

Article

## Entrepreneurial Spirit of African Art: Exploring the Ugorji Ndukwe Godswill's Studio Practice

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### Abstract

Poverty and gross unemployment among most Nigerian youths have necessitated this paper which shows how art is used as an entrepreneurial tool in contemporary Nigerian society. It borrows insight from the context of artistic practices in pre-colonial African societies, to alleviate the prevailing poverty and joblessness among the youths today. Focusing on the utilitarian sculptures of Ugorji Ndukwe Godswill, a young informally trained wood sculptor based in Nsukka, southeastern Nigeria, I describe the history, materials, techniques, forms, and styles associated with his studio production of side stools, mirror stands, reclining chair (Oche Ndabe), wine bars, dining table/chairs, coffee tables, and television stands using processed and unprocessed timber. Of interest is also how the visual poetry held by some species of naturally configured curvilinear wood has become the central focus of Ugorji's utilitarian artworks. Based on a critical and qualitative analysis of data gathered from field situations, participant observation, interviews, and published and unpublished literary materials on the subject matter. I argue that Ugorji's studio practice shows how a return to pre-colonial African art practices and processes can be reconfigured into a veritable entrepreneurial channel for our creative youth today.

**Keywords:** African arts, entrepreneurship, studio practice, utility sculpture, creative youths

### Introduction

Nigeria has been facing so many economic challenges. Currently, the nation is bedeviled by abject poverty and gross unemployment, which have necessitated the engagement of some youths in illicit means of generating income (Ngwu & Akabuike, 2019). According to World Bank 2009, as cited in *Failed State 2030*, despite Nigeria's outward appearance of representative democracy in Africa with her robustly growing economy, between 52 and 72 percent of her populace still live on less than one dollar per day (DeLong et al., 2011). To complicate the situation, there is an increase in the number of university graduates who join the labour market annually from more than one hundred higher educational institutions in Nigeria, and it has become increasingly difficult for many of them to be gainfully employed (Okoli, 2004). The situation grows worse because most Nigerian students including artists are not trained to be innovative and enterprising entrepreneurs after graduation. This has been a result of the absence of textual sources that stimulate the perspective of art as an entrepreneurship endeavour in African discourses. This also has contributed to the decline of youth's interest in engaging with the apprenticeship system of learning which also has the capability of promoting entrepreneurship (Kasfir, 1998); (Perrill, 2015). The lack of qualitative documentation of indigenous entrepreneur approaches and their perspectives in the creative industries have also affected the awareness required for youth empowerment in the history of Africa.



This lack of dialogue has been of paramount importance for the failure of the creative industry and youth empowerment in Africa, evident both in the previous neglect of its sustenance and preservation through documentation and in the current prevalent acts of internet fraud among Nigerian youths (Ellis, 2017).

These mentioned national problems could be alleviated through the apprenticeship system and practice of the pre-colonial system of teaching and learning art, which usually gives rise to entrepreneurship channels for creative youths. However, a good number of members of society have no idea about the inherent efficacy of this artistic practice and its entrepreneurship training acumen in combating economic hardship. Through this work, I set to document a locally trained utilitarian artist for proper sensitization and youth empowerment.

There is also, an attempt to show that previous approaches that have been pursued lacked dialogue and incorporation of local views of entrepreneurial practitioners. A further attempt is also to situate the thesis of this paper on the fact that entrepreneurship endeavours are likely to flourish more if we integrate local approaches and locally trained creative personnel in order to achieve sustainable development and proper youth empowerment (Ejigiri, 2014). This paper is an attempt to fill these lacunas.

While this paper sets out to create awareness concerning the need for apprentice practice among the teeming unemployed Nigerian youths, who could delve into the practice of art to mitigate their economic wants; it does that through examining the practices of an artist-entrepreneur, Ugorji Ndukwe Godswill. He is an informally trained sculpture practitioner who against all odds, has strived to compete with the formally trained contemporary Nigerian artists, who just like the Tiv traditional artists practice their art and at the same time do other jobs to support themselves and their families.

