

## **NIGERIAN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY: A PERSPECTIVE OF IGBO LITERATURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Nigerian politics is characterized by many antisocial behaviours like god-father syndrome, thuggery, electoral malpractices, extermination of lives, bribery and corruption, imposition of candidates on citizens, fake/empty promises, violence, tribalism, nepotism and wasteful spending. Apart from election periods, one of the ways by which people get to know about these vices is through their literature. Literature mirrors the society's behaviours. It informs, persuades, convinces, mobilizes and even caricatures the ways and manners by which some of these abnormal practices listed above are exhibited. It is on this note, therefore, that this paper sets out to x-ray politics and democracy in Nigeria through literature. To do this effectively, six Igbo literature texts are examined. The six books under review cut across the three genres of literature – prose, drama and poetry. The social ills characterized by Nigerian politics are exposed and recommendations were made on how to achieve good governance. The paper concludes by urging Nigerians in general to patronize their indigenous literature so as to help achieve a sustainable democracy and stable political system.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literature is an art that portrays the people's way of life in a particular setting. It serves as a mirror that reflects the tradition and culture of a society. Whether oral or written, literature embodies prose, drama, and poetry. The important thing to note about literature is the high premium it places on the character, culture, traditions and language development of the people in the society. Days are gone when the primary function of literature was purely entertainment. Today, literature gives useful information on the people's way of life, their economic, social, political, education and general wellbeing.

Talking about Politics, it embodies the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having powers. It could also mean activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization (<http://www.google.com>.)

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2011:214) defines politics as the act of science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity such as a nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs.

Politics could also be seen as the science or art of political government; the practice or profession of conducting political affairs, political methods or manoeuvres, political principals or opinions, the use of strategy or intrigue in obtaining powers, control or status

(<http://www.the-free-dictionary.com>). In agreement with the above explanations, Eke (2013:59) states that politics is (i) who gets what, when and how (ii) a study of ideas, affairs and the attainment of governmental power.

Based on the above, politics is the practice and theory of influencing other people. More narrowly, it refers to the activities associated with the government of a human community such as a country or state. Furthermore, politics denotes the activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization. However, for the purpose of this write-up, we shall be looking at politics as it concerns governance, particularly in Nigeria.

## **THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY**

Democracy is a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of the state typically through elected representatives. Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary (2010) explains democracy as the government by the people on which the supreme power is vested on the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. Abraham Lincoln as quoted on <http://www.ait.tw/in> says "Democracy is a government of the people by the people and for the people". Studies in Humanities teach that democracy is the system of government with four basic elements:

- A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
- The active participation of the people, as citizens in politics and civic life
- Protection of human rights of all the citizens
- A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens

## **POLITICS IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria is a Federal Republic with executive power exercised by the president. The government of Nigeria is also influenced by the composition and management of the upper and lower houses of a bicameral legislature. The president, however, is the head of state, the head of government, and the head of a multi-party system. Nigerian politics takes place within a framework of a federal, presidential, representative democratic republic, in which executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is held by the government and the two chambers of the legislature: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Together, the two chambers make up the law-making body in Nigeria, called the National Assembly, which serves as a check on the executive arm of government. The highest judiciary arm of government in Nigeria is the Supreme Court of Nigeria. Nigeria also practises separation of powers.

There is no gain-saying the fact that Nigerians crave for good governance, and that politics is the part of the process by which such governance is made possible. As part of the activities comprising politics, political parties compete with one another for supremacy in elections by making their intentions known to the electorate via pledges made in the election manifestos and election campaigns so that at the end, the winner of the election is believed to be the choice of the majority. However, politics in Nigeria is more often than not, characterized by vices such as election rigging, thuggery, violence, ethnic/religious crises, political apathy, coups d'état, etc, and these vices invariably mar the political process such that the end result does not usually represent the people's choice. Nigeria has a long history of such political

crises both in the pre- and post-independence era. For instance, there was the Kano Riot of 1953 (pre-independence era), census crises of 1962/63, Action Group crises of 1962, 1964 federal election crises, Western Nigeria election crises of 1965, the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) and the general election crises of 1979 and 1983. At this juncture, it is worth mentioning that Nigerian politics has also witnessed a lot of setbacks from military coups. The first military coup in Nigeria took place on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1966. Since then, Nigeria has witnessed six successful military coups and three unsuccessful ones. The last one was the removal of the interim government of Chief Ernest Shonekan by the military led by General Sani Abacha in 1993.

