NETIZEN: THE APORIA OF 'POWER TALES' IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract.
The paper interrogated the theme of dysfunctional electrical power situation in Nigeria from an artistic work entitled 'Power Tales' by Ike Francis as a disincentive in transforming Nigerian citizen to netizens as well as the major reason behind the country's negative place in the digital divide. The issue of digital divide has always been viewed from the perspective of quality of access to the internet; the paper explores a different aspect of the issue to extend to material logistics of electrical power supply as a fundamental problem which could catalyze other factors of digital divide. By interrogating the meta-codes presented in the art installation, the paper identifies discreet and implicit undertones of sociopolitical and cultural contents of the artistic work. The authors present their readings of Power Tales as a visual semiotic on the Nigeria infrastructural dysfunction.
Information is more than an "object" from which knowledge is gleaned; it is a space where meaning is negotiated within the dynamics of changing contexts. This changes the way we think about inquiry and takes into account the point of view of the researcher and the researched. Cyberspace is radically altering these notions of individuality as modernist conceptions of identity grounded in traditional psychological perspectives are being replaced by a reflexive and decentered sense of self. (Sullivan p.156)
Universal energy access is so fundamental that the United Nations has launched a major global initiative that calls for universal access to modern energy services by 2030. This effort will attempt to address the 1.3 billion people who lack access to electricity worldwide, including nearly 300 million people in India alone.

Keywords: Power Tales, Contemorary Nigeria, Electrical Power Supply, Netizen, Information

Introduction

The relationship between consistent and tenable electrical energy supply with effective administration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) may not be apparent in advance economies such as the United States of America where reliable electricity supply is not a problem for its citizens. But in many countries of the south pole of the globe such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Bangladesh, and many less economically advanced countries, adequate electrical or alternative new energy resource is crucial for a smooth ICT development. A topical essay on the issue of electricity gap written by Richard Caperton and Mari Hernandez drew our attention to re-thinking the major theme in an art installation by Ike Francis entitled 'Power Tales'. The work interrogates a concept of electricity divide through the visual mode of research as a means of presenting the looming digital divide problem in Nigeria.

In a country such as USA, electricity is a basic necessity to the extent that the government ensured an access to affordable, reliable and safe electricity for its citizens. This is "a moral and legal contract that electric companies entered into with the American people, and it generated a great amount of business for them as it fueled the rapid growth of our nation's middle class."(Caperton and Hernandez, 2013). Unfortunately, the same cannot be said to be the situation in many African countries. In the art installation, Ike Francis presents electrical divide as a fundamental stage towards the condition of digital

divide with its implication of impeding a speedy transition of Nigerian citizens to netizens and participants at the electronic common wealth of cyber-culture.

Electrical supply assumes a serious concern in Nigeria because citizens depend on central grid for distribution of services and the government has not been able to meet up with the challenge. In lieu of the above undertone, the intermittent and erratic supply of electricity in Nigeria still subsists despite Nigeria's abundant human and natural resources. As the advanced world adapt to changes toward superefficient alternative energy resources such as solar, smart-grid and new energy storage systems, Nigeria still grapples with outdated modes of energy supply. While traditionally known digital divide factors such as; income level, religion, age, gender and quality broad band access to internet will aggravate internet penetration in a smaller country such as Senegal, in Nigeria with inadequate energy plan for its citizens, the high cost of maintaining diesel-powered generating plants by Internet Service Providers (ISP) makes internet services expensive, slow and unstable. Nigerians resort to harmful and eco-destructive cheap electrical power generators which end up destroying their personal computers and ICT gadgets. The unstable electrical power situation in Nigeria has become a cliché among Nigerians to exclaim 'NEPA!' when reacting to electrical power outage or its erratic supply. The NEPA acronym formerly stood for the defunct National Electrical Power Authority though had changed its names severally but maintains the same obnoxious essence of unreliability. This psychological impact on the populace is debilitating and non-productive.