A reflection on the Tiv traditional artists, like their colleagues elsewhere in African traditional societies, shows that besides their major occasional commissions, they also produce beds, chairs, baskets, hoes, and so on, which are purely utilitarian (Okogwu, 1986). Even though they are also involved in farming and marketing farm produce to support themselves and their families it does not deprive them of the opportunity of artistic practices. This occurs not only where the sculptors or other artists belong to a stratified occupational group, but even where they are socially undifferentiated from the dominant occupational category like the farmer, fisherman, and so on (Kasfir, 2000).

In fact, like the Tivs, many notable artists working in Nigeria keep a second job in the private or public sector. Ozioma Onuzulike, Eva Obodo, Chijioke Onuora, Tayo Adenaike, Kolade Oshinowo, Olu Amoda, Uche Onyishi (1999), and others work as teachers in art schools while practicing their art as well as pursuing more creative projects under less financial pressure. Other formally trained artists, who do not

have the opportunity of working as civil servants, go into innovative entrepreneurs by doing works capable of yielding immediate cash for their day-to-day upkeep. Among the later artists include Iyke Okenyi (2001), Chibuike Onyirioha, Osita Orji, and a host of others. It is amidst this competitive atmosphere that Ugorji finds himself and he practices in the town of Nsukka where formally trained sculptors in the art department of the University of Nigeria, abound.

Notable among these formally trained artists is their ability to practice between academic arts and utilitarian sculpture, which has gradually evolved into one strategy for innovative entrepreneurship. This is to say that, the production of utilitarian sculptures in wood or other possible media seems to have become one major strategy for academic artists to support themselves while carrying out their main-line creative production. They produce creative-wooden furniture for immediate sale, while also engaging themselves in their mainline intellectual art since this intellectual line of art might not yield immediate financial returns.

Even though Ugorji had no formal training in art or have engaged with any of these formally trained artists, the connections between pre-colonial and postcolonial African art and several examples of the modifications, reinventions, and disappearances of traditional art forms as well as their current commodification are present in his practice. His quest into the art apprenticeship system is a veritable means of converting our jobless youths into valuable utilitarian wares creators, which is a creditable means of income generation venture and also capable of effectively making one self-reliant.

So, in the works of Ugorji, we see the practical conversion of logs of wooden materials into useful artistic objects, establishing a nice strategy that helps in checkmating, to an extent, the level of unemployment and poverty in Africa and Nigeria to be specific. However, undertaking an entrepreneurial venture in art involves commercialization, which usually leads to sales that offer economic alleviation, but a great number of our youths are not ready or equipped to undertake the challenges involved in being innovative. What these youths need is the knowledge to engage in such an enterprising expedition so that their economic well-being will be improved.

## **History**

Ugorji, trained informally as an artist under his mentor Felix Nnabuiké who was also informally trained. He spent three years (2010-2013) as an apprentice in Nnabuiké's Art studio located at the *Obiagu* market in Enugu, the capital city of Enugu State, southeast Nigeria. That was where he learned the profession of art-making and acquired a level of entrepreneurship skills. Though he gained admission in 2009 to study Engineering, (his original course of interest at the university level) his family was unable to sponsor him. In an interview, he revealed

how Nnabuike encouraged him to become his studio assistant having seen his creative abilities after his dream to study engineering failed.

As a result of his desire to survive and engage his creative prowess, he resorted to attaching himself to Nnabuike's art studio to learn and acquire the necessary skills for survival. This makes one recall Kasfir and Förster's notion of a group of artisans, who not only share a workspace but also draw on it as a stable framework for communication and learning governed by the acknowledged expertise of one or more senior members of the group (Perrill, 2015). Kasfir and Förster's concept of master-apprentice models of learning has existed in the pre-colonial era and has also split into the late colonial institutions. These factors make entrepreneurship even more viable in our contemporary society, yet the youth are wallowing in penury.

### **The Influence of Ugoji's Artworks**

The kind of art Ugoji does is traced to the utilitarian sculpture of the Nsukka Art School popularized under the motivational tutorship of Ernest Okoli in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which is also the town where Ugorji resides and practices. Ugorji, as an entrepreneur has a distinctive utilitarian approach to sculpture production relevant to the Nsukka society in Enugu State, southeast of Nigeria. This propensity can be harvested and harnessed to improve the thriving of the creative industry and youth empowerment in Africa.