Since the epoch-making transition to civil (democratic) rule on May 29, 1979, which ushered in the administration headed by Olusegun Obasanjo, the journey to date has not been smooth. Moreover, the just concluded 2015 general elections, which ushered in the government of President Muhammadu Buhari is not an exception in this saga of political crises. However, it is noteworthy that despite the problems and challenges facing politics in Nigeria, the country's democracy has managed to stay on its feet without undue military intervention since May 29, 1999.

## **NIGERIAN POLITICS AS REFLECTED IN IGBO LITERATURE**

In a real democratic dispensation, people decide and choose their leaders and their leaders are accountable to them. The people decide on who represents them in the parliament and who heads the government at the national, state and local government levels. They do so by choosing competent persons from competing parties in regular free and fair elections, democratically conducted.

The political situation in Nigeria presently is far from the ideal. The god-father syndrome for example, which results in the imposition of leaders, is the order of the day. The number of party stalwarts and influential and rich people, a candidate knows count. This is x-rayed in '*O Ji Ihe Nwata* by Okoro (2006:11) where the people of Umuoma gathered to decide on who should be their king since the government has requested them to send a leader to represent them.

Iruoha, one of the kinsmen, after greeting his people says;  
A si na agba e yiri eyi ka ogbenye jiri buru ogaranya.  
Abali anọ gara aga ka anyị gurụ akwụkwọ ndi goomentị  
obodo anyị deere anyị banyere ihoputa eze ga-achi  
obodo a. Ubochi ahụ, anyị sirị onye o bula laa oha  
ajujụ na ohia uche, were anya okenye ji ele ihe di  
n'akpa dibia mata onye anyị kwesiri ichi eze ga-achi  
obodo a. Onye nke ga-agachitere anyị ozi n'aka ndi  
goomentị. Ugbu a egede esirila. O buzi onye kwuo  
uche ya (p10)

Four days ago, the government wrote us, requesting  
us to elect a king that will rule our community.  
That day, we requested every one of us to go home  
And sleep over the matter in order to select a king that will  
rule over us and represent us in government. Now the die is cast. It is  
time for us to elect a person of our choice.

This is the ideal idea of democracy. The community is meant to select their representatives. However, because of the evils and corruption; respect for money and undue affluence which have eaten deep into the flesh of Nigerian politics, Anyadike, one of the kinsmen quips:

“Onye ọ bụla n’ime anyị amarala na ego  
na-achi ụwa taa; ọ bụ onye ji ego ka ọ n’eru  
n’okwu na gọmentị. N’ihi nke a, ana m asị ka  
anyị lechaa elechaa tupu anyị eloo; karia ilo ụtara  
na ogwu; asikwanu m kwukwe, aga m asi ka  
Okparakụ bụrụ onye anyị ga-echi eze”.

Every one of us knows that money rules the world  
today; it is only the rich that can speak out in  
government. Because of this, I am of the opinion  
that we look well before we leap to avoid  
making a mistake. If I am to say, I will suggest  
that Okparaeke should be crowned.

Ideally, Okparaeke is not the people’s choice in the text under review, but because he donated large sums of money for some community projects, some individuals strongly recommended him for the kingship stool not minding how he got his wealth. Having been bought over, his supporters thwart the community’s plan of crowning a member of the Isiguzo family their king as tradition and custom demand. One of them says:

“Kedu onye ọ bụ n’ezinaụlọ Isiguzo?  
Ha buteliri igu ewu tara ma ya fọdu  
ịchikọta ọha obodo Ụmụọma”.

Who is it in Isiguzo’s family?  
Can they fend for themselves?  
talk less of the people of Ụmụọma.

From the above, it can be deduced that in such political issues, money at times ‘talks’. For instance, because, Isiguzo is from a wretched family, he is not given fair treatment; he is denied his right because he has no money. In the Nigerian society today, there are competent and worthy people who, like Isiguzo can hold certain positions and give good account of them, but because they are not rich and therefore cannot obtain the nomination form, are relegated to the background. This attitude at times pushes such people to look for ‘godfathers’. In the long run, they remain indebted to these godfathers and are accountable to them (godfathers) instead of the masses that they represent. Democracy demands that the rights of the minority and less privileged be protected always. There should be equal rights for everybody, both rich and poor. Government should be based on the consent of the people governed. The people governed are sovereign, they are the highest in ranking and power belongs to them.

