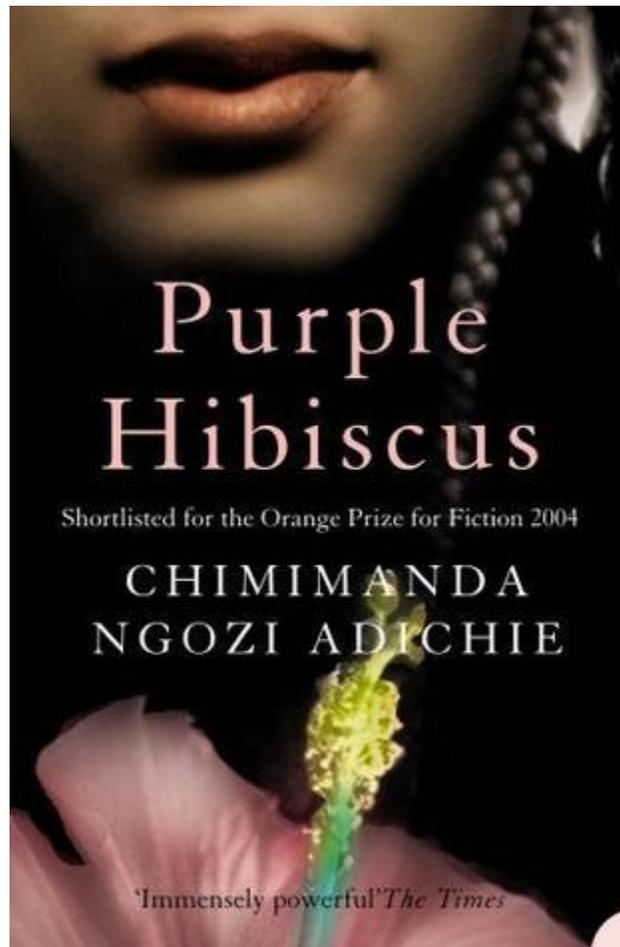


**Ethnic Tensions and Political Turmoil: Postcolonial Reading of
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian writer and social activist has achieved her fame throughout the world for depicting the social, cultural and political matters in her novels and short fiction. With her literature she has drawn the new generation of readers to the African Literature. To name a few of her novels and short fiction that got critical acclaim worldwide for are – *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009).

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Purple Hibiscus

Purple Hibiscus typically explores the issues of ethnic tensions and political upheaval in Nigeria. The central character is Kambili Achike – the fifteen-year daughter in the house of the father figure Eugene. He is an orthodox Catholic figure in the Achike family. The text actually “de-mythifies” the concept of the father figure. Beatrice is her mother who is also under the torture of Eugene. Chukwuka Achike, named as “Jaja” by his family is Eugene’s brother and he is two years senior to Kambili. The development of the story is there when the two children came in touch with their Aunt Ifeoma. They have seen that Aunt Ifeoma, being a lecturer in The University of Nigeria, has raised her three children. She has also relocated them abroad for their better future. In this way Jaja and Kambili get their confidence to protest against whatever their father ordered. Adichie was showing here that the people in the household were doubly subjugated: first by the ‘authority of the family’ and second by ‘the governance’. Father Amadi is a young priest who is in touch with Aunty Ifeoma and her family. He has some idea of liberation. He is opposite to other white European priests in the country such as Eugene’s priest, Father Benedict who is orthodox about his religion. Adichie also presents another aspect here: on one hand she shows the readers the subdued female characters and on the other she shows the liberal minded woman like Aunt Ifeoma. Ultimately at the end, Papa is poisoned but Jaja takes the blame for his mother’s crime and spends almost three years in prison. The objective of this paper is to investigate how the political turmoil in Nigeria and the impact of religion have affected the Achike family in particular and Nigerian society in general.

