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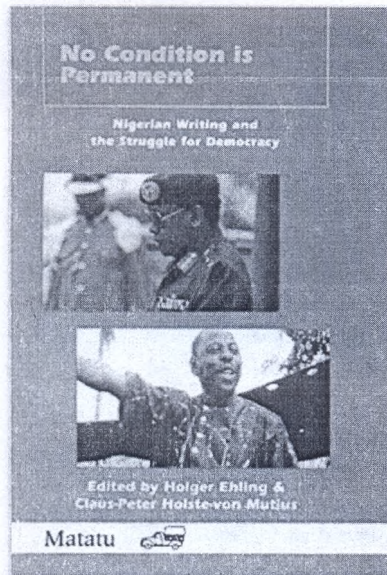
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by Holger Ehling (Editor), Claus-Peter Holste-von Mutius (Editor)

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Creative Endeavour and the Nigerian Environment

THIS ESSAY IS AN ATTEMPT to focus on the effects of appropriate, conducive and congenial environment for the development of creative output. In doing so, it will look primarily at Nigerian society from the viewpoint of economic and political influences. Both of these factors are incontrovertible determinants of the development of a civil society, and are crucial in stimulating cultural creativity. For the purpose of definition, 'civil society' refers to that segment of society that interacts with the state yet is distinct from it. 'The arts' is a broad-based generic term for the products of the creative process, be they literature or the plastic arts or even the recent fabrications of modern technology. It is from this broad perspective that I intend to address the interaction between the arts and society. However, my examples will be limited to the plastic or visual arts and, to a lesser degree, literature.

In his discussion of the creation of art, Monroe Beardsley proceeds from its genesis, which he aptly refers to as the 'incept' up to the finished state.¹ According to him, 'propulsion' and 'finalistic' theories provide adequate bases for reaching the end of a creative process. He argues that between the concept and the end of the work, various other original impulses begin and end. The artist is guided by the interplay between conscious and pre-conscious activities; this recalls the nature-nurture argument. The artist is bound to react to and draw from prevailing social situations.

The history of the development of Nigerian society up to the present is fraught with anxious stories of mismanagement and insecurity, and these are often motivated and conditioned by the interaction of the forces of the economy and politics, whether under a civil or a military dispensation. Nigerian civil society has been bat-

¹ Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael J. Warren & Donald M. Callen (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1982): 254.

tered beyond what human tolerance can allow, and is only now beginning to recover painfully. Indeed, the domestic environment can be, and has been, studied within the parameters of good times and bad, based on the changing fortunes of the Nigerian socio-economic and political environment.² Such a society is laden with material for creative minds as they interact with the vagaries of our harsh environment. For this purpose, I shall examine only the first thirty-five years of Nigeria's history to find out how politics and the economy have influenced the arts and vice versa.

The first ten years of post-independence Nigeria witnessed a great creative period. Fresh from the throes of colonialism, Nigeria's artists were quick to take advantage of their newly earned freedom. And, realizing full well that society provides the basis for most creative output, many creative minds went to work for the total emancipation of the newly liberated Nigeria. The early literary works of Achebe, Soyinka, Clark and a host of others represented (and still do) the expression of genuine, well-motivated and true feelings and reactions to Nigerian society in the pre- and post-colonial periods. In these works there was honesty of purpose. Their impetus to create was not born out of a material need to survive but to express themselves and create art; in line with the Western tradition, but using local materials. The fairly stable political environment at this time had great consequences, too, for the eventual success of the works of this period on the international scene.

In the same vein and in the area of the plastic arts, the products of Enwonwu, Ugbodaga-Ngu, Grillo and Onobrakpeya, to name a few, are outstanding examples of the earlier period. At that time, the seriousness with which government and the rest of society resolutely embarked upon art training clearly accentuated the peace and economic prosperity of this period. Even government legislation on outdoor sculptures in public buildings began to be passed. There were also talks about the recording of a cultural policy to harness the products of Nigeria's artists.

The oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s created enormous wealth for the nation, and the cultural scene began to witness a great proliferation of artistic production. Although managed by a military government and thus incontrovertibly dictatorial in approach, the period can still be regarded as easily the most conducive, vibrant and full of incentive for the growth and development of the creative arts and culture generally. The oil wealth provided the right incentives, the comforts, and the motivation. This was a kind of period of cultural revival. But the proliferation of artistic production had a deleterious effect on that section; it translated into decadence in some cases.

The 1977 Festival of Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC) signalled a growth in sophistication conditioned largely by Nigeria's economic growth and success. The

² Dennis Odife, *Structural Adjustment and Economic Revolution in Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1989): 3.

festival was not only a display of Nigeria's wealth, but also provided great opportunities for revisiting the arts and culture of the country in the context of other black nations. The Nigerian government of the period has often been criticized for spending so much money on the event. But the festival indeed lent a much-needed impetus to Nigerian creative minds, laid the foundations for artistic growth in the post-festival period, and displayed the riches of African culture, especially of those in the diaspora.

A dip in the economic fortunes of the country stimulated tremendous changes in all sectors of the national life, especially with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1985–86.³ With a dwindling economy and attendant hardships, the need for survival became the prime motivation for most endeavours. More than ever before, many of the creative artists who depended largely on their works for their upkeep had to become more eclectic and to produce more quickly. As an artist, I recall how quickly paintings and sculptures began to appear in the market and how seldom they were bought. Many talents were forced by hardship to compromise on standards and quality. And this led to forms of decadence because of an absence of thoroughness, an attitude of compromise towards unconventional approaches, and a lack of fidelity to genuine inspiration. Since the structural adjustment began, there has been a political conditioning of the themes of the arts. More than during the earlier periods, the SAP period is characterized by greater sensitivity on the part of the artist to domestic political and economic crises. Artists now began to react by depicting political and economic problems, the hardships of the lower classes, and the affluence of the upper class.

In more ways than can be imagined, creativity is rooted in temporal emotions. Creative minds are known to draw largely from their societies and environment. The artist is sensitive; he trusts and depends primarily on his instincts and day-to-day experiences. It is more to these motivating factors that he owes honesty. Lately, Nigeria has been battling to establish a congenial civil and democratic society. The fulfilment of this goal yet eludes us, as the nation is plagued by massive poverty and monumental corruption. The concomitant result is political instability, a poor and unhappy population. Poverty and suffering have battered the ego of civil society. This situation, to put it mildly, has intensified alarmingly in recent years. The artist is affected by this, and from it he draws inspiration. The unfavourable environment therefore acts as both catalyst and impetus for the artist. What I am saying here is that his fidelity to truth in expressing the situation is a more desirable trait than the urge to gain materially from his production.

But it should be noted that, just as the adverse conditions of extreme poverty, corruption and maladministration can be a catalyst for the creative mind, so also can

³ See Odife, *Structural Adjustment and Economic Revolution in Nigeria*, 3.

the resultant economic gains from their production lead the artist astray: hence the desired 'honesty.'

Finally, having looked at the broad terrain of Nigerian creative production, a relationship is developed between politics and the economy on the one hand and creativity on the other. Success in the economic and political realms depends on how good or bad they are perceived to be in terms of effectivity, while the success of artistic and cultural creativity may be measured by the honesty and authenticity of its relationship to the 'incept.'⁴

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⁴ See Beardsley. *The Aesthetic Point of View*, 254.