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AFRICAN CHILD SOLDIERS: A POST-COLONIAL ANALYSIS OF UZODIMMA IWEALA'S *BEASTS OF NO NATION* AND ISMAIL BEAH'S *A LONG WAY GONE*

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ABSTRACT

This article**, African Child Soldiers: A Post-Colonial Analysis of Uzodimma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ismail Beah's *A Long Way Gone,*** explores the participation of children in wars in post-colonial African societies. In the aftermath of colonialism, Africa has been plagued by armed conflicts, a tragic consequence of which is the widespread recruitment of child soldiers. the general purpose of this paper is to contribute to the representation of the disruptions in child development as a result of the upheavals of war, and shedding light on the devastating impact of war on their innocence and humanity examining them through the lens of the postcolonial theory of Amilcar Cabral, who argued that colonialism destroyed traditional social and political structures in colonised societies. Postcolonial theory is crucial in this paper because it provides a framework for understanding the intricacies of translating African literature by addressing challenges rooted in colonial dynamics, and it examines the enduring legacies of colonialism and challenges Eurocentric narratives. The data analysis technique employed in this study is a descriptive procedure, involving the researcher's interpretation and understanding of the text and content analysis. The researcher finds that the legacy of colonialism, with its exploitative practices and destabilisation of African societies, has created an environment disposed to the recruitment of children into armed groups. The researcher also finds that there is a shift from the normal culture of caring for, cherishing, and protecting children to exposing them to the harshness of war, taking advantage of their vulnerability, naivety, and weakness.

Background to the Study

Child soldiers have a long history in Europe, dating back to the seventeenth century. They were used to arm and maintain knights in medieval Europe and to carry ammunition to cannon crews. The most well-known early use of child soldiers occurred during the 1212 Children's Crusade (Singer, 55). This was a march of thousands of unarmed boys from Northern France and Western Germany who thought they might take back the Holy Land by the sheer power of their faith, although many never left Europe, the majority of those who marched perished from disease and hunger, while some were sold as slaves by unscrupulous ship captains. Since then, children under the age of fifteen have been present in war in Europe. Helen Brocklehurst notes that "in the American Civil War, which was referred to as 'a boys' war', it is believed that about 250,000 to 420,000 boys in their teens served in the Union and Confederate armies and celebrated doing so" (449). Children were also used as soldiers in the two World Wars of the twentieth century.

In contrast, children are highly valued in African culture, where they represent continuity and are at the centre of family and community life. In many African cultures such as among the Akan of Ghana, and the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria, children are central to the household "women are constantly shown in their productive roles. They may be pregnant or bearing children or in company of children, or unfulfilled because they have no children of their own**"** (Jane Opoku-Agyemang, 126**)**. The child is an important figure in African society, as the society is structured around their lives. The involvement of children in conflicts is therefore not part of the African culture. Wars were fought by full-grown men who had been initiated into manhood. In fact, women and especially children are

not part of many war stories in Africa. Unfortunately, many African children are now forced to endure short, difficult, and brutal lives, with some being brutalised, abandoned, and forced to commit atrocities by warlords. Widespread recruitment of children as soldiers has been prevalent in many parts of Africa. The involvement of children in conflicts is not a part of traditional African culture. The involvement of children in armed conflict is rooted in the crisis of the post-colonial state, built upon ethnic conflicts over power sharing, identity, access to resources, the incapacity of the state to provide for and protect its citizens, and the collapse of social and economic structures in rural areas and massive migration to urban areas. According to Hart Jason in his essay "Politics of Child Soldier", he mentions that:

> The deployment of children as combatants has no place within this particular vision of childhood. Indeed, the very notion of children bearing arms, killing, or dying in battle represents the antithesis of the "safe, happy and protected childhood" imagined by the child rights project. (218-219)

Child soldiering is seen as part of an ongoing social breakdown, partly due to post-colonial economic and state breakdown. They are used as cheap expendable and malleable weapons of war. Their underdeveloped ability to assess danger means they are often willing to take risks and difficult assignments that adults will refuse. They are easier to condition into fearless killers and unthinking obedience. According to Bettina Schmidt: "Most of them do not know what they are getting into; most of them do not know the implication for the rest of their lives" (28). Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois also agree that war and violence have more effect on these children than can be immediately seen. Allison James and Alan Prout, see child soldiering as "part of an ongoing social breakdown, brought on, in part, by post-colonial economic and state breakdown" (30).