Key words: Nigeria, Catholicism, Ethnic tensions, Authority, Governance.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Courtesy: <http://chimamanda.com/about-chimamanda/>

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria in 1977. She is the author of three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013) and a collection of short stories, *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009). She has also achieved numerous awards and distinctions, including the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction (2007) and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (2008). Not only is she famous for her notable works but also she has drawn her third generation readers of Africa with the depiction of the social, cultural and political matters in her novels and short fiction.

Purple Hibiscus

Purple Hibiscus is her debut novel where family, religion, politics and tolerance emerge as the central theme. The narrative revolves around Kambili Achike and her family. The objective of this paper is to investigate of how the political turmoil in Nigeria has affected its religion in general and the Achike family in particular. The ethnic tensions between the tribes – Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba – were to disrupt the unity of a nation and the post-Biafran War or the post Nigerian Civil War caused the political turmoil in Nigeria. The end of the Biafran War was not the end of the problem; however, post-war Nigeria also faced difficulties, varying from extreme violence between religious groups to government corruption and an unstable economy. Britain colonized Nigeria because they had interest in native slaves. But the Slave Trade Act in 1807 prohibited British subjects from participating in the slave trade. Nevertheless,

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the British continued their slave trading even after the prohibition. The situation was worse because the Nigerian communities, except the Northern one, joined hands with the Britishers in supplying the slaves. In this way British tried to make Nigeria a colony of their own. Ania Loomba also pointed out in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* that "... within the colonies [South Africa and other African countries] pre-capitalist economic forms of exploitation such as plantation slavery persisted, indeed flourished and expanded for a long time" (129-130). So the colonizers had the interest in making Nigeria their colony.

Brief History of Nigeria and the Contemporary Politics

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* can only be read in the backdrop of Nigerian history and politics as it is the focus of the main plot of the novel. To illustrate further, the setting of the novel is post 1990s or may be the late 1990s. The events taking place in the novel have been deeply affected by the Nigeria-Biafra (1967-1970) war. Nigeria became a British colony in 1861 and continued to be the same till they fought for their independence and finally achieved it in 1960. However, there was a particular section of Nigeria which was still passively dominated the British. This part was the northern part, not only was it economically underprivileged but also it had least literacy rate. Through Emirs (Amirs), who were possibly the head of the tribal communities, the British tried to govern Nigeria. Another tribal community, *Yoruba* were the ethnic group of south-western and the southern region of Nigeria. They helped the British in supplying the slaves during the 18th century. Another Nigerian community, *Igbo* was the main ethnic group particularly in south-eastern Nigeria. Their culture was mostly influenced by the Western culture and therefore segregation was not possible in one go. They were also not keen to regain their lost ethnic culture and were perhaps content with the British and Nigerian amalgamation even as their cultural identity marker. They were traditionally decentralised and therefore, most of the Igbo people were converted to Christians. As they directly supported the British people, they were also benefitted by them.

However, the northern territory was totally different: *Muslim Hausa* and *Fulani* were the predominant ethnic groups in Nigeria's northern region. They were controlled by the Islamic Laws and *Emirs* (Amirs) were the head of the communities. This part of Nigeria was

underdeveloped in every sense of the term and therefore, the British colonizers tried to lure them with economic benefits provided they converted themselves as Christians. The proposition was not acceptable to the Muslim Hausa and Fulani people who wanted to retain their own culture and their own class.

Therefore, the basic motto of these two ethnic groups, Igbo and Yoruba, was to adopt a new culture and they did not want to retain their ethnic culture. The British took up the most susceptible form of colonizing and religion became a tool for the imposition of soft power.

In the western part of Nigeria, the churches and missionaries were rapidly spread out, and by 1966 – 1967, the Igbo people were mostly educated in the foreign education system and were closely associated with the Nigerian power-politics. The Biafran war was also causing the ethnic tension between the democratic minded tribe like Igbo and autocratic minded people like Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba. So, there was clash of interest between the tribes resulting in the formation of two groups with individual interests in a nation. Education, politics, society, economics and to some extent *history*, also got politicized. Amidst these cultural differences and ethnic tensions, the booming production of oil only elevated the gap.

