

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE “EMI LO KAN” SLOGAN, ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE IN NIGERIA’S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE OFO AS A SYMBOL OF LEGITIMIZATION AND AUTHORITY IN IGBO LAND.

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Abstract

The phrase "Emi lo kan," articulated by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress, became a prominent slogan in the Nigerian political landscape during the 2023 General Elections. Translating to "It is my turn," this slogan raises significant concerns regarding the aspirant's reliance on the will of the people in a democratic context, where the collective voice of the electorate should take precedence over individual claims to entitlement. Given the introduction of advanced technological measures in the electoral process, which were intended to enhance the expression of the populace's will, one might have anticipated an election characterized by fairness and transparency. However, the conduct and outcomes of the elections revealed numerous instances of electoral malpractice, undermining the assurances provided by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Consequently, Bola Ahmed Tinubu was declared president, thus realizing his "Emi lo kan" assertion. In this context, this paper explores the significance of Ofo in Igbo culture as a symbol of legitimization and authority, arguing that the events of the 2023 General Elections diverge markedly from the principles of authentic democracy. To facilitate this exploration, the paper poses several critical questions: How does Ofo function as a symbol of legitimization and authority in Igbo society? In what ways did the "Emi lo kan" slogan diminish the power of the electorate within a genuinely democratic governance structure? How did the INEC fail to uphold its commitment to technological advancements in the 2023 elections, inadvertently facilitating electoral malpractice? To address these questions, the paper draws on secondary sources, including online journals, articles, books, and newspapers. Through a critical analytic framework, it contends that the political slogan "Emi lo kan" during the 2023 General Elections fundamentally undermines the essence of democracy and contradicts the Igbo cultural understanding of Ofo as a crucial emblem of legitimization and authority within Igbo society.

Keywords: Emi lo kan, 2023 General Elections, APC, INEC, Ofo

Introduction

Democracy is defined as the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, indicating that a democratic system is inherently centered on its citizens. The strength of any democratic governance lies within its electorate, who express their preferences through elections, selecting candidates they believe will effectively govern them. Thus, by casting their votes, citizens confer legitimacy upon a government. This understanding underscores the essence of democracy as a representation of the people's will, which is crucial in affirming governmental legitimacy.

Similarly, among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, the concept of legitimacy is embodied in the ofo, a symbol of integrity and authority traditionally bestowed upon the eldest male member of a household or kindred. The ofo confers leadership status, signifying authority within the family or community, regardless of the recipient's social or economic standing. It is an exclusive symbol of leadership, not attainable through wealth but reserved for those deemed qualified.

In Nigeria, democratic governance is established through constitutional elections conducted every four years by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This body is responsible for ensuring that the most qualified candidates, who genuinely reflect the aspirations of the populace, emerge during elections. Ideally, such a process should safeguard against individuals purchasing their way into office. However, INEC has consistently failed to fulfill this promise, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among voters. Each election cycle witnesses citizens leaving polling stations disillusioned as candidates who do

not represent their interests are often declared winners. This recurring discontent has fostered apathy among the electorate, with many asserting that what occurs in Nigeria is more akin to selection than election.

The 2023 elections, however, were anticipated to break this pattern. Former President Muhammadu Buhari and the INEC chairman pledged that the elections would be free and fair, ensuring the will of the people would prevail. Initially, many Nigerians were skeptical, having grown weary of similar promises made in the past. Nonetheless, the introduction of technology in the 2023 General Elections, which included the INEC Voter Enrollment Device (IVED), the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for both voter accreditation and electronic transmission of results, and the INEC Results Viewing (IReV) portal for real-time access to polling unit results, sparked renewed hope among the populace (Dii, 2023). These advancements promised a shift from the traditional manual methods toward a more credible electoral process. Additionally, the redesign of the naira currency was perceived as a strategy to combat vote buying, further bolstering public confidence in the integrity of the elections.