Based on a critical and qualitative analysis of data gathered from field situations, participant observation, interviews, and published literary materials on the subject matter. Ugorji's utilitarian art and indigenous perspectives are concurring and contributing to the creative art industry, entrepreneurship, and youth empowerment. It is against this background that this study draws from Gillian Rose's theories of Visual Arts Research, Visual Arts Practice, and Visual Arts Research Practices (Rose, 2001), to focus on the utilitarian sculptures, materials, processes, techniques, tools, forms and styles of Ugorji's works (an informally trained sculptor), as a basis for understanding the dynamics of utilitarian sculptures as an entrepreneurial venture.

### **Materials**

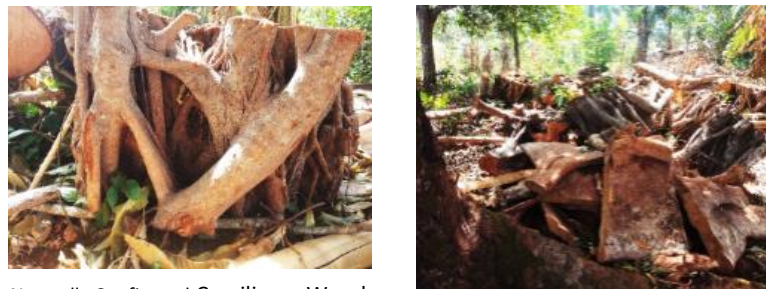
Ugorji's primary materials constitute naturally configured curvilinear woods, unprocessed wood all sourced from the bush, and processed woods sourced from the Timber Shed comprising the Sawmills, wood market, and some carpenters' workshops. The unprocessed (in the Sawmill) are mainly meant for firewood.



Fig. 1 Un-configured natural woods, photographed by the researcher



Processed woods from the timber, Pictures taken by the researcher



Naturally Configured Curvilinear Wood

Deforested wood still at the site of cut

Fig. 2 Processed woods

The woods are usually bought from the bush, directly from the owner during deforestation, or from *Wood Trade Union members* who bought them from the bush and retail them to the last consumers who usually use them as firewood and some minor carpentry works. In his case, Ugoji pays people who source for available woods in the bush ready for deforestation, this way he creates works for other individuals who through working for him earn a living. And it is also cheaper for him to buy from the bush than from the trade union. However, it is cheaper for beginners who may not afford to source from the bush and carter for the transportation, to buy from the trade unions.

Other resources used in the production process of Ugorjir's utility wood-works include solid objects such as metals, like nails, and soft objects, or semi-liquid such as glues. These materials are very common and affordable in the local markets.

## Tools

In addition to traditional methods, the artist also employs a range of modern tools sourced from local markets, including electric-powered tools like jigsaws, routers, and cross-sectional cutting saw machines, as well as manual tools like files, chisels,

and oxy-acetylene sets, both formally constructed and locally fabricated ones, to shape and refine his wood sculptures.

## Stages of Production

### *Processing the Woods*

The works go through several stages of production; starting with more critical processing of the unprocessed woods, even though they were already sawed into different sizes and forms, and given lengths with the help of chainsaws by estate personnel, they are still cleaned by peeling off the bark (sap) and allowed to dry gradually in a controlled environment to reduce cracking. If the wood accumulates mud during transportation, then they too must be washed with water and detergent. Sometimes, the naturally configured curvilinear wood comes from a burnt bush in which case, part of the wood will be charcoal. This requires that the burnt charcoal area be cleaned with an iron brush or metal scrapper to get to the unburnt wood, this he also does, so that the dirt and sand will not damage the blade of the planing machines.



Fig. 3 Burnt curvilinear wood from the bush, Picture taken by the researcher

The next stage in his production involves making decisions on the type of work to be done with any given wooden structure. The outcome of any work depends largely on the interpretation of the hidden form by unlocking the locked form in the configured wood, which is usually achieved through the manipulative skill and level of the artist to transform and reconfigure this locked image into a physical reality. It behooves the artist to find a way to manipulate his tools and materials to extract a given image and achieve his desired objective. Most times, more than one form of *wood* may be combined to achieve a given work. In doing this, one or two of the above-mentioned materials are used to strengthen the work. Also, these materials determine the process and the technique with which any naturally configured curvilinear wood is reconfigured.