Achike Family and the Missionary People

Kambili Achike and Jaja are the pivotal characters of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. They are siblings in the novel where Jaja is two years senior to Kambili. Eugene Achike and Beatrice are their parents. Beatrice (named as Mama throughout the novel) is tender woman, but Eugene on the contrary “de-mythifies” the concept of the father-figure. Generally, he is very torturous to his family members. The story evolves in the postcolonial Nigeria where religion, in this specific context, Christianity is taking a major role in the development of the relations amongst the family members. Ania Loomba writes, “Christianity became the prison through which the knowledge of the world was refracted” (105). Papa-Nnukwu, father of Eugene and his sister Ifeoma did not follow the foreign culture and religion. He is the person who believes in the indigenous traditional Igbo culture. He was against adopting the foreign religion and culture whereas his son Eugene was adhering to the European culture. This is the

root cause of the tension in the family. Auntie Ifeoma has not bound herself and her children in the web of religion. Eugene felt threatened by Papa-Nnukwu.

In the later part of the novel, Beatrice voiced against her own husband to protect her children. She even poisoned him. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa-Nnukwu (Kambili and Jaja's paternal grandfather) represented the indigenous culture specifically that of Igbo land. He was ethnically Igbo who followed the Igbo cultural traditions. But his son Eugene was the representative of colonialism and autocracy. So, his father's tradition was thwarted by him. Papa-Nnukwu was usurped by Eugene and relegated to having no authority. His father was literally representing a pure Igbo culture, but colonialism never left anything pure. So the ethnic tension is here between a son and his father. One believes in one's own culture and another one in acculturation. The concept of family with Achike's is slightly unusual. Eugene is the boss in the family and amidst his orders, the rest of the three people are just living. Eugene also beats his wife Beatrice and the children. Despite getting harsh treatment from their father, Kambili and Jaja were trying to establish their personal identities in a new world. So, this ethnic tension between the father and the rest of the family prevails throughout the novel. Papa-Nnukwu's death had a crucial role in allowing both Kambili and Jaja to approach adulthood with a greater understanding of themselves and a wider appreciation for familial and cultural context. The two important religious characters in the novel are Father Amadi and Father Benedict. Unlike Father Amadi who was trying to make Catholicism relevant to the contemporary Nigerian society, Father Benedict was trying to colonize the Nigerian indigenous people with the white men's politics. These people were bearing "The White Man's Burden"¹ and Eugene was the representative of them.

The Title – "Purple Hibiscus"

The title "Purple Hibiscus" is chosen with ample symbolic undertones. Generally, in subtropical and tropical countries, hibiscuses are basically red or may be sometimes white. Readers may doubt of a purple one. To Kambili and Jaja, purple hibiscuses in Aunt Ifeoma's

¹ Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden". http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_burden.htm. accessed on 29 August 2016

house signified a sense of freedom. One may think that this kind of hibiscus possibly does not exist at all and therefore their thought of freedom from the oppression of their father was totally vague. Jaja builds up the courage slowly in the same rhythm as the purple hibiscus he planted took its time to grow. At the end of the novel, the color of the hibiscus changed. It has changed with the passage of time. The long sought freedom they wanted was finally achieved. The hibiscus finally bloomed. Jaja finally won over his father's domination. He was mature enough to be the perpetrator in his family. André Kaboré in the article "The Symbolic Use of Palm, Figurines and Hibiscus in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" mentioned the relation between the blooming of hibiscus and Jaja

... Jaja gradually "blooming" as he moves from refusing to go to Communion on Palm Sunday, to closing his door to Papa by pushing his study desk against it the day after Palm Sunday and refusing to answer Papa's invitation to come to dinner, and finally to planning not to receive Communion the coming Easter Sunday. (36)