In the lead-up to the 2023 General Elections, there was heightened interest in the presidential race, particularly due to the emergence of the Labour Party as a significant contender alongside the traditional powerhouses, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressive Congress (APC). The Labour Party's candidate, Peter Obi, the former governor of Anambra State, resonated with the aspirations of many young Nigerians, giving rise to the popular “OBI-DIENT” movement that galvanized widespread support across the country. This development marked a potential turning point in Nigeria's electoral landscape, raising hopes for a more representative democracy.

Conversely, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the presidential candidate of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), appeared to struggle to resonate with the youth, primarily due to his slogan "Emi lo kan," which translates to "It is my turn." Many perceived this statement as an excessive claim to entitlement for the nation's highest office, reflecting a sense of greed regarding what should fundamentally rest within the people's will. Furthermore, the controversies surrounding Tinubu's public image—characterized by allegations of drug dealing and questions regarding his identity and academic credentials—fueled public reluctance to support his candidacy for the presidency. Despite this, when the presidential election results were announced, the APC candidate was declared the winner, seemingly validating his assertion that it was indeed his turn. This outcome was met with widespread dissatisfaction among the populace, who viewed it as indicative of a compromise by the INEC. Many felt that the electoral body had failed to uphold its promise of real-time electronic transmission of results, which opened the door to potential manipulation. This situation raises significant concerns regarding the credibility of democracy and the electoral process in Nigeria.

In light of these events, this paper examines the concept of Ofo in Igbo culture as a symbol of legitimization and authority, contending that the 2023 General Elections fell short of the ideals of genuine democracy. To support this argument, the paper poses several critical questions: How does Ofo function as a symbol of legitimization and authority within Igbo society? In what ways did the "Emi lo kan" slogan undermine the power of the electorate in a truly democratic framework? How did the INEC fail to adhere to its technological commitments during the 2023 General Elections, thereby facilitating electoral malpractice? To address these inquiries, the paper utilizes secondary sources, including online journals, articles, books, and newspapers. Through a critical analytic approach, it asserts that the political slogan "Emi lo kan" during the 2023 General Elections fundamentally contradicts the true spirit of democracy and is antithetical to the Igbo cultural understanding of Ofo as a vital emblem of legitimization and authority within Igbo society.

Towards an Understanding of Emi LoKan

"Emi lo kan" is a Yoruba phrase that translates to "It is my turn." This electioneering campaign slogan was introduced by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the former governor of Lagos State, Nigeria, and the presidential candidate of the ruling All-Progressives Congress (APC) in the February 25, 2023, general election. The catchphrase served as a central theme in the speech he delivered during a town hall meeting with APC members and stakeholders in Abeokuta, Nigeria, prior to the party's presidential primary election. During this town hall meeting, Tinubu highlighted his pivotal role in the formation of the APC, which ultimately contributed to the defeat of former President Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 presidential election by General Muhammadu Buhari. He emphasized that without his support, Buhari would not have achieved victory after three previous unsuccessful attempts (Ige, 2023). Tinubu extended this narrative to include the current governor of Ogun State, Mr. Dapo Abiodun, reinforcing his significance within the party.

Additionally, he underscored his selflessness and political acumen, which he claimed had enabled him to nurture a cadre of political protégés. He also noted his decision to concede his vice-presidential aspirations to support Buhari's candidacy, further solidifying the foundation of the "Emi lo kan" slogan within his political discourse, asserting that it was his turn to lead Nigeria as president (Ige, 2023). Agbeleoba et al. (2023) encapsulate this sentiment with the following words:

To ba je tiwe, mo kawe (If it's about education, I am educated)
 To ba de je oro agba, emi l'egbon (If it's by age, I'm the most senior)
 Apemora eni la n pe temi dire (You use your mouth to confess good things about yourself)
 Mo ti n sin yin bo, ojo ti pe (I have been serving you all the while)
 E gbe kini yi wa (bring this thing (presidency))
 Emi lo kan! (It's my turn) (p.33).