### *Techniques and Processes*

Ugorji's little engineering background seems to help him in making some mathematical calculations to strengthen each wood and resolve how to reconfigure them to achieve his desired effect. He claims that sometimes he reaches this decision

by making some drawings on paper and subsequently transferring them to the woods with the help of a pencil, charcoal, chalk, and other freehand drawing tools. He also asserts to use of T-Square and other mathematical sets instruments where they are required. However, observation shows that he does more direct drawings on the woods than working from a sketchbook since no sketchbook was provided during the interview sessions. Furthermore, drawing from Kisfir's experience on the Idoma, Ebira (Igbira), Kalabari, and Tiv communities in Nigeria, whose carvers are free agents, who also have picked up their knowledge of carving in a piecemeal fashion since boyhood, do not receive any direct instruction in the correct way to carve an eye or an ear, but must rely on the examples of completed work they see around them. Ugorji, just like these boys has been liberated from the conventions of the academically trained studio procedure, and must ultimately learn the equivalent skills by trial and error instead (Kasfir, 2000).

### *Marking, Cutting, Carving and Burnishing*



Fig. 4 Ugorji's wall clock (Open spaces cut for a certain purpose). ©Ugorji

The above process of drawing and sketching on the wood is preceded by cutting the design he wants to give the work as a pattern on the wood. This is where the forms on the wood did not suit his desired intention for a particular work. He sometimes carves with a chisel to create deeper contours and textural effects, which are usually embellished with burnishing using an oxy-acetylene set. Neutral spaces were created if the wood did not come naturally open or created to enhance a curve where necessary. The open spaces can function as the handle for lifting such works, or they could just serve as a place where the eye can rest if the work is already heavily textured. However, sometimes he also cuts the wood to create a vacuum for the joint formation process. The cutting styles and tools usually depend on the kind of joint he desires.

Although he claimed to have done a series of sketches before embarking on the production of any work, he was unable to make available these sketches for documentation. However, it is observed that making these works is a complicated

and complex process that involves a lot of calculations before the actual creation. All his explorative results were embarked upon with a preconceived idea that was either put down as a rough sketch on paper or processed in his mind. He is a good apprentice to have acquired the level of his ability to form organizations and balance since the interview showed that he lacks basic knowledge of principles and elements of designs. Yet, he does not seem to stumble on his forms by sheer accident. He operates more by Pearts' concept of "once a piece begins to take on a personality, I know I'm getting somewhere" Cassidy (as cited in Obodo, 2010). In this case, forms are enhanced as they materialize from preconceived ideas processed in the mind. Evidence is the results of his finished works which though unguided by themes of compositions, usually gives a direction to the outcome of the work; rather he titles the works after they are executed.

## Forms and Styles

Some key individual artists work in the genre that Ugorji has followed. Though personal interview with him revealed that he has not heard or seen the works of those artists. Yet, evident in his forms and style shows a connection. The differences between the formally and informally trained artists, though may not be the focus of this paper, however, these connections have to be established. One would also expect these connections in style and forms when one considers that some professional art schools have been very influential in the production of his genre of art within and around the globe. Notable, are The Margaret Trowell School of Fine Art in Kampala, Uganda (Makerere University), the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Dakar, Senegal, and the Art Schools at Ahmadu Bello University and Nsukka Art School in Nigeria, where he resides.

The discussion of Ugorji's forms and style cannot commence without a reflection on Uche Okeke, who though is a published poet amidst other creative prowl, has in the history of contemporary Nigerian art, been acknowledged as the patriarch and precursor of an *uli* movement, which has come to constitute the major style in the works of Ugorji. Uli has since the 1970s, flourished around the Nsukka-Enugu axis in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, and what is known today as the Nsukka Art School. It is on this axis that Ugorji's workshop is situated. Uli, the traditional design elements used for indigenous murals and body decorations by the Igbo, provides in the works of the Nsukka Art School the visual template and the master grid to which all the artists are connected in varying degrees (Jegede, 2000).