The significance of tracing the electrical energy condition in Nigeria is that without adequate alternative energy sources in the country, electrical energy becomes the most affordable, eco-friendly, and reliable energy supply for a smooth transition of Nigerian citizens into netizens. The netizen subject incidentally is the seminal thrust of Ike Francis' Practice-based research program where Nics Ubogu is the active project supervisor. The authors find themselves at the crossroads where; lack of sustainable electrical supply meets with inadequate access to the electronic media, theory meets practice, and analogue processes of geographically-bounded citizens meet with limitless horizon of the virtual netizens.

The paper interrogate 'Power Tales' art installation to deconstruct the implicit reference to electrical power supply as a major cause for the widening gap of digital divide in Nigeria. By analyzing the creative elements used in creating specific metaphors in the three glass cubes, we argue that despite Nigeria's abundant human and natural resources, the country is yet to meet its ideal potentials to transform its citizens into netizens. Miniatures of emblematic archi-sculptural works from Nigeria, Senegal and the United States of America were used as central creative elements in the reflective glass cubes. The sculptural replicas were combined with other creative elements to evoke the effect of electrical power supply situation in the countries under focus. The three glass cubes present in visual metaphors the narratives of electrical power supply as an important reason underlying the wide gap of digital divides

existing between Nigeria with material and immaterial infrastructural deficiency and other countries where infrastructural facilities assume important place.

Presenting Power Tales as Metaphor for Digital Divide

'Power Tales' art installation consists of three glass cubes representing Nigeria, United States of America and Senegal. Inside the cubes are super iconic forms of the *Statue of Liberty* in New York, *Monument of African Renaissance* in Dakar and the *National Theatre* in Lagos. These countries were formerly under British and French colonial rule. The super-icons have imbedded narratives of national identity, power and cultural pride for citizens of their host countries. The replicas of the monumental artifacts were all remodeled in miniatures and they work in concert with circuit panels, one-way reflective mirrors and light to evoke interpretive signs of the state of infrastructures in the respective countries. Thus, the state of electrical power supply in an area is basic to the smooth functioning of the internet and its gadgetries. This affects the level of participation on internet spaces and determines the gap of digital divide among the countries mentioned above. We highlight the archi-sculptural forms as metaphors for subsisting national images of the countries they represent. We also show their fundamental similarities, differences and iconological inferences as semiotic visual texts for understanding their host countries' socio-political images.

The histories of these projects are woven with discreet connections of similarities and differences. Firstly, serving heads of governments in the respective countries in the respective countries conceived the idea of the project during the tenure of their government. Secondly, fabricators in foreign countries constructed the projects outside its host countries and later installed them in the countries under focus. Thirdly, the monumental projects merge sculptural and architectural influences through deriving inspiration from humans and the things humans use. From these histories, *Power Tales* presents a visual metaphor through the iconographical reading of elements presented in the glass cubes.

Further insights into the forms show that the French sculptor Frederic August Bartholdi designed the *Statue of Liberty* Gustav Eiffel led a team of artists. It was a gift of conviviality from the people of France to the United States of America and then President Grover Cleveland dedicated the edifice at New York Harbour on October 28, 1886. The design of *National Arts Theatre* however is from an existing cultural facility called 'The *Palace of Sports and Culture'* in Varna, Bulgaria. The former Military Head of Nigeria, General Yakubu Gowon initiated the idea of the project to host the second edition of the World Festival of Black Arts (FESMAN) after its inaugural edition in 1966 at Dakar Senegal. In 1977 the complex played host to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac 77) at Iganmu/Orile inLagos, Nigeria. A Bulgarian construction company called Technoexportsroy constructed and completed the project 1976. President Abdoulaye Wade conceived the third form *Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine (Monument of African Renaissance*. A Senegalese architect, Pierre Goudiaby design

the structure while the pre-fabricated, construction and assembling of the project in Dakar is by a North Korean company known as Mansudae Overseas Projects. On April 4, 2010 in Quakam a suburb of Dakar, the government commissioned the project in a well attended ceremony.

The *Statue of Liberty* heralds freedom for the new-found land where exiled and the repressed could come and experience freedom. The copper statue had continued to attract visitors to New York ever since its installation at the Liberty Island. A sonnet by the American poet Emma Lazarus reads, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This explains the symbolism of the form and to which the United States of America anchor their diplomatic policy.

