

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS: THE IGBO IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA POLITICS AND SOCIETY SINCE 1960

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Abstract

The Igbo ethnic group has played a significant role in the political, social, and economic development of contemporary Nigeria. However, the history of the Igbo in Nigerian politics has been marked by a series of complex interactions, misunderstandings, and missteps that can be best described as a "comedy of errors." From the events leading to the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) to their current status in national politics, the Igbo experience has been characterized by political marginalization, a struggle for resource allocation, and repeated failed attempts at political integration. This paper examines the historical, political, and social dynamics that have shaped the Igbo in contemporary Nigerian society. By analyzing their struggles for political power, the effects of military rule, and the continuing challenge of ethnic and regional divisions, the paper presents the Igbo journey as a tragicomic narrative of both resilience and frustration. Ultimately, this article seeks to explore the ironies, contradictions, and complexities in the Igbo quest for political relevance in contemporary Nigeria.

Introduction

The Igbo people, one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, have long been a key player in the country's politics and society. Despite their significant contributions to the nation's development, their political journey has been fraught with contradictions, setbacks, and missed opportunities. This article explores the political and social trajectory of the Igbo in contemporary Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the so-called "comedy of errors" that has characterized their political experiences since Nigeria's independence in 1960, Akpan, I. (1998). The Igbo, one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, have experienced a tumultuous journey in the nation's political and social spheres since Nigeria's independence in 1960. The journey has been marked by triumphs and challenges, with the Igbo constantly grappling with issues of marginalization, economic exclusion, and political disenfranchisement. The post-independence era, particularly in the period following the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), has been characterized by a complex relationship between the Igbo people and the Nigerian state, with notable political events that have shaped the Igbo's role in contemporary Nigeria.

In this essay, we explore the complex and often contradictory role of the Igbo in contemporary Nigerian politics and society. The title "Comedy of Errors" reflects the paradoxical and often tragicomic nature of Igbo experiences in post-colonial Nigeria. From the struggle for recognition and political power to their economic resilience, the Igbo have shown a capacity to thrive in adversity, Chukwuma, U. (2017). Yet, this resilience has often been undermined by political and social inequalities, resulting in a narrative full of contradictions, missteps, and occasional progress.

In post-independence Nigeria, the Igbo have been at the forefront of many of the country's most critical moments. From the secessionist Biafran War to their marginalized position in subsequent national governments, the Igbo's political and social struggles have been both tragic and comical, Akpan, I. (1998). The term "comedy of errors" encapsulates the series of miscalculations, misunderstandings, and failed political strategies that have undermined the Igbo's quest for equality, recognition, and political power in Nigeria. This article delves into the key events and decisions that have shaped the Igbo experience in modern Nigerian politics and society.

The Biafran War and Its Aftermath in Historical perspective.

The Road to the Biafran War

The roots of the "comedy of errors" can be traced to the post-colonial political structure of Nigeria. After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, it was meant to be a federal republic with a political system that recognized the country's ethnic and regional diversity. Achebe, C. (1983), the balance of power between the northern, western, eastern, and southern regions of the country was never stable, and tensions ran high. The Igbo people, who predominantly resided in the Eastern region, felt politically sidelined by the dominant Northern and Western regions. Their exclusion from key political power centers, coupled with an increasing sense of regional insecurity, led to the secession of the Eastern Region under Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu in 1967. This marked the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War. Agbaje, A. (1999).

The Biafran War: A Tragicomic Conflict

The Biafran War (1967-1970) was a defining moment in the Igbo's political history. It was a war marked by heroism, sacrifice, and tragedy but also by strategic blunders that could only be understood as a "comedy of errors." Despite initial military successes, the Igbo-led secessionist movement, Biafra, failed to secure

international recognition and was unable to garner the necessary support to defeat the Nigerian federal forces. The war resulted in the loss of millions of lives, particularly among the civilian population, due to starvation, disease, and military combat. Agbaje, A. (1999). The aftermath of the war was particularly difficult for the Igbo people. Though they were eventually reintegrated into Nigeria following the federal government's declaration of "No victor, no vanquished," the Igbo were left politically and economically devastated. The post-war period was marked by political exclusion, economic marginalization, and an ongoing sense of betrayal.