Colonial State Operation Vis-à-vis Religious Dominance

Probably while writing *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie had in her mind the influence of Chinua Achebe on Nigeria. She starts her novel with the phrases from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The opening lines are thus:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère. (*Purple Hibiscus* 3)

Palm Sunday

The naming of the chapter is also significant: "Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday". Palm Sunday stands for Christian feast that falls on the Sunday just before the Easter. The feast commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an event mentioned in each of the four canonical Gospels. The violent acts committed against the family by the father Eugene were representative of the patriarchal power. Eugene is not only an agent of patriarchy but he also bears the burden of British culture. In fact he just tortures his wife. While going to bed, Kambili saw that "Her brown face, flawless but for the recent jagged scar on her forehead, was

expressionless.” (15) This shows that there was an obvious evidence of domestic violence. Kambili thought of their vacation in their aunt’s house in Nsukka which is a town and Local Government Area in South-East Nigeria in Enugu State. Kambili liked that place. To quote from the text,

Nsukka started it all; Aunty Ifeoma’s little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (16)

Kambili wanted the freedom from the typical colonial desperations as well as religious dominance of her father. She wanted to taste the freedom. She had realized the same kind of freedom in the blooming of purple hibiscus. Eugene’s strict adherence to the religion had some positive as well as negative effects on his family. Beatrice, his wife, had a few miscarriages but he had refused to take any another mistress or wife even though *propagating* is traditionally the most practised convention in Nigerian people.

Political Turmoil in Nigeria and the Effect of it on Family

The socio-political turmoil in Nigeria constantly destroyed the peace in Achike’s family. Eugene did not have a good relation with the other members in the family. Jaja and Kambili wanted to stay in Nsukka, but in Nsukka also, the government wanted to end the persistent democracy and there were agitations harboured in the university. Ifeoma had to face some agitations out there. The students’ mob was something she did not like at all. Obiora, Ifeoma’s second child, told that “The university’s equivalent of a head of a state...the university becomes a microcosm of the country.” (224) Soon unrest hits the university where Ifeoma taught as the students reacted to their inadequate conditions: “‘Students are rioting,’ Amaka said” (Adichie 228). Aunty Ifeoma told her daughter to “Turn of the security lights” (228). To quote from the text,

Amaka turned off the lights. The singing was clearer now, loud and resonant. There had to be a least five hundred people. “Sole administrator must go. He

doesn't wear pant oh! Head of State must go. He doesn't wear pant oh! Where is running water? Where is light? Where is petrol?" (228)

The situation in Nigeria had become dangerous and tumultuous. People cannot get fresh water, petrol, not even light. When Kambili went to the market, she saw a painful incident where the military force was inflicting violence upon the citizens. To describe,

Market women were shouting, and many had both hands placed on their heads, in the way that people do to show despair or shock. A woman lay in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short Afro...Her wrapper had come undone and her white underwear showed...I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air...Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing. (44)

Adichie focuses on the pain and brutality of the common mass. Eugene's family was a well-to-do family. Eugene knew that the politicians in Nigeria were corrupt and that is why he wanted a new kind of Nigeria to emerge out of the old Nigeria. He and his editor, Ade Coker, run a newspaper named *Standard* and there they had mentioned "many stories about the cabinet ministers who slashed money in foreign bank accounts" (24). He had unique idea about Catholicism; Anthony Chennells has mentioned in the article "Inculturated Catholicisms in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" that

The missionary tradition in which Eugene has been raised encouraged mimicry of all things European, because these possessed a particular power to invoke the true God. His parish church is built to a European design, and Kambili is accustomed to thinking 'that God's presence dwelled more in St Agnes [than in any other Nigerian church], the iridescent saints on the floor to- ceiling stained-glass windows stopped God from leaving'. God, however, is not tied to stained glass and altar steps that 'glowed like polished ice blocks' (28). (Chennells 269)

Tension and political upheaval were growing day by day and Jaja and Kambili were in a situation where this was normal to see a live televised execution of three men. Beatrice was not

at all feeling easy at Father Benedict's sermon; but she had to go there for her husband's ordeal. Father Benedict enquired of her ashen look: in reply she just mentioned that ashen look was just for her allergies were bothering her but she was absolutely fine. She had to pretend that she was fine and strong. These two brother - sister were reared in such an environment that they were desensitized to the domestic violence as they calmly cleaned their mother's blood while she was beaten up.