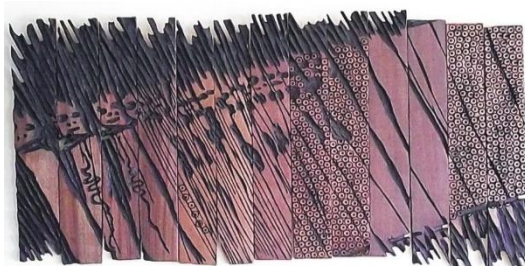


Fig. 5 ©El Anatsui, wood panel

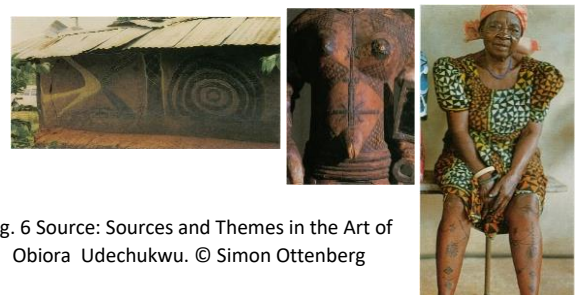


Fig. 6 Source: Sources and Themes in the Art of Obiora Udechukwu. © Simon Ottenberg



It is within this artistic style that Ugorji's works fall in. While Uli serves as his visual template, his forms fall between Earnest Okoli and the Art of El. Anatsui, whose prodigious rapport with wood through burnishing and pyrography has influenced a great number of his students. However, no modernist art historian or critique may identify a stylistic sameness in the woodworks of Ugorji and Anatsui. However, an intensive study may show a selection of several artists who produce works that, though of varying stylistic strengths, yet are connected by an interest in and exploration of a local design phenomenon known as Uli. Herein and on Ugorji's functionality production approach, lies the strengths of his works. The formally trained Nsukka artists may not be in the same level of artistic paradigms as Ugorji but can be identified with the stylistic presence of Uli burnishing and the functionality of their works. With this in mind, I demonstrate why Ugorji's works are most engaging and also evocative.

### The Utilitarian Sculptures of Ugorji



Fig. 7 Ugorji seating on one of his Reclining Chairs, capture are his Coffee table, Side stools, Picture frames, and Bed. ©Ugorji

In presenting his utilitarian sculptures in line with the styles and forms of the above-presented formally trained artists, it is important to look at the range of utilitarian works he produces. His techniques and studio processes as already outlined gave rise to these forms, their functions, styles, and creative development. The utilitarian sculptures produced by Ugorji can be seen under three broad categories: (A) the ones produced for souvenirs (B) Household furniture (C) wall hangings or wall panels.

#### Type A: Works Produced for Souvenirs

These include Flower Verse, Picture Frames, and Wall Clock. This category of work was produced from the timber-processed woods sourced locally.



Fig. 8 Ugorji's set of flower verses finished with locally laminated wood process and burnished with uli designs for aesthetic purposes. (1x2f) aprox ©Ugorji



Fig. 9 Ugorji's Wall clocks, (2x2f) ©Ugorji

Practical sculptures like Flower Vases, Picture Frames, and Wall Clocks take center stage in this category, showcasing their functional appeal.

These set of wall clocks were produced from floral designs, burnished, and embellished with uli. The two on the extreme right seem to have been produced from unprocessed curvilinear woods, while the two on the left seem to have come from processed timber. More examples of wall clocks are as follows:



Fig. 10 Other Ugorji's Wall clocks. (1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>X 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" ) aprox. ©Ugorji



Fig. 11 Ugorji's Picture frames carved (1x2", 2x3"), burnished with uli and polished with a wood finish. ©Ugorji

The other set of works in this category includes picture frames which are also burnished and embellished with uli designs and finally polished.

### Type B: Household furniture



Ugorji's Sets of Chair, standard three seater, two seater, & one single and a side stool. With center tables (3x3,2x4) respectively. © Ugorji



A throne commissioned by a traditional ruler from Edo State Nigeria, (name withheld) © Ugorji The work is still in progress as at the time of interview.

Fig. 12 A cross-section of household furniture

Works selected for presentation in this category are mostly furniture like coffee tables, chairs, a couple of logos for social clubs, wine bars, and thrones (seats for traditional rulers). Over-wide unprocessed woods sourced from the point of deforestation were used for some of the tabletops, while mixed media were employed to achieve the top of some. The over-wide provides him with the un-cut width and weight required for a given work.

Below are other works in this category, wine bars produced from processed woods and heavily embellished with uli. The extreme right is a side view.