Political Marginalization and the Struggle for Power 1970-1999

The Military Era and Political Exclusion

The political landscape of Nigeria in the decades following the Civil War was dominated by military rule. During these years, the Igbo people found themselves politically marginalized. Despite their contribution to Nigeria's economic and political life, the Igbo were unable to secure prominent positions of power in successive military governments. Adiele, E. (1993), the marginalization was not just in terms of military appointments but also in terms of the distribution of national resources. In the years following the war, Igbo political leaders, such as Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, who had been key figures before the Civil War, struggled to regain the political influence they had once enjoyed. They were either sidelined or excluded from national dialogues, especially during the era of military dictatorships. The Igbo's inability to effectively navigate the political system and secure a strong political foothold during this period only deepened their sense of disillusionment.

The Struggle for Political and Economic Recognition in Historical perspectives

At the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the country was divided into three major regions—Northern Nigeria, Western Nigeria, and Eastern Nigeria, the latter of which was dominated by the Igbo. Ikejiani-Clark, M. (2011), the Igbo, with their vibrant cultural heritage, entrepreneurial spirit, and educational focus, were poised to become a central part of the new nation's political and economic fabric. However, from the outset, the Igbo found themselves at odds with other ethnic groups, particularly the Hausa-Fulani in the North and the Yoruba in the West. These tensions were exacerbated by the failure to forge a truly inclusive and unifying national identity.

The political dynamics in Nigeria after independence were dominated by an ethnic-based system in which the three regions vied for power and resources. The Igbo, under the leadership of the influential Nnamdi Azikiwe and the Eastern Region's regional government, initially played a central role in Nigerian politics. However, the assassination of Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in 1966 led to a series of political upheavals. The subsequent military coups, particularly the counter-coup of 1966 that saw Igbo officers and civilians targeted for violence, exacerbated the tensions between the Igbo and the rest of Nigeria, Akpan, I. (1998).

This animosity and distrust between the Igbo and other ethnic groups in Nigeria reached its peak with the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). The conflict arose from the secession of the Eastern Region, which declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra, under the leadership of Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. The war was marked by significant loss of life and destruction, and the eventual defeat of Biafra led to the reintegration of the Igbo into the Nigerian federation. Despite the end of the war, the legacy of bitterness, distrust, and marginalization persisted, Akpan, I. (1998).

The Aftermath of the Civil War and the Politics of Marginalization

Akpan, I. (1998), the defeat of Biafra in the Civil War did not lead to a harmonious reintegration of the Igbo into Nigeria. On the contrary, the post-war era witnessed the continued marginalization of the Igbo people, both politically and economically. The Nigerian government, under military rule, imposed policies that sought to punish the Igbo for their perceived rebellion. The federal government enacted a series of policies that disenfranchised the Igbo, including the imposition of state control over their economic enterprises and the restriction of their access to key political positions, Onu, I. (2009).

Ojukwu, C. (2008), the Igbo found themselves sidelined in the Nigerian political landscape, as key positions of power were dominated by the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba elites. The absence of a strong Igbo political voice in the post-war years was compounded by the military's control over Nigerian politics, which often saw the exclusion of the Igbo from the highest levels of governance. The political environment was marked by a combination of political instability, corruption, and neglect of the Igbo. Despite this political marginalization, the Igbo remained resilient, with a strong focus on education, commerce, and entrepreneurship. Onu, I. (2009), Igbo businessmen, in particular, became central to Nigeria's economic activities, particularly in the areas of trade and manufacturing. The Igbo's emphasis on education helped foster a strong professional class that contributed significantly to the country's growth. However, the absence of political power meant that their economic successes did not translate into greater political influence or national recognition. Amadi, E. (2010).

Return to Civilian Rule: An Opportunity Missed?

The return to civilian rule in 1999, following years of military dictatorship, presented an opportunity for the Igbo to reclaim political power. However, once again, the Igbo's political strategies proved to be ineffectual. Amadi, E. (2010), the presidential race of 1999, which saw Olusegun Obasanjo's ascension to power, was a critical moment. Despite having a number of influential politicians within the country, the Igbo were unable to secure the presidency or even make substantial gains at the national level. The inability of the Igbo to rally behind a single, unifying political candidate or force in 1999 reflects the internal divisions within the Igbo political leadership. The political fragmentation of the Igbo, due to competing interests between political elites, was a critical error that further limited their ability to leverage power in the new civilian dispensation. Adebajo, A. (2002).