"There's blood on the floor," Jaja said. "I'll get the brush from the bathroom."

We cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolor all the way downstairs. Jaja scrubbed while I wiped. (33)

Ade Coker was arrested for the newspaper had some publication that was against the Head of State. But ultimately Eugene was capable of setting Ade free from the bondage. Eugene wanted to run his paper *Standard* underground to make his staffs safe. Kambili's grandfather Papa-Nnukwu was not allowed in their house as he was representing the indigenous people. He followed the traditions of the Igbo people. But Jaja and Kambili wanted to spend some time at their grandfather's house. But Eugene was very strict; he just allowed them to spend some fifteen minutes there. He thought that staying there for a long time may cause the degradation of their moral values. He offered them food, but they refused since they have been ordered to do so by their father. Since Papa-Nnukwu offered his food to his ancestors in a ritual each morning, Papa would not allow his Christian children to eat with their grandfather's food. Moreover, they have crossed that time limit. Papa did not hit them, rather he told to finish the food and he orders them go to bed to pray for forgiveness.

Like any other colonizing countries that treat the people under their colonial rule, Eugene assumed that the needs of his children were the same as his own. He never considered that their needs may be unique and uniquely suited to their own circumstances. Eugene's treating of the other family members was not good at all. The northern Nigerian people were also neglected by these so called western minded Nigerian people. So there was an ethnic tension growing in between them. Tension and political problems also attacked the liberated women like Aunt

Ifeoma, who is Professor in the University of Nigeria. She was a widow, but she maintained a life with freedom. She also reared her children in a manner that they have their own expression, decision and discretion. But the problem is that the life at the University in Nsukka, where she taught, was getting difficult. Teachers were not paid for nearly two months and therefore, some had migrated to America. The situation was not very good for these people in Nigeria. So, Ifeoma had to shift to America. Aunty Philipa, Ifeoma's friend, asked her to come to America so that she can come out of this socio-political turbulence and economic crisis. Also her son Obiora suggests her to migrate. He says, "And Mom will have her work recognized in America, without any nonsense politics," (224)

The visit to Nsukka marked Kambili's first experience with the idea of democratic rule—the idea that Kambili herself was capable of making her own decisions and carving out her own identity. In Eugene's place she had no choice; she was helpless and followed the ordeals. In Nsukka, Ifeoma's place is small, but it's filled with people and 'New Ideas'. Though Eugene's house had sprawling space, but "had too much empty space, too much wasted marble floor that gleamed from Sisi's polishing and housed nothing. [The] ceilings were too high. [The] furniture was lifeless" (*Purple Hibiscus* 192). Amaka, Ifeoma's daughter, was an adolescent girl who embodied what Nigeria could become if it should follow a democratic path. Amaka listened to both Western and traditional Nigerian music, and she freely expressed her opinions. Ifeoma allowed them to do whatever they wanted to. Ifeoma believed that a nation cannot be strong unless each member of the society fully embraces and uses his or her talents and skills. They should exercise self-authority and protest the anarchism. Eugene's fear had stopped Kambili to protest against anything in the house. But Ifeoma on one such occasion thought that she should teach a lesson to Kambili so that her protesting power should have evolved - "Aunty Ifeoma's eyes hardened—she was not looking at Amaka, she was looking at me [Kambili]. *O ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!" (*Purple Hibiscus* 170). Ifeoma, however, refuses to bow to governmental rules, for she said "I am not paid to be loyal. When [Ifeoma] I speak[s] the truth, it becomes disloyalty . . . when do we speak out, eh? When soldiers are appointed lecturers and students attend lectures with guns to their heads? When do we speak out?" (*Purple Hibiscus* 222-223).