They have been reported in recent news items about wars as brutalised, abandoned, abused and turned to silage by warlords. A great part of Africa has recruited children as soldiers, making them commit atrocities. In Somalia, boys aged fourteen to eighteen regularly fight in warlord militias. In Rwanda, thousands of children were thought to have participated in the 1994 genocide in which Hutus killed hundreds of thousands of Tutsis. For example, Rädda Barnen reported that "one rehabilitation camp alone housed some 486 suspected child genocidaires. The boys were all younger than fourteen when they allegedly took part in the mass killings of thousands" (60).

An African Research Bulletin released in May 2006 reported that "in states such as Angola, Burundi, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda, children, some no more than seven or eight years of age, are recruited by government armed forces almost as a matter of course," while rebel forces in Sierra Leone were known to recruit children as young as five (41). This picture has overshadowed the important position the child occupies in most African communities. Something has happened to the values which many African societies hold so dear. As in other regions, the phenomenon is rooted in the crisis of the post-colonial state. According to Alcinda Honwana, the involvement of children in armed conflict is a manifestation of this crisis, built upon:

> Ethnic conflicts over power sharing, identity and access to resources; in the incapacity of the state to provide for and protect its citizens; and in the collapse of social and economic structures in rural areas and the massive migration to urban areas. (2)

For instance, Graca Machel defined modern warfare in postcolonial states in terms of the 'abandonment of all standards' and a 'sense of dislocation and chaos', and argued that the emergence of such new wars has led to unprecedented levels of human rights violations against women and children. In doing so, Machel effectively located the phenomenon of child soldiers in the 'New Barbarism Thesis' of Robert Kaplan (11).

Literary artists paint a picture of a society that has completely broken down, highlighting the emotional impact of war and conflict on children. African fiction often portrays children as soldiers

in war and conflict, a tragic element that has drastically changed the genre over the past few decades. They tell stories of children who find themselves in war and conflict. children who suddenly become soldiers, their childhood is forcibly taken away from them, and they are made to become adults overnight to fend for themselves, protect themselves and fight to kill perceived enemies. Using the first-person narrative style most of the time, they give voice to these children. Literary artists present the ordeal of child soldiers, telling stories of children who suddenly find themselves in war and conflict, forced to become adults overnight to fight against perceived enemies. They paint a horrible picture of children suffering abuse and torture, often unaware of the implications for their lives.

Literary works mainly found in Africa depict children as combatants in wars, often suffering from hunger and substance abuse. These children are forced to perform atrocities under the influence of drugs, often subjected to abuse by adult commanders. Some notable African novels that highlight children's experiences of war include Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy,* Yemande Omotoso's *War Games,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun,* Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire,* Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Mad Dog,* Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, *Under the Tongue*, and *Without a Name.*

The Problem of the Study

The problem of this study is bordered on the fact that discourse on child soldiers is relatively understudied in African literary criticism, although many literary artists have captured it to some extent. Against this background, therefore, there is the need to discuss the child soldiers in post-colonial Africa using Uzodinma Iweala's Beasts of No Nation and and Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone*

Scope of the Study

This paper is limited to the study of Uzodinma Iweala's Beasts of No Nation and Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone.* The choice of these novels is based on the fact that both novels have war and child soldiering as their thematic preoccupations, and while Iweala sets his work in an unnamed West African country, Beah's is a memo of a child soldier in the Sierra Leone war of 1993.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research is the Postcolonial theory, which is a field of academic inquiry that emerged in the mid-20th century that encompasses a range of perspectives and approaches that analyse the effects of colonialism on societies, cultures, and individuals. The central focus of postcolonial theory is to understand and critique the lasting impacts of colonial domination on both colonised and colonising societies.