An overview of the background of the 2023 General Elections

Prior to the 2023 general elections, former President Muhammadu Buhari, alongside the INEC chairman, Professor Mahmood Yakubu, reassured Nigerians that the elections would be conducted in a manner that was free, fair, and credible (Ezeador, 2023). To facilitate this commitment, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) allocated a budget of N355 billion for logistical expenses, which included the implementation of innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing (IReV) portal. These measures were intended to ensure that the elections would proceed peacefully, devoid of manipulation and rigging.

The INEC chairman consistently emphasized that the introduction of BVAS would significantly mitigate various forms of electoral malpractice (Ezeador, 2023). As Uzoanya (2023, in Ezeador, 2023) articulates:

Many Nigerians looked forward to the 2023 general elections for many reasons, among which were: the fact that the elections were not the traditional two-horse race; the repeated assurances from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC; the signing of the 2022 Electoral Act which contained the deployment of technology; the increasingly depressing state of the economy, among others. So, the build-up to the elections was one filled with a nostalgia of anxiety, apprehension, and hope that the time has come for us to get things right (p. 24)

It is noteworthy that by the time the 2023 general elections were conducted, Nigeria had already experienced ten general elections since gaining political independence in 1960. These elections occurred in the years 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Among these, the military oversaw the transition elections of 1979, 1993, and 1999, marking the country's shift from military to civilian governance (Ojukwu et al., 2023). In contrast, the elections held in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 were organized by civilian administrations transitioning from one civilian government to

another. According to Oronsaye (2008), it is essential to highlight that the seven elections conducted under civilian authority—namely, those in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019—suffered from significant credibility issues. The electorate perceived these elections as neither free nor fair, leading to doubts about their overall legitimacy. The 2023 general election represented the seventh consecutive electoral cycle since Nigeria re-established its democracy in 1999 (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

These elections mark 24 years of uninterrupted democracy, the longest duration in Nigeria’s history. The 2023 general election was the first nationwide election conducted under the new Electoral Act, which President Buhari signed into law in February 2022. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) employed two technological innovations to enhance the integrity and transparency of the electoral process: the Bi-modal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), which verifies and authenticates voters, and the INEC Results Viewing Portal, a public-facing voter tabulation system to be deployed nationwide.

The lead-up to the 2023 general election was fraught with uncertainty, largely due to the historical experiences of the Nigerian electorate, many of whom hold a long-standing belief that their votes do not carry weight in determining their leaders. This sentiment is rooted in a pervasive sense of powerlessness, exacerbated by over three decades of military rule following independence in 1960. As Africa's largest country by GDP and population, Nigeria has undergone a series of elections in recent years (Aina, 2023). Since the restoration of democracy, marking the beginning of its Fourth Republic in 1999, the country has conducted ten general elections. While some of these elections were marred by irregularities, others were significantly flawed. A notable example is the 2007 general election that led to the late President Umar Musa Yar’Adua’s ascension to power; Yar’Adua would later acknowledge that the election did not meet the standards of a free and fair process, prompting him to prioritize electoral reforms (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

Nigeria’s 2023 general election emerged as one of the most fiercely contested in the nation’s history. The election in 2015, which resulted in the presidency of Muhammadu Buhari, was seen by many Nigerians as a pivotal moment to reset the country’s trajectory following a significant decline attributed to the perceived incompetence of the prior administration. The Buhari government pledged to address pressing security concerns, particularly the ongoing threats posed by Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the northeast (Aina, 2023). Additional promises that resonated with the Nigerian populace included combating corruption and prioritizing economic growth. However, eight years later, while some progress has been made in diminishing the influence of Boko Haram and ISWAP, President Buhari’s assertion that the insurgency has been “technically defeated” has faced skepticism from various stakeholders, including policy analysts and commentators (Aina, 2023).