Fig. 13 Ugorji's set of wine bars commissioned work ©

The logos hereunder were contracted by social clubs and it seems the works are produced from both processed and unprocessed wooden materials.



Fig. 14 Ugorji's set of Logos commissioned work ©

Ugorji also works to produce and display for whoever may want to acquire it. This next set of works falls within this category. The materials are sourced from both the processed and unprocessed wood environment. They provide him with both over-wide and sawmill-processed woods with which he produces a category of works that range from functional to decorative arts. Room dividers, Mirror, and wall panels are the dominant sculptures under this category and have been selected for presentation.

## Conclusion



Fig. 15 Ugorji's Sets of works produced as roomdivider (2x4f), wall panel (2x4f), and Mirrow (4x4f).

In his works spanning from souvenirs, household furniture, and wall panels, Ugorji unconsciously explores the utilitarian style of the Nsukka Art School and the use of

traditional uli and nsibidi symbols, a movement which academically emerged in the 1970s from the University of Nigeria and operated to expand and modernize the aesthetic of Igbo culture. Though he has not laid any claim to foreign patronage, he has a strong hegemony in the indigenous patronage. This is evident in his standard of living which shows that he is making enough money from the business to take care of himself and his family. Ugorji's practices particularly his utilitarian wood sculptures, which its' source of raw materials is readily available and affordable when enhanced with uli burnishing, are astute and reveal the fluidity of art patronage in a place considered to be a semi-urban area like Nsukka. His productions fall within a fine-grained balance between the conventional carpenters and the academic artists, but what endears it most, is its' affordability and functionality which puts a subtle demand on the society to have needs for them. This, therefore, increases the level of his patronage as most homes need furniture that serves as art and other purposes all at the same time. This, therefore, substantiates Förster's fluidity of the material and social collaboration in master-apprentice style woodcarving and painting communities (Perrill, 2015).

Ugorji has affirmed the studio art practice as an analytical category, some tool scholars can use to critique the economic and socio-cultural diversity of artistic production across cultural and geographic divides. Also, as a veritable tool to boost the lives and economic standards of unemployed Nigerian youths. This is buttressed by Kasfir and Förster's description of art studios as economic institutions; they provide comparative examples from Gothic European Artisanal workshops, as well as the structures formed by Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus Art School in Germany. They point out that studio work "has been neglected as an analytical category," despite its' "relevance to our own history and its' presence in our society" (Ejigiri 2014, p.142).

The "our" used in the above refers to an abstracted "Western" culture. If the studio practice has proven to be this useful to the Western culture whom the African society has come to imitate, why should we Africans neglect our original tradition of artistic apprentice system of learning and training which has proven to be a viable means of entrepreneurship? Kasfir though astutely observes that a "constellation of factors" is influencing artisanal practice and also hints that the physical studios and online networks are becoming fixtures of global art and might benefit artists (Kasfir, 1999, p.). The latter will boost and create avenues through which foreign patronage can be attracted. It is in this moment of hardship in Nigeria and Africa that such studies as found in these theories are required to increasingly ameliorate the difficulties our youths are facing in this perilous time.

The processes of the entrepreneurial quest, as a social and economic institution, have been an issue in a variety of disciplines; however, art is one of the most viable tools for its actualization. Ugorji's apprenticeship and studio practice have proven this to be true. As validated by Kasfir and Förster, apart from the studio, being places of learning and interaction, art studios are social settings, and among the laudable happenings at a studio is that younger ones project themselves into the experienced work of other senior ones (Ejigiri, 2014). Those who are not even graduates of fine and applied arts can also key into this in the form of apprentices

and train under Ugorji and acquire the necessary experience to establish their own studios within a year and six months or between the spaces of two years. This will go a long way to mitigate the gross unemployment eaten deep into the fabric of our youths economically.

The Mozambique-based FRELIMO leaders who required a collective mode of production have already adopted this practice by fostering the emergence of a distinct socialist style and iconography and made sure that cooperatives operated through a structure, whereby entrepreneur artists were fully integrated into youth empowerment programs. Above all, the liberation movement, whose leaders became rulers in independent Mozambique, "sought to return creative agency to the masses and reorient artistic creation along communal lines" (Ejigiri 2014, p.143). Nigeria can also adopt this for a change.

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