Postcolonial theorist Amilcar Cabral argued that colonialism destroyed traditional social and political structures in colonised societies. He argued that this was done in order to create a new social and political order that was more conducive to colonial rule. Amilcar Cabral was a prominent figure in the struggle for independence in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. He was not only a revolutionary leader but also a key postcolonial theorist. His central point of view was that colonialism had a devastating impact on traditional social and political structures in colonised societies. He wrote that "Colonialism is not only the exploitation of man by man, but also the destruction of national cultures. It is the destruction of African institutions, African culture, African languages"(39). Cabral argued that this destruction was essential to colonial rule, as it allowed the colonisers to impose their own values and institutions on the colonised. He also argued that this destruction had a profound impact on the colonised peoples, leading to a loss of identity and culture. Cabral contended that colonial powers, through their policies and actions, deliberately undermined and dismantled existing social and political systems in order to exert control over the colonised populations. Cabral added that this

deliberate destruction of traditional social and political structures had severe and long-lasting consequences for colonised societies. It led to social disintegration, economic exploitation, cultural alienation, and political instability.

Cabral's argument about the destructive impact of colonialism on traditional social and political structures has been supported by many other scholars. For example, the South African historian Walter Rodney wrote that colonialism "smashed the old social and political institutions of Africa". In order to reclaim their independence and rebuild their societies, Walter advocated for a process of national liberation that involved both armed struggle and a concerted effort to reestablish indigenous systems of governance, culture, and social organization. Chimalum Nwankwo observes that war in Africa often followed in the wake of colonialism or, in some cases, occurred concurrently with it. Even amidst these conflicts, the Western world continues to exert its influence in various ways (2). Furthermore, the myriad problems that arose in the aftermath of independence in many African nations, including corruption, poor leadership, and disillusionment, are also scrutinised through the lens of postcolonial theory. The application of postcolonial theory in this research is crucial, as it enables an examination of the ways in which Africans have been relegated to the status of "the other," as well as the complex manifestations of corruption that have emerged since independence.

Post-Colonial Analysis of Uzodinmma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ismail Beah's *A Long Way Gone.*

In Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* the phenomenon of child soldiering is depicted with harrowing realism and emotional depth. While one is fictional and the other autobiographical, both works explore the traumatic rupture of childhood caused by war, and the political, cultural, and historical contexts that facilitate such violence. Set against the backdrop of unnamed and real African nations plagued by civil conflict, these novels interrogate the legacy of colonialism, the erosion of societal values, and the devastating loss of innocence.

The title of the novel, *Beasts of No Nation,* says a lot about the novel; it has no clear setting. 'No Nation' is an indication that there is no definite location. However, an author must have a setting in mind and it can be deduced that the setting is Nigeria since the author is a Nigerian "By keeping the setting indeterminate, however, the book also implicitly refers to other countries where civil wars have erupted and where child soldiers are being used" (John Hawley, 22). According to Meg Main, "this indeterminacy increases the horror of the book because Beasts of No Nation equates to Beasts of All Nations" (67). Agu and his fellow soldiers thus symbolise all child soldiers who were or are part of a war. It is an insightful depiction of the impact of war on the lives of children.

What is striking about both narratives is how they centre the child's voice. Agu's narration in disjointed, lyrical pidgin mirrors his psychological breakdown and trauma, while Beah's simple, clear prose belies the emotional weight of his experiences. Their voices, though stylistically different, are prevailing in evoking empathy, portraying internal turmoil, and highlighting how war hijacks the developmental arc of children.