Furthermore, the government’s anti-corruption efforts have largely been perceived as selective and politically motivated. Economically, the country has struggled under the Buhari administration, facing a high debt burden and rising inflation, leading to significant hardships for Nigerians (Ojukwu et al., 2023). A recent report from the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that over half of the population lives in multidimensional poverty. In addition to its failure to fulfill key promises, the Buhari administration has encountered numerous challenges. In the North-West, armed banditry has resulted in thousands of deaths and widespread displacement. There has been a rise in secessionist movements, notably from the Indigenous People of Biafra and its paramilitary wing, the Eastern Security Network, as well as agitation from the Yoruba Nation. The administration’s handling of the #EndSARS movement further strained relations between the state and society, particularly among young people protesting police brutality, which they claimed was disproportionately directed at them. Additionally, the poorly timed cashless policy implemented by the Central Bank of Nigeria has contributed to a nationwide cash shortage, adversely affecting the informal economy and impacting small businesses and subsistence households (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

The 2023 general election presented Nigerians with a significant opportunity to select a new cadre of political leaders. Prior to the elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) assured the public of the election's credibility by introducing technology-driven innovations such as the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV). The BVAS was specifically designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters through fingerprint verification, ensuring that individuals were eligible to vote at their designated polling units. Meanwhile, the IREV aimed to facilitate the real-time transmission of election results from polling units to the central collation center. These initial assurances played a crucial role in galvanizing the enthusiasm of first-time voters, resulting in over 9.5 million new registrations. Another noteworthy development in the lead-up to the general election was the emergence of Peter Obi, the Labour Party's candidate, and his 'Obedient Movement.' This phenomenon marked a significant shift away from the traditional two-party electioneering dynamic that had long dominated Nigeria's political landscape (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

The 2023 general elections and its Outcome.

On February 25, 2023, Nigerians turned out in unprecedented numbers, fueled by hope and enthusiasm to cast their votes, convinced that the electoral malpractices that had plagued previous elections would not reoccur (Ezeador, 2023). Voters arrived at polling units as early as 6 a.m., with some even sleeping on-site or providing generators to ensure there was no manipulation. These efforts reflected a strong desire for their votes to count and for the results to be uploaded to the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV), as promised by the electoral commission. However, the reality proved to be quite different. Instead of witnessing the transparency and integrity they had anticipated, voters experienced disappointment, deception, intimidation, and systemic failure. The February 25 elections were marred by the very issues that Nigerians believed they had overcome. They soon realized they had been misled and deceived by the assurances given by the INEC leadership. As Uzoanya (2023, in Ezeador, 2023) noted:

The election was marred by irregularities, ranging from voter suppression, intimidation, raw violence, sporadic shootings, snatching of ballot papers, and vote buying, among others. Both international and local observers attested to the fact that the election was grossly below standard. A key factor of uploading results from the polling units to the IREV portal looked like „the more you look, the less you see (p.25).

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were monitored by both local and international observers. According to Obalonye et al. (2023):

The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) which deployed 774 roving Observers across the 774 local government areas in the country in the February 25th presidential and Legislative election in Nigeria has declared that the result of the presidential poll was manipulated (p.29).

The laws and regulations governing the conduct of the 2023 general elections were not rigorously followed. Nnabuike (2023) highlights this issue, stating that:

The International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) joint Election Observation Mission (IEOM) have said that despite the 2022 electoral reforms, the 2023 election has so far fallen short of citizens' expectations. The Joint Election Observation mission, which was led by the former president of Malawi, Dr. Joyce Banda, said logistic challenges and multiple incidents of political violence overshadowed the electoral process (p. 4).

On Wednesday, March 1, at 4:10 AM, while a significant portion of Nigerians were still asleep, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the results of the presidential election. Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) received 8,794,726 votes (36.61%), followed by

Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) with 6,984,520 votes (29.07%), and Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) in third place with 6,101,533 votes (25.40%). Rabiu Kwankwaso of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) was declared to have garnered 1,496,687 votes (6.23%). The results indicated that, out of approximately 93.5 million registered voters with Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), only about 25 million (27%) had participated in the election. According to a parallel vote tabulation by YIAGA Africa (2023), the presidential results for Imo and Rivers states did not align with their findings (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