In *Omume Onye Na-Edu Ya*; Nwadike (2008:7), the king summoned his cabinet to decide on who, among his three sons will succeed him when he dies. In an interview akin to a manifesto, the three sons bared their minds before the cabinet. From their speeches, the cabinet deduced that the last son, Onochie would be the most suitable to rule them after his father. The ‘eze’ however dashed the hopes of the people by giving the leadership stool to his

second son, Ikechi against the wishes of the cabinet and the whole community. Ikechi is arrogant, tyrant, over-ambitious and unapproachable. Ichie Echefu says this about him;

Ochicho ya ga-abu ka ya buru onye ochichi.  
O ga-acho ka ya lugbuo otutu mba n'agha.  
Nganga ya abughi ihe a ga-eji onu akowa.  
N'ihie ihe ndi a, ndi obodo ya ga-na-aturu ya  
nnukwu egwu. N'ihie ujo a, ha agaghi na-eru  
ya nso. N'ihie ya kwa, ha agaghi ahụ ya n'anya.  
p.29

His ambition would be to rule. He would want to defeat many states in wars. His pride knows no bounds. Because of these, his subjects would be afraid of him and would not like to come close to him. And thus they would hate him.

After all said and done, the people of Umuezela revolt because of Ikechi's bad leadership style and the leadership is taken away from him and given to Onochie who has the qualities of a good leader and the interest of the masses at heart. "*Kama oha ga-anwu ka eze diri, o ka mma ka eze nwuo ka oha jiri aka ha horo eze ozu*". Instead of the masses to die for the king to succeed, it is better that the king dies and the masses select another king". In other words, power flows from the people to the leader.

Democracy stipulates that all political parties and candidates have the right to campaign freely, present their manifestoes to the people directly or indirectly (through the media), without any molestation, or any form of violence. In Nigerian politics however, no political campaign goes on without any clash from the opposition party/parties. This in most cases resulted to bloodshed, kidnapping, arson and loss of property. Towing this line of thought, Nwadike (2007:2) says;

Na ndorondoro a, e nweghi ihe otu ndia niile na-emeghi iji mee ka afọ maa ibe ha n'ala.  
Ndi nwee ogbakowa, ndi ozọ emete, sowe ha site n'idunye ndi ogbuaraofara ha ka ha luso ha ogu. Mgbe ufodu, a na-eti mmanwu iji chusaa ndi biara igere nti. Ebe di icheiche, a gbara otutu ugboala oku ma merukwa ndi mmadu ahụ.  
Otutu mgbe, e suru ulo ndi mmadu oku, bu ndi a maara na-adonyere otu otu ma o bu ozu ukwu.  
Aru mere.

In this politics, these parties stopped at nothing to pull down one another. When one party organizes a rally, the others will follow them up by hiring thugs and assassins to fight them. Sometimes, they use masquerades to chase away people who have come to listen to the campaigns of the party. In different places, cars were burnt and many people injured. Many a times, the key supporters of one party or the other had their houses set ablaze.

Atrocities were committed.

Nigerian politics is also characterized by false promises and deceit. Some parties will promise free education at all levels, free medical treatment, regular supply of electricity and pipe borne water, free food and regular salaries and so on. Once such parties are elected, the whole promises become a mirage. In Nwadike (2007:3) more light is thrown on the above thus:

Unu tuliera otu anyị aka, anyị ga-eme ka ụmụ unu niile guọ akwụkwọ n'efu, bido n'ụlọ akwụkwọ nta ruo n'ụlọakwụkwọ kachasi elu. O bụrụ na otu m emerie, anyị ga-akpọnye ndi okokporo niile nwunye n'otu n'otu. Obodo unu chọọ ihe ọma di ka ụlọ ngwaahịa, mmiri, ọkụ, koleji na ihe ndi ọzọ di unu mkpa, donyerenu anyị ukwu, mgbe ahụ, ihe niile ga-abụ nke unu.