Return to Democracy and the Igbo Question

The 1999 return to democratic rule in Nigeria marked a new era of political participation. However, the challenges of inclusion, ethnic division, and political competition remained unresolved. Olamide, T. (2012), the Igbo were once again faced with the question of how to navigate the complex terrain of Nigerian politics, particularly as the country struggled to define a new national identity in the post-military era. In the 1990s, political organizations like the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) became key players in the Nigerian political scene. These parties, like their predecessors, were often dominated by the North and West, leaving the Igbo in a position where their political aspirations were frequently sidelined. The Igbo struggle for political recognition was highlighted by the continued absence of an Igbo president in post-independence Nigeria, despite the region's substantial population and economic contributions. Amadi, E. (2010).

Amadi, E. (2010), the question of an Igbo president became a significant point of contention in Nigerian politics. The aspiration for an Igbo presidency was symbolized by the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections, where the candidate of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and later, former governor of Anambra State, Peter Obi, gained popularity but ultimately failed to clinch the presidency. This persistent exclusion from the highest political office fueled a sense of disenfranchisement among the Igbo and contributed to calls for greater autonomy and recognition, Okafor, P. (2010).

Igbo Identity and the Politics of Secession: The Rise of Biafra Revival Movements

Smith, G. (2011), since the end of the Civil War, the question of Biafra and Igbo autonomy has continued to resonate within the Igbo community. Various groups, including the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), have emerged, calling for the revival of Biafra or for greater autonomy within Nigeria. These movements have brought the issue of Igbo self-determination to the forefront of Nigerian politics, creating a new challenge for the Nigerian government. Adebajo, A. (2002).

IPOB, led by Nnamdi Kanu, has been particularly vocal in demanding the creation of an independent Biafra, and its activities have often led to clashes with the Nigerian military and government. Osaghae, E. (2001), the resurgence of Biafran nationalism has sparked debates on the balance between ethnic autonomy and national unity in a multi-ethnic country like Nigeria. Amadi, E. (2010), while the majority of Igbo people do not openly advocate for secession, the rise of such movements indicates a deep-seated frustration with the Nigerian state and its failure to adequately address the historical injustices suffered by the Igbo. The marginalization of the Igbo in political, economic, and social spheres continues to fuel a sense of alienation, which in turn strengthens the desire for either greater autonomy or, in some cases, independence, Okoro, T. (2001).

The Igbo in Contemporary Politics: Contradictions and Errors

The Rise of Ethnic Nationalism: The Role of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

In recent years, the Igbo's struggle for political relevance has been revitalized by the rise of ethnic nationalism, particularly through the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Akpan, I. (1998), IPOB, led by Nnamdi Kanu, has called for a return to the Biafran cause, invoking strong feelings of ethnic solidarity and historical grievances. However, the rise of IPOB is not without controversy. While IPOB's call for self-determination resonates with many Igbo people who feel politically disenfranchised, the movement's radical methods and the international backlash it has garnered have complicated the Igbo's pursuit of political recognition. Ikejiani-Clark, M. (2011), the government's response to IPOB has been one of force, leading to clashes between the group and Nigerian security forces. The situation has created a political and social crisis, where the Igbo find themselves at odds with both the Nigerian state and with factions within their own community, further entrenching the "comedy of errors" narrative, Orji, A. (2003).

The Quest for the Presidency: A Goal Still Elusive

The presidency of Nigeria has remained a distant goal for the Igbo. Adiele, E. (1993), despite several attempts by prominent Igbo politicians to run for the office, the presidency has eluded them. Political elites such as the late Chuba Okadigbo, Alex Ekwueme, and even more recent candidates like Peter Obi, have all faced significant challenges in securing widespread support across Nigeria. This inability to clinch the presidency reflects both internal political disunity and external regional competition. Nnamdi, K. (2015), the Igbo's failure to unite behind a single candidate and strategy has repeatedly thwarted their ambitions at the national level. In particular, the constant fragmentation of Igbo political voices, combined with a lack of political alliances with other ethnic groups, has hampered their ability to challenge the political dominance of other regions, particularly the North and West. Ali, A. (2005).