Both novels begin with the characters' relatively peaceful lives, which are soon shattered by the outbreak of war. In Iweala's novel, Agu's idyllic childhood rooted in community, family, education, and Christian values is violently disrupted when civil war invades his village. The story is told by Agu, who traces his life as a child soldier from the moment he is abducted into a rebel army to the point of his recovery at a rehabilitation centre. The linear plot, intermixed with flashbacks and stream of consciousness sections, in its broken pattern design, gives a compelling account of Agu's vulnerability as a child soldier. At the battlefront, Agu engages in different types of violence and suffers various forms of abuse. As the novel opens, he has just been separated from his father, who was killed in front of his terrified eyes. He is hiding from rebel soldiers who capture him and force him to become a child soldier or die. The confusion of a child who has just seen the gruesome

murder of his father and is left alone to help himself is seen in the opening of the story. It reveals the beginning of the suffering of a child:

> It is starting like this. I am feeling like insect is crawling on my skin, and then my head is just starting to tingle right between my eye, and then I am wanting to sneeze because my nose is itching, and then air is just blowing into my ear and I am hearing many thing: the clicking of insect, the sound of truck grumbling like one kind of animal, and then the sound of somebody shouting, TAKE YOUR POSITION RIGHT NOW! QUICK! QUICK QUICK! MOVE WITH SPEED! MOVE FAST OH! In a voice that is just touching my body like knife. (1)

Similarly, Beah's memoir opens with his love for American rap music and the hope of performing at a talent show, but his life is derailed when rebels attack his village, leading to the murder of his family and the destruction of his home. Beah describes the civil war that destroyed his mother country, Sierra Leone, between 1991 and 2003 and how it affected his life in various ways. Sierra Leone is an Anglophone country in West Africa Sierra Leone's civil war stands out from other conflicts because of the extensive use of child soldiers by the rebel group the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), and the government forces.

Ishmael describes how he flees brutal rebel soldiers; Beah's story begins with the attack of the rebels of the RUF on his village Mogbwemo in 1993 which leads to the separation from his family and which causes the twelve-year old Beah to wander, alone travel miles from home on foot with a group of boys, around the countryside, for months and gradually being reduced to a life of raw survival instincts. After learning that his family has been killed by the rebels, Beah is made to join the government army at the age of thirteen in search of protection and food. In the army, the child Ishmael transforms into a ruthless drug addict and a child soldier who only wants to avenge the deaths of his loved ones.

It is clear in the novels that Agu and Beah have no intention of joining a rebel group when they first come in contact with the war. When they encounter the rebels, however, they are presented with what Lawrence Langer calls a "choiceless choice" (Whitehead 34). Agu for example, was alone in a secluded place, separated from his parents; how can a ten-year-old child defy a rebel army and its Commandant? Even though the Commandant asks Agu if he wants to be a soldier, everyone knows that declining his offer would mean death. Being forced to join, the reader immediately feels sorry for Agu. He is overwhelmed by everything. The reader is left as overwhelmed as Agu himself as he tries to make sense of his new surroundings and his new identity. He says simply, "What am I supposed to be doing? So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier" (13). The helplessness reflected in Agu's language mirrors his sense of being overwhelmed by outside forces. As soon as he becomes a rebel, the tender-hearted Agu is already worrying about what it would be like to kill a person. Beah, on the other hand, joins the government army for protection and food after learning his family is dead. Beah unwillingly becomes a child soldier, but he quickly finds a sense of meaning in his new army life: "I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore" (124). He became completely unaware of the dangerous and crooked road that his life was taking. The war machinery takes advantage of his vulnerability, exploiting his fears, hunger, and need for belonging. For two years as a child soldier, he has contact with actual combat. During the short training they receive, the army superiors try to indoctrinate him and the other child soldiers and instill hatred for the rebels into them by constantly repeating the same sentence: "Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you" (112).

The first day of fighting is a terrible day for Beah. He sees his life turning for the worse. He is no longer running, but he is now part of the army that kills and brutalises people, something he never thought could happen to him. This event marks for Beah the beginning of his transformation into a

vicious child soldier, since he had no problem shooting his gun after this first mission (120). His experience triggers something inside him that he does not understand, and makes him lose compassion for others. He loses his real being. He loses his sense of self. He was no longer a normal kid. The drugs he is fed on a daily basis also contribute to the numbing of his emotions and to his transformation into a fierce killer. The drugs numb him to such an extent that he does not even feel pain when he is shot in the foot: "I remember feeling a tingle in my spine, but I was too drugged to really feel the pain, even though my foot had begun to swell" (157).