Dịka otu hụrụ ụmụokorobia na ụmụagbaghobia n'anya, anyị merie, a ga-ewepụta ụbochi ezumike, ụbochi a ga-etiri ha egwu ahụ a na-akpo Disko nke Bob Mali tiri. A ga-ahoputakwa minista ọha nke gana-ahụ maka ndi na-etolite etolite, Disko na ime garagara. Ụnụ tuliela anyị aka, ụmụ unu agaghikwa ele ule ọzọ. A ga-edokanye onye ọ bula asambodo n'efu, mekwaa ka ha turu abuba ugo akwụkwọ kacha elu.

If you vote for our party, we will give your children free education from the lowest to the highest levels. If my party wins, we will give all the bachelors wives one after the other. If your community wants good things like factories, water, electricity, schools and other important things, support us, and then all things will be yours. As a party that loves the youth, if we win, public holidays shall be mapped out when Bob Marley's disco music shall be played for them. There shall also be a minister for youths, disco and socials. If you vote for us, your children will not sit for examinations again. Certificates will be issued to them freely and they will be awarded the highest degrees.

As imaginary as the above promises sound, many politicians in different political parties make such promises to lure the masses ( who are desperate to see that their children go to school and later secure jobs and other good things of life) to vote for them. It should be noted however that the basic necessities like education, water and electricity, free medical treatment etc are the rights of the citizens and as such should be made available without any compromise. Be this as it may, what obtains in Nigeria is far from the normal. Fund meant for basic necessities is most often spent on wasteful and irrelevant things. Politicians once voted into power claim all sorts of allowances ranging from wardrobe, furniture, kitchen, domestic aids to travelling allowances. In addition to these, they celebrate their birthdays in pomp and pageantry and throw parties for the slightest reasons. Thus, fund meant for Nigerian citizenry end up being spent with impunity by a low percent of Nigerians who call themselves political office holders.

Mgbemena (1990:54) in his poem titled “Ndorondoro ọchịchị obodo” (Politics) summarizes the manner of Nigerian politicians; their inconsistencies, flattery and deceit when he says:

Ha bu ogwumaagana,  
Ndi ndorondoro ọchịchị obodo.  
Chi na-efo  
Ha na-agbanwoghari  
Taa ha di ocha,  
Echi ha di oji,  
Nke ha kwuru unyaahu  
Abughị ya ka ha kwuru taa.

They are chamelion,  
Politicians  
They change with time  
Today they are white;  
Tomorrow they are black,  
What they said yesterday  
Is not what they said today

Such politicians embrace everybody while campaigning. They will smile, dance, shake hands and even eat with the down-trodden because they are targeting the people’s vote. They wear humble, gentle and simple looks always to attract the people’s votes, but in actual fact, they are lions in sheep’s clothing. When they are voted in, seeing them becomes as difficult as a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

They hide themselves in the circle of security men who are instructed to frustrate every attempt by the people to come close, with the exception of their political cronies. Undue protocols are imposed to worsen a situation that is bad already. In support of this, Mgbemena (1990:55) writes:

Mgbe ha choro enyemaka,  
Ihu ha buso amu,  
Okwu ha buso nro;  
Nkwa ha bu uwa dum.  
Mgbe ha nwetere  
Ihe ha na-achọ;  
Ihu ha aburu ogo  
Onu okwu ha nkume;  
Nkwa ha esoro ikuku.

When they need help (vote)  
They are all smiles  
They talk politely  
They promise heaven on earth  
When they get  
What they want;  
They look aggressive  
Their voices harsh  
Their promises vanish.

Nwana (1933) in the pioneer Igbo novel (*Omenuko*) x-raying the Igbo democratic principles of governance through Eze Mgborogwu says: “*Ọ ga-adi m mma nke ukwu ma a si na unu emee ka Omenuko were warrant jidere Obiefule nwa m ruo mgbe ọ ga-enwe ike ichikota obodo m*” (p. 17). “I will appreciate it if you will allow Omenuko to hold the warrant for Obiefule my son till he is able to rule my community”.

Eze Mgborogwu is the leader of Mgborogwu. He does not force his wishes on his subjects rather, he pleads with the people to allow Omenuko hold the office till his son grows, because he knows they have the right to air their opinion on who succeeds him. This attitude depicts democracy and respect for the governed.

In a democratically elected government, the people are free to criticize their elected leaders and representatives, and also to observe how they conduct the business of government. Ubesie (1979) uses Maazi Obijiofor to buttress this assertion stated above in his book *Ukpana Okpoko Buuru*. This is seen when Maazi Obijiofor goes to Obi Udeaja to express his views about the situation of things in Ifite-Amaeke. There is anarchy, stealing, kidnapping and other hideous activities in the town. Maazi Obijiofor cannot keep quiet and watch as things go wrong; he boldly goes to the King to ask him what the matter is. These days, freedom of expression is in principle and not in practice. Nobody dares question the government in power otherwise the person pays dearly.