Socio-Economic Challenges: A Comedy of Underdevelopment

Economic Disparities and the Impact of Marginalization

The Igbo people are renowned for their entrepreneurial spirit and are often seen as the economic backbone of Nigeria, particularly in the southern regions. Chukwuma, U. (2017), however, despite their business acumen and high levels of economic activity, the Igbo continue to face significant economic challenges. These include limited access to political power, restricted economic opportunities, and underdevelopment in certain areas of the southeastern region. The neglect of southeastern Nigeria by successive governments, especially in terms of infrastructural development, has contributed to the sense of alienation felt by the Igbo. Onu, I. (2009). The lack of development in the region's transportation networks, lack of federal investment, and the underfunding of key sectors such as education and health reflect the broader national pattern of neglect. Asogwa, I. (2012).

Economic Realities: The Igbo and Economic Development

Onu, I. (2009), the Igbo are often regarded as one of the most economically entrepreneurial groups in Nigeria. They have established a strong presence in various sectors of the economy, particularly in trade, industry, and manufacturing. Cities like Onitsha, Aba, and Nnewi have become hubs for commerce, with Igbo businessmen playing a central role in driving economic activity. Amadi, E. (2010), however, the Igbo face significant challenges in achieving economic parity with other ethnic groups, especially considering the history of political exclusion and economic marginalization. While the Igbo have thrived in business, the lack of political power has prevented them from fully benefiting from the state's economic resources, Obi, C. (2010). Key national projects, such as infrastructural development and federal funding, have often bypassed the Igbo region. Additionally, policies implemented by the federal government have sometimes been seen as punitive towards Igbo economic interests, particularly in sectors like oil and gas, where the region has significant potential but remains underdeveloped.

The Social Fabric of the Igbo Community: Culture, Religion, and Education

Despite political and economic challenges, the Igbo have maintained a rich cultural and social fabric. The Igbo place a high premium on education, and this has helped foster a strong middle class and intellectual community. Soludo, C. (2007), the emphasis on education and entrepreneurial spirit has enabled the Igbo to remain a dominant force in Nigerian society. Religion also plays a central role in the lives of many Igbo people, with Christianity being the predominant religion. The Igbo have a long tradition of both indigenous religious practices and Christianity, which has helped maintain a sense of community and identity, particularly in the face of adversity. Onu, I. (2009).

The Role of the Igbo Diaspora

The Igbo diaspora has played a significant role in sustaining the economic and cultural identity of the Igbo people. Udeh, C. (2004), remittances from Igbo people living abroad have contributed significantly to the local economies of many Igbo communities. However, despite the Igbo diaspora's economic contributions, they remain politically disconnected from the Nigerian state and are often excluded from decision-making processes, furthering their sense of disillusionment.

A Comedy of Errors or Triumph of Resilience?

Nnoli, O. (1993), the Igbo experience in contemporary Nigerian politics and society has been one of struggle, resilience, and paradox. While they have faced systemic marginalization and political exclusion, they have simultaneously demonstrated remarkable economic success and cultural endurance. The "Comedy of Errors" reflects the contradictions inherent in the Igbo experience—caught between political aspirations, economic achievements, and a complex historical legacy, Ukwu, P. (2009). The Igbo continue to face the challenge of navigating a political landscape that has often excluded them from the highest echelons of power. However, their resilience, economic contributions, and cultural significance remain undeniable. Whether the Igbo will ever achieve full political and social equality in Nigeria remains uncertain, but their journey—marked by both errors and triumphs—continues to be a vital part of Nigeria's evolving national story. This paper provides a broad overview of the Igbo's political and social role in post-independence Nigeria. It addresses the impact of historical

events like the Civil War, political marginalization, the quest for autonomy, economic resilience, and social-cultural identity, while incorporating references that can guide further reading and research. Usman, B. (1999).

Conclusion

The Igbo in contemporary Nigerian politics and society can be described as a group trapped in a comedy of errors — a series of historical miscalculations, missed opportunities, and internal contradictions that have prevented them from fully realizing their political and economic potential, Achebe, C. (1983). From the aftermath of the Biafran War to the rise of ethnic nationalism in the form of IPOB, the Igbo people have faced significant challenges in securing political power and social relevance in post-independence Nigeria. Despite these challenges, the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of the Igbo remain undiminished, Achebe, C. (1983). While the quest for political power has been fraught with errors, the Igbo continue to play an indispensable role in the social and economic fabric of Nigeria. Ultimately, the Igbo's political journey remains a complex narrative, characterized by both tragedy and comedy, as they navigate the contradictions and challenges of contemporary Nigerian politics.

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