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Kambili's meeting with Father Amadi is very relevant to the plot of the story. She met Father Amadi in Nsukka in Aunty Ifeoma's house. Till then Kambili was only recipient of Catholicism. Blindly she had to support her father and whatever Father Benedict wanted to follow in the sermon. But Father Amadi's treatment was something different to that of Father Benedict. In Nsukka, Father Amadi wanted Kambili to only participate in the religion and this was the catch point which attracts her to Father Amadi. Like other places, in her church he was the authority, but he had some compassion and he ruled with Love not with coercion. He was also caring when he alerted Kambili about that "protruding nail (and) that could pull a thread off your clothes" (135). Kambili also found that Father Amadi had a voice, "that had the same effect on my ears that Mama working Pears baby oil into my hair had on my scalp. I did not fully comprehend his English-laced Igbo sentences at dinner because my ears followed the sound and not the sense of his speech." (135) Cheryl Stobie in the article "Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" mentioned that

In the public domain of spiritual worship Papa-Nnukwu voices traditional assumptions about power and gendered prohibitions by commenting that the female figures in the masquerade are harmless, but the most powerful ones may not be viewed by women. While Papa-Nnukwu is portrayed in a generous light as a wise elder, the shortcomings of his beliefs are also revealed, and he is not idealised. Similarly, Father Amadi is shown in a positive light as he attempts to make Catholicism relevant for a contemporary Nigerian congregation by the use of the Igbo language and songs, and as he pays attention to Kambili, encouraging her to play football and express herself. (Stobie 424)

Jaja's defiance against his father got some shape when he actually began honouring his grandfather. Jaja wanted to be associated with the history and culture of his own people. Though Eugene had told him not to take any food from their grandfather's house, still they ate there. This is not a mere decision to go against his father, rather this is deliberately done only to go against the orthodox White man's Catholicism which his father actually borrowed. Jaja's decision to be

imprisoned for years without being formally charged was just another way of expression of loyalty to his own family. He is not the perpetrator; rather his father is. He is the one who had created a lot of trouble in the family. Jaja's decision to protect his mother by being the alleged murderer elevated him from the common patriarchal society. He entered into the role of father figure and therefore became the representative of what the Nigerians should be. When the police questions the family, "Jaja did not wait for their questions; he told them he had used rat poison, that he put it in Papa's tea" (*Purple Hibiscus* 291).

Conclusion

The postcolonial Nigeria is something different from that of the previous one. Oil here dominates the economy and people of different tribes and states wanted to have the financial strength and thereby the authority of power. Even after the independence, Britain was continuously supporting the anti-Nigerian people to have the authority of the oil. They were providing arms and ammunitions to make a war between the three main tribes – Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, and Yoruba – and there were also many small tribes. This circular power machinery worked for the economic growth of Britain. The independent nation Nigeria was just poisoning its own roots and someday it will be uprooted as the readers saw Beatrice poisoned by her own husband. The Achike family had a different milieu in their house but after the demise of Eugene, it gained stability. Jaja and Kambili bloomed to a new level and gained identity. The political upheaval and the religious dominance both became the active agent joining hands with each other to dominate people. Rich people like Eugene cannot understand the problems of the common people. But in his house also there were problems: there was no bonding in members in the house. Family members had problems with the head of the family. Auntie Ifeoma, who was not at all motivated by the foreign western culture, who took care of her father Papa, was also disturbed in her working area. So postcolonial Nigeria had its own problem rooted in its own people. The ethnic tensions between the groups and political turmoil in the country had made Nigeria a wasteland and Achike family, Ifeoma's family and Papa's house are the microcosms of all the Nigeria.

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