Instead of celebrating the emergence of a new president, Nigeria remained silent, resembling a nation in mourning, highlighting the disconnect between the election outcomes and the people's will. Reflecting on this disappointing outcome, Ezeador (2023) remarked that the 2023 general elections were the worst since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. The presidential and National Assembly elections were marred by extensive rigging, underage voting, vote buying, ballot paper burning, violence, delays, disenfranchisement, result cancellations, poor logistical arrangements, and failures in the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) to upload results (Ezeador, 2023). Furthermore, Ezeador (2023) emphasized that the events of the 2023 elections starkly contradicted the provisions outlined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended in 2011, citing Section 133 of the constitution, which states that:

A candidate for an election to the office of the president shall be deemed to have been duly elected to such office where being the only candidate nominated for the election- (a) he has a majority of YES over NO votes cast at the election; and (b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, but where the only candidate fails to be elected by this section, then there shall be fresh nominations(p.17)

Ezeador (2023) argues that, based on the aforementioned constitutional provisions, it is evident that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was compromised. The candidate declared as the winner by INEC was not duly nominated and, more importantly, did not achieve a legitimate majority due to widespread electoral rigging. Additionally, the candidate did not secure victories in all states, including the Federal Capital Territory (Ezeador, 2023). Supporting this view, Dii (2023) asserts that the declared outcome of the 2023 presidential election fell significantly short of the enthusiasm, mobilization, and determination exhibited by voters in their quest to elect their leader. Even the substantial financial investment, which represented a 62% increase over the expenditure for the 2019 general elections (Omotayo, 2023), was not justified. This raises the conclusion that the character and nature of the ruling government and its leader play a critical role in determining the quality and credibility of general elections in Nigeria. The implications of critics regarding the non-interference during the 2015 elections—whether it demonstrated former President Jonathan’s faith in INEC or his desire to foster that belief (Akhaine, 2011)—highlight a level of confidence that was absent in the previous administration.

Both the 2019 and 2023 elections were conducted under the auspices of the ruling APC and President Buhari as its leader. In comparison to the democratic progress made in 2015, the 2019 election represented a marked regression (Amao, 2020), while the 2023 general elections were deemed a failure across all metrics (Omotayo, 2023). The initial promise surrounding the deployment of the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) technology to ensure the integrity of the ballot has proven to be unfounded. Agbakoba (2023, in Dii, 2023) characterizes this election cycle as one of the most troubling in terms of electoral petitions, noting that BVAS was primarily utilized to certify voters rather than serve the comprehensive function that the National Assembly had portrayed to Nigerians when the Electoral Act of

2022 was enacted. He remarked, “If you listened to the INEC chairman, he repeatedly told us that BVAS is the magic, but it turns out that BVAS wasn’t the magic” (p. 9).

The Will of the People and the emergence of the Emi lokan slogan in the 2023 presidential election.

The 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria serves as a poignant example of how electoral malpractice appears to have been orchestrated to align with specific exigencies of the time and to achieve a predetermined outcome that diverges from the popular will. This assertion is grounded in the widespread public mobilization observed in the pre-election period, the numerous reports of electoral malpractices, and the eventual results, which seemed contrary to the expressed preferences of the electorate (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). Regrettably, the 2023 Presidential election is regarded as one of the most anticipated events in Nigeria's recent history (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). According to Agajelu & Alazor (2024), the significant efforts made by many Nigerians, particularly the youth, to engage in the 2023 Presidential election are reflected in the notable increase in voter registration figures. This surge was largely inspired by the emergence of certain candidates perceived to possess the character and competence necessary for transforming the nation. Data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reveals that the total number of eligible voters increased by 9,464,924, or 11.3 percent, rising from 84,004,084 in the 2019 general elections to 93,469,008 in 2023 (Suleiman, 2023).