## SUMMARY

In this paper, Nigerian politics and democracy have been overhauled with relevant examples from some Igbo literature. In doing this, six literature books which cut across the three genres of literature were x-rayed. The literature texts investigated are; Adaeze, Echiche, O Ji Ihe Nwata, Omenuko, Omume Onye Na-Edu Ya and Ukpana Okpoko Buuru.

Findings reveal among other things that:

- a. The Nigerian political government based on democratic principles is evidenced in the Igbo pioneer novel *Omenuko* by Nwana (1933) when Eze Mgborogwu pleaded with the people of his community to allow Omenuko to hold his warrant for his son until he becomes of age. He did not use his incumbent power to impose the leadership on the people. He knows that they have the right to choose who rules them. This is also witnessed in *O Ji Ihe Nwata* by Okoro and Epuchie (2006) when the people of Umuoma gathered to decide on who should be their king as the government of the day requested them to send a leader who will represent them.
- b. The people governed are sovereign. The wishes of the people governed are respected. This is evidenced in *Omume Onye Na-Edu Ya* by Nwadike (2008) when the Eze summoned the Ichie (cabinet who represent the masses) to decide on who should succeed him.
- c. The presence of political parties; ruling and opposition, political violence, burning of people's houses, harassment of people by thugs etc, in Nigeria politics are seen in Nwadike's *Adaeze* (2003) when these parties stopped at nothing to pull down one another. They used masquerades to chase away people who have come to listen to the campaigns of the party. Cars and houses were burnt and people injured.



- d. There are electoral campaigns replete with unrealistic promises as well as deceit in Nigerian politics. All these are evidenced in Nwadike's *Adaeze* (2003) and 'Ndorondoro' one of Mgbemena's (1990) poem in *Echiche*.
- e. Over zealotry and over-ambition to rule which are hallmarks of Nigerian politics are also revealed. This is seen in *Omume Onye Na-Edu Ya* by Nwadike (2008) where Ikechi is anxious to be the next king against the wishes of the masses.
- f. Respect for money and affluence present in the Nigerian politics are shown in *O Ji Ihe Nwata* by Okoro & Epuchie (2006) when one of the kinsmen asks, "*kedu onye o bu n'ulo Isiguzo? Ha buteliri igu ewu tara ma ya fodu ichikota oha obodo Umuoma*" who is that person in Isiguzo's family that can fend for himself, talk less of other people". Another kinsman says, "onye o bula n'ime anyi ma na o bu ego na-achi uwa tata; o bu soso ndi nwere ego ka onu na-eru n'okwu" "Everyone of us knows that money rules the world today; it is only the rich that can speak in the government today".

### RECOMMENDATIONS

For Nigerian politics and democracy to be stable and worthwhile, we suggest the following:

- People should be allowed to decide who should rule or represent them at all levels of government.
- People should be given the forum for positive and constructive criticism of the government in power without fear.
- The rights and opinions of the masses should be respected and protected at all times.
- Those in power should listen to the people and respond to their needs.
- Leaders should always make themselves available to the masses when elected into power.
- During political campaigns parties that cause trouble should be banned from contesting elections.
- Transparency and fairness should be the watchword in every election. Thus, people's votes should be used in determining their leaders or representatives.
- Politicians should re-orient themselves to new ways of politicking devoid of empty promises.
- The citizenry should be well educated on the importance and benefits of participating in every election. They should also be made t of theo know dangers inherent in being bribed by politicians.

### CONCLUSION

The essence of revealing politics and political issues in literature is to inform, sensitize, mobilize and make caricature the negative sides of the Nigerian politics and to appreciate and reinforce political leaders when they deliver. Many Nigerian literary writers have actually gone a long way in realizing the above through their literary texts. Be this as it may, a lot of Nigerian readers prefer reading western literature to their indigenous literature with the result that the indigenous texts become alien to them. It has become pertinent for Nigerians to redirect their steps and focus more on their indigenous literature, as this will help to eradicate the anti-social behaviours that are prevalent in Nigerian political system and thus help in achieving a stable political front and sustainable democracy.

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