Both novels expose how war perverts the natural journey from childhood to adulthood. Agu and Beah are denied the rites of passage traditionally afforded to young boys in their communities. Instead of transitioning into manhood through communal rituals, they are inducted into violence through rape, murder, and indoctrination. Agu, identifies with an animalistic persona, shedding his humanity in order to survive. Beah, fueled by drugs and vengeance, becomes desensitised to killing. Both undergo a distorted form of maturation, forced into a grotesque version of adulthood defined by brutality and moral disintegration.

Through flashbacks, the war experiences of Agu and Beah juxtapose with memories of their childhood. Agu's recollections of school, family dinners, and Bible stories serve as reminders of his lost innocence and contrast sharply with the horror of war. Beah similarly remembers the warmth of his grandmother's love, peaceful village life, and youthful dreams. These memories not only emphasise the tragedy of their transformations but also highlight what war destroys, not just lives, but culture, values, and identity.

Agu's memory Iweala creates Agu's life before the war so vividly, thus showing a perfect society free of violence. He is a boy with promise whose life has been destroyed by war and whose dreams are shattered. Flashbacks sometimes pop up without warning but they are also often announced by Agu, who states that these memories come back to him when he closes his eyes. "Behind my eye I am seeing how one day, the younger children began to be growing thinner" (75).

Agu, is portrayed as a child who had an ideal life before the war. Agu's ideal life shows what an ideal society is supposed to be and the ideal life of children in it. Agu is a child who is loved and cared for by his father, a school teacher and his mother, a staunch Christian. He is a boy who loves education and is anxious to go to school. His love for reading at a very tender age makes his mother call him "Professor" as he is always asking his mother to read stories to him. His interest in these stories especially the Bible stories makes him curious to learn reading, encouraging him to learn to read even before he starts schooling. His desire for education makes him try to prove to his father that he is old enough to go to school. "I was always asking him every day, tomorrow can I be going to school, and he was always saying to me, Agu just wait" (26). Agu's strong desire for education comes from his admiration of his father, the school teacher, and he wants to go to school so that he "can be learning everything he is knowing that is making everybody in the village to like him so much" (26). Though his mother is not well educated like his father, she is happy that she can read the Bible, "the only book that is mattering. This is why Pastor is liking her so much" (25). From the Bible stories his mother told him, Agu had great love for Christian values. At home, she tells him stories from the Bible and when she takes him to church Agu attends Sunday school to listen to "more stories from The Bible about Jesus and Joseph and Mary and telling us that we should watch out so that we are taking the hard road and not the easy road. They are always telling us that God is liking children so much that he is always watching us" (29).

At school, Agu, is the smartest person in his class. He is so brilliant that he skips one class. He takes all his lessons seriously, and his class teacher, Mistress Gloria loves him. She keeps telling him, "Agu make sure you study book enh? If you are studying hard you can be going to the university to be Doctor or Engineer" (28). Agu is also popular among his friends because all the other "children

were thinking that I am nice boy and also I am the best at all the games and all the lessons we are learning. So they were liking me and wanting to be my friend" (29).

As a cherished child of his parents and beloved student of his school teacher, Agu is in continuous tension between the demands of his child soldier experience and his life before the war. He always remembers the Bible stories his mother told him especially the story of David and Goliath, his love for reading and his desire to be a doctor or an engineer.

Throughout the narrative, Agu laments his lost childhood. He knows he has already lost his innocence from when he is recruited into the troop. "All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not," and "I am knowing I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child things" (36).

Under the influence of drugs and in the heat of their violent activities, Agu refers to himself as a "leopard" and the soldiers see each other as animals, since their physical abnormality makes them appear devoid of humanity. When the drugs are waning, however, Agu wonders how he can combine his contradictory desires of wanting to be a good boy and wanting to be a good soldier who follows all orders.