Fig.1 Detail from 'Power Tales' Cube 1.The *Statue of Liberty*

Monument of African Renaissance is Located in Quakam, a suburb of Dakar. It prides as the tallest sculpture in Africa with composite forms of a man, his wife and child. The man signifies establishment, the woman suggests domestic stability while the child sitting on the shoulder of the giant suggests standing on established civilizations to make new advances. The form reminds us of Isaac Newton's quotes that "if I see further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". In the above context, the child who sits on the man's right shoulder symbolizes a "Y-gen" netizen who uses past and existing experiences as knowledge base for the contemporary societal requirements. During the commissioning of this project, former President Wade Abdoulaye noted that the monument represents "Africa's potential, rebirth and liberation from centuries of ignorance, intolerance and racism".

Unlike the glass cube representing New York, the cube representing Dakar does not have luxuriant spread of lights rather; the lights are steady and attractive. In spite of the country's lean human and natural resources, they have been able to make prudent use of their limited resources. With barely over 15 million people, there is a vibrant tourism culture which attracts foreign investors and has improved the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country. This attributes to internal constant electrical power supply which fritters to other aspects of developments including powering an adequate transformation into technological society.

Fig.2. Detail from 'Power Tales' Cube 2. *Monument Of African Renaissance* **in Dakar**

The third glass cube consists of a replica of "National Theater", ICT wastes, L.E.D lights in one-way reflective glass cube. The spread of lights in this cube are many compared to fig.2 however, these lights fluctuates intermittently thereby giving a partial grasp of its scale and luminescence. Unlike the feelings of dynamism and hope evoked by the human forms of figures 1 and 2, the military hat design of National Art Theatre evokes negative connotations of political instability, repression, pervading corruption, dramatic sense of stagnation and a long journey into moral and economic abyss. Could this be attributed to a long period of military misrule, and stagnation in the country? Metaphorically, arranging multiple lights and beautiful elements from computer interiors evoke a plastic understanding of lack in the midst of abundance. Despite abundant human and natural resources, inconsistent electrical power supply and lack of proper infrastructure suffices for the general amnesia to adequately transforming its citizens and environments to a contemporary technological society.
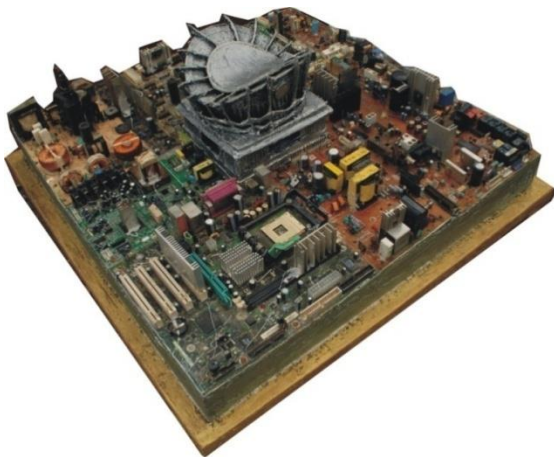

Fig.3. Detail from 'Power Tales' Cube 2.The *National Arts Theatre* **in Lagos**
Discussion

In a bid to situate the netizen phenomenon, the study throws up critical issues of postmodernism as cultural background that underpins the citizen's transition into netizen. We will begin our engagement through a systematic explication of postmodernism as a cultural background of the netizen via new ICT advancements. Netizen is a contemporary materialization of modern and postmodern developments which locates the micro-politics of broader globalism. It is a result of series of scientific, technological and

social inventions from modern and postmodern eras. While some studies had focused on netizen and its expanding scope, our intervention to this extant phenomenon,   question the issue of electrical power failure in Nigeria through visual metaphors presented in the art work – Power Tales. This approach provides a novel dimension towards understanding an aspect of digital divide and how it affects contemporary developments in Nigeria.

Let us advance our augment by merging design with the semiotics of contemporary Nigerian narratives presented in *Power Tales*. In creating 'Power Tale' the artist transmuted thoughts on this basic aspect of digital divide into visual metaphors through creative studio strategies. The effect enacts a plastic representation of the power problem in Nigeria from a comparative model of variable economic and political conditions.

