dynamic, exciting and open-minded” (Agwu, 2016, p. 5). Galleries and museums such as [The Brunei Gallery](#), [SOAS](#) have featured Rita Doris Ubah's work.



Figure 9: *People of Umvofia*, 2017, mixed media, varied sizes. Photo: The author.

The gigantic royal chair that Kenechukwu Udeaaja executed with fibre glass, metal, ribbon, jewelry, and necklaces, bracelets, wool and other accoutrements, is an installation entitled *Cultural Remix* (Fig. 10) and depicts the greatness of an Igwe, traditional ruler in Igboland. The royal chair, among other appurtenances is symbol of authority in Igboland. It is replete with the allegory of Igbo traditional authority. Udeaaja “arguably outmoded cultural elements and shows how they can be reinvented and mixed up for contemporary artistic purpose” (Nwigwe, 2017, p. 6). The artwork in its opulent splendor shows the artist's creative ability and mastery in manipulating new media into forms and shapes (Okoro, 2021).



Fig. 10: *Cultural Remix*, fibre, coloured material, metal, ribbon, wool and glass, 2016.
Photo: The author.

Conclusion

What necessitated this study was not unconnected with the arguments that art postmodernism has provoked since its inroad in the Nigerian art scene. On different occasions, writers, critics and art historians raised vital issues about postmodernist art and what it would offer to modern Nigerian art. Looking at it from different stand points, they raise some issues pertaining to its negative implications on the future of art, and on the young and up-coming artists in higher institutions, in terms of patronage, and commercial value, among others. The fear of permanence as to what would constitute, as well as form the basis of our tomorrow's archaeology; anthropology and history gripped them, thereby making some of them dismiss postmodernist art as anti-art, as well as highfalutin.

The above submissions on the negative impacts of postmodernist art in Nigerian art have been proved wrong in this study, using some artists of Nsukka School who are practicing, and gaining media attention both in Nigeria and abroad as a useful example. As evident, artwork produced veered off from modernist aesthetics to postmodern ethos. They are installation art created with the combination or conglomeration of unrelated things, blurring the boundaries between sculpture and textile arts. For instance, the techniques of tying, stretching and twisting materials in extraordinary ways have become common approaches in both fields of visual arts (Nwigwe, 2022). The works are visual testaments of the postmodernist creations in Nsukka School.

In this study, it is shown that postmodernist artwork produced by the Nsukka artists has been received and exhibited internationally. Good example is EL Anatsui's works of art that have been reorganized in the international art scene. Also, Dilomprizulike's artwork has been show in the famous Africa Remix art exhibition that toured many countries around the globe.

It is imperative to mention the influence of postmodernism on non-Nsukka artists such Jelili Aliku, Peju Alatise and Victoria Udonian. Their active involvements in this current creative endeavour show the impacts of postmodernist art in Nigeria art scene. In favour of postmodernist art, these artists have rejected the modernist ideal of medium and form as primary characteristics of their art.

Finally, it is hoped that this study will stimulate new research directions that can confront the emerging issues of art postmodernism, triggered by the socio-political conditions in Nigeria.

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