After two years of fighting, Beah is chosen by his lieutenant to participate in a rehabilitation process at Benin Home. It is in this therapy home that his past comes back to haunt him. Beah does not only suffer from physical withdrawal from the drugs, but also from emotional withdrawal from the people to whom he had become attached. The army had become his family and he unwillingly had to leave them in order to be rehabilitated. During rehabilitation, Beah, as well as the other boys, has various flashbacks and nightmares: "at night some of us would wake up from nightmares, sweating, screaming, and punching our own heads to drive out the images that continued to torment us even when we were no longer asleep" (148). It is at the rehabilitation center that Beah begins to feel remorse about all he had done. He laments how his community is being broken by this war. He remembers his days before the war and how they contrast with his war days:

> War has also destroyed all that held them together as people and the values which they held high. For example in Sierra Leone, old men are symbols of wisdom and respect. However, Beah once encounters a rebel threatening an old man and says: "before the war a young man wouldn't have dared to talk to anyone older in such a rude manner. We grew up in a culture that demanded good behavior from everyone, and especially from the young. Young people were required to respect their elders and everyone in the community" (33).

Before the war, children were valued and protected by the larger community; rituals were performed to mark the transition into adulthood. Now, family structures are disrupted and the emergence of insurrectional movements has affected the ability of social structures to protect children. It is not even clear what the fighting factions stand for, and no governmental services remain. There are no police officers protecting anyone, no one to feed and shelter the war orphans like Beah and no one to help the children separated from their families to find them. There is a complete breakdown of order. Beah laments on how harsh life has become for a child. The once peaceful and loving society, which is the ideal place a child should grow, has given way to chaos, heartlessness, killings and so much violence. All semblance of normal society has fallen apart.

It is important to note that the main motivation of Iweala and Beah is to critique the post-colonial systems that allow such violence to thrive. In A Long Way Gone, the Sierra Leonean civil war is linked to the country's wealth in diamonds and the political corruption that followed independence. Beah reflects on how war eroded traditional respect for elders and dismantled communal support systems. In Beasts of No Nation, Iweala's indeterminate setting universalises the experience, implicating many African nations with similar post-colonial struggles fragile institutions, failed

leadership, and exploitation by power-hungry elites. Both works suggest that child soldiering is not merely the result of civil unrest, but of deeply rooted systemic failures.

Iweala employs vivid imagery and bodily metaphors—defecation, vomiting, decay—to underscore the societal rot that produces child soldiers. His depiction of the Commandant's sexual abuse, arbitrary killings, and dehumanising discipline critiques a broader culture of impunity and moral collapse. Similarly, Beah's reflections on his numbness, his drug dependence, and his nightmares after rehabilitation reveal the enduring psychological scars left by war.

Iweala, through his narrative, highlights the rot in the especially in most African societies. The numerous references to defecation, urinating and vomiting suggest a breakdown of the social order. People ease themselves and vomit both out of pleasure and out of fear. Luftenant is portrayed as "going to toilet" anywhere for pleasure while Agu is so much afraid that, "I am wanting to cry and I am feeling I am having to go to toilet" (9). The bad smell shows that the decay is wide spread. In a village raid Agu recalls "in the corner, there is a desk being eaten by termite in the other corner is bed smelling like chicken and goat" (47). They portray the extent of degradation of the society which produces child soldiers and portray the child soldier as one who is constantly disturbed. Iweala uses imagery to show the decay in society, inhumanity and lack of regard for human life. The commandant kills at will, even members of his child soldiers troop. There is no respect for human beings as they are left to die just like animals. The body of one soldier whom he kills for annoying him is left "on the roadside with one big hole in his head and his eye wide open" (33). One child soldier also remembers his mother's body, blown apart like "meats" hanging from a tree while Strika, Agu's friend remembers his parents' headless bodies

Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* are depositories of the complex meanings of the child's existence in postcolonial society. The strength of the novels lies largely in their incorporation of factors that led children to violence. Violence affecting children, they argue, is germinal to a wide range of behavioural, psychological, social, economic, and political related problems at every level of society.

The narratives of Iweala and Beah serve as urgent calls to action, demanding a critical examination of the postcolonial structures. They remind us that the plight of child soldiers is not an isolated phenomenon but a symptom of broader societal ills that must be addressed through comprehensive and sustainable approaches to peacebuilding and social justice.

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