Notably, of the registered voters, 37,060,399, representing 39.65 per cent, were aged between 18 and 34. Furthermore, 33,413,591, or 35.75 per cent, belonged to the middle-aged demographic of 35 to 49 years (Suleiman, 2023). These statistics illustrate a landscape in which younger individuals dominated electoral participation, reflecting their fervent desire to instigate meaningful political change that would foster good governance, a facet that Nigeria has sorely lacked for many years (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). According to Agajelu & Alazor (2024):

When one puts into consideration the popular movement that emerged at the build-up to the presidential election, it may be correct to aver that younger people, who constituted the majority of registered voters, yearned for a generational change in the Nigerian presidency as the older generation, which had spent most of the times on the seat of presidency appeared to be bereft of clues on how to set the country on the path of sustainable development through good governance. The movement that emerged was the Obidient or Obi-Datti Movement(p.23)

Several factors contributed to the emergence and unprecedented popularization of the Obidient Movement in Nigeria. Key among these were the #EndSARS protest of October 20, 2020; the departure of prominent political figure and aspiring presidential candidate Peter Obi from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), one of the major political parties; and the widespread perception of vote-buying and corruption that plagued the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) during its primaries, which controversially nominated Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the party’s presidential candidate (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024).

In a political climate rife with accusations of vote-buying and a growing determination among the youth to combat this trend, Peter Obi exited the PDP amid fervent support from his followers, who believed he was fundamentally opposed to the corruption prevalent in both major parties, the PDP and APC. He subsequently joined the Labour Party, despite its relative lack of grassroots presence—a crucial political structure typically deemed necessary for winning national elections in Nigeria. However, with the rallying cry of “we no dey give shi shi” (a phrase signifying opposition to vote-buying), Obi’s supporters established a unique political framework that deviated from traditional Nigerian political norms. This movement gained traction on social media, amplified by well-known influencers, and resonated strongly with many, particularly among the youth and younger generations from diverse backgrounds and regions.

In 2020, a significant protest erupted across major cities in southern Nigeria, driven by widespread outrage against police brutality, particularly from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The catalyst

for this movement was a disturbing video that surfaced online, showing a police officer fatally shooting a young man in Delta State. The video went viral, igniting massive protests as youths took to the streets, chanting "End SARS" and utilizing social media to amplify their message with the hashtag #EndSARS. The protests evolved into various forms but reached a tragic climax during the infamous shooting at the Lekki Toll Gate, where several individuals were reportedly killed. Although the Nigerian authorities eventually suppressed the End SARS protests, the trauma and scars left by the events lingered. When Peter Obi emerged as a presidential candidate, he was seen as someone capable of addressing the social issues that fueled the End SARS protests. Consequently, many former End SARS advocates eagerly rallied behind him, hoping for meaningful change (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). According to Agajelu & Alazor (2024):

A third factor that contributed to the emergence and popularisation of the Obidient Movement was the allegations of vote buying in the ruling APC and the emergence of a very controversial politician, Tinubu as the party's presidential flag bearer. A popular case that greatly haunted the APC presidential candidate Bola Tinubu, who later emerged winner, was his association with illicit drug dealings in the United States. The drug case has been variously interpreted and defended by his ardent supporters, however, some evidence as dug up and reexposed by the independent investigative journalist, David Hundeyin shows that the presidential candidate may have indeed been indicted. Coupled with other controversial aspects of his personality, which include unclear personal and educational background, Tinubu has appeared to be a misfit to many and cases where Nigerians are made jest of because of their supposed choice of president abound in some international tabloids and social media(pp.23-24)

As various political parties in Nigeria conducted their primary elections to select their presidential candidates, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) faced a growing decline in popularity among the electorate. This dissatisfaction was largely attributed to the visible shortcomings of the APC-led federal government under Muhammadu Buhari, particularly in crucial areas such as security, economic development, and national unity. The APC's prospects for retaining political power at the national level appeared increasingly contingent upon the choice of its presidential candidate to succeed the already unpopular President Buhari (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). While several younger aspirants within the APC, including then-Vice President Prof. Yemi Osinbajo and then-Minister of Transport Mr Rotimi Amaechi, emerged as promising contenders, the political clout of the party's national leader and fellow aspirant, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, was notably significant. During his consultations, Tinubu