The strategy of replicating forms on the one-way reflective glass cubes typifies the netizen notion of being and not being present, this further exude decenteredness and obliterate apprehensions of real boundaries. The reflections on the glass cubes produce multiple and varying views of objects and articulate a sense of poststructuralist notion of the signified as an unending process of signification. This condition subverts reality to simulacrum and returns it back to reality through the active participation of the audience in meaning making. The work illustrates a popular postmodern obsession to pluralistic sensibilities with implications that no single point of view is comprehensive of the depth, richness or complexities of the contemporary experience. This forms an infinite, interplay of elements of signifiers and signified to create metaphysics of presence. Just as the views presented within the cubes are endless so also are the meaning infinite depending on the respondent's approach to subject, time and space. The artistic work opens up democratic, accessible and discursive field where the gap between the audience and artist diminishes for a social and inter-textual construction of meanings.

Currently, internet had assumed pivotal role in human encounters. The scheme of the contemporary world requires a tacit grasps of the new techno-centric logic of ICT where netizens are key players in its power games. Based on this ubiquity of internet media in the society, Steven Best and Douglass Kellner had observed that internet is "instantaneously conveying global culture from one side of the earth to the other, making accessible the latest ideas, forms of culture, and modes of interaction" (Best and Kellner, 1991). In this concatenation of events, any real development relies on quality and smooth ICT access depends on stable supply of energy from electricity.

A formalistic analysis of incorporating waste materials from ICT, one-way reflexive mirrors and Light Emitting Diodes L.E.Ds for constructing massive cities signals the techno-capitalist material and immaterial world of the netizens. The interlinking of materials and approaches in constructing Power Tales calls to mind Marshall McLuhan's classical work 'medium is the message' (Mcluhan, 1964, p.7). This entails the intended and unanticipated influences of ICT materials or ideologies on humans and extending

of human selves into materializing encounters in human daily affairs. Applying this equation to the Nigerian context, the inter-mix of waste materials from ICT, mirrors and L.E.D lights is metaphoric of Nigerian contemporary encounters and evoke experiences of postmodernism and technological citizenship.

Digital Divide and the Aporia of Active Netizen-ship in Nigeria

Digital divide had become issue of international dimension; this affects countries' participation in emerging knowledge based economy. Accordingly, Greg Stuart identifies the digital divide issue in Nigeria as a result of inadequate government prioritization of needs, observing however, that, in "countries such as Nigeria, there are many material obstacles that stand in the way of access, leading to what is often referred to as, ―the digital divide‖ between those with access to the internet and those without" (Stuart 2010). Digital divide refers to the disparity between countries in accessing ICT and digital technologies. A number of factors are responsible for the differentials that exist among countries which result to unequal control in the power games of contemporary electronic community of the cyberspace. Electrical power situation is a major material obstacle to enjoying quality access to the internet in Nigeria.

The world is experiencing a paradigm shift because of advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). One of the areas where this paradigm shifts manifest itself, is in relocating citizens from geographically and physically bounded entities of a country to virtual citizens of the internet. Thus, from the above multiple modes of on-line and off-line participation of citizens, Michael Hauben coined the word 'netizen' to a new reality which combines the citizen's internet (on-line) and real-time engagements as a citizen of the net (Hauben and Hauben1997, p. 1). Similarly, Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove (2005, p. 179) identifies this shift from real-time citizens to virtual citizenship as "technological citizenship."

Meanwhile, adapting digital technology into modes of engaging labor, leisure and almost every other aspect of human engagements defines contemporary experiences. As a technologically conditioned citizen, netizen exists beyond limited geographical spaces by inter-mixing the analogue and digital processes towards actualization of their respective needs. A functional netizen culture in Nigeria will inspire pride among Nigerian citizens to take part in the global economy with a mindset of "I produce, therefore I am" and not the subsisting "I consume therefore, I am". The later comes with unsure energy to power distribution and access to the internet. A beggarly attitude towards availability of energy supply for productive engagement in the internet is behind the wasteful indulgence as consumers of others' cultural products. Instead of the healthy exchanges of 'give and take' which is typical of advanced countries, Nigerian youths misapply productive time into peeping at what is trending in other part of the world. This has emasculative burden on the psychology of our future generation as a country. Taking a cue from the child on the giant's shoulder in *Monument of African Renaissance* in Dakar, the youth should learn from past colonial experiences of Western modernism and postmodernism to understand the power games of the

contemporary era. Facilitating adequate power supply through electrical, solar or any other recent energy source will guarantee easy access to global electronic communities. This enhances cultural exchanges and growth of netizens among Nigerians and beyond. It opens a new vista which extends the scope of digital divide to include material infrastructure such as electrical power supply. It directs the attention of readers to the discreet and topical issues about electrical power condition in Nigeria through evocations in artistic work. (justify) 'Power Tales' raise our consciousness to the basic importance of electrical power supply in bridging the gap of digital divide.
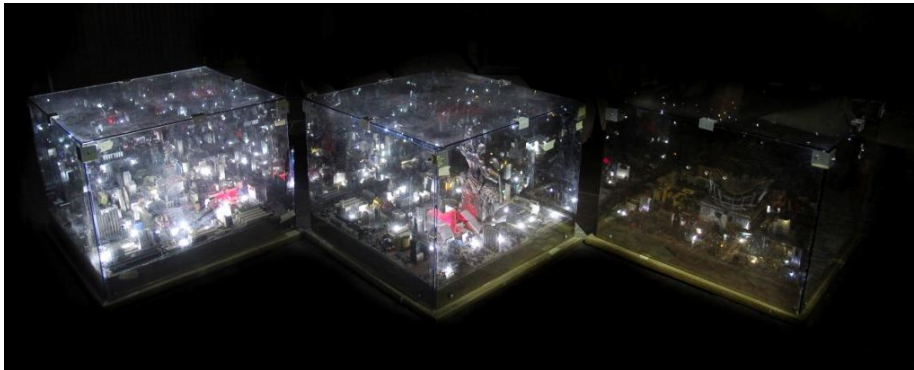
Power Tales

Fig. 4, Power Tales, 2013 Installation Art. W- 64cm X L- 64cm X H -51cm   Installation

Conclusion

From the visual metaphors presented in Power Tales, the paper expresses hope in solving this problem through a well articulated electrical power plan as a way of bridging the digital gap and improving its citizens' profile at the electronic commonwealth of the netizen.

No doubt, the role of citizens in the twenty-first century had changed drastically, not only as a result of the paradigm shift that have occurred through experiences of modernism and postmodernism, but rather due to proliferating the use of ICT to precipitate shifting identities and participation within a larger global community. These depend on availability of electrical or alternative energy supply which is a prerequisite to a smooth transmission of electronic community of netizens. Unfortunately, providing this basic infrastructure has been unwittingly controlled by a syndicate of government agencies, politicians, pseudo-investors and their foreign collaborators.

The government and its agents had concertedly supervised the dysfunctional state of electrical power condition and this is a major reason behind the looming digital divide with low-level participation coming from Nigeria. Any governmental plan that guarantees steady electrical power supply goes a long way in mediating the power structure of its citizens. This will improve the citizen's active role as productive netizens instead of functioning merely as consumers at the techno-centric capital of cyberculture. With steady electrical power supply, it is easier to actualize the beneficial aspects of netizen-hood and bring about developmental implosion with citizens participating fully within the scheme of contemporary

electronic society. Such accomplishment will transform information to knowledge, knowledge into power and lifts the Nigerian netizens out from the stultifying burdens imposed by its pseudo-leaders.

Through choice of materials, creative approaches and display orientations, the artist had been able to harness creative elements as a strategy for exploring the topic through the facilities of the visual art. In its immersiveness, self-awareness within space and inclusiveness, installation art presents an apt language to present netizen and its experiences in Nigeria. The vast but scarcely activated space in the cube representing Nigeria demonstrates that in spite of the level of awareness and active population of young people in Nigeria, an unstable electrical power supply will definitely impinge on a widening gap of the digital divide with Nigeria on the downscale place of the graph.

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Notes

Due to inability to support standard electrical power supply, Nigeria citizen's participation in the ICT has not been commensurate to its abundant human and natural resources. An unending systemic inadequacies and systematic inept government agencies had transformed dysfunctional infrastructural problem into belonging to the group of have not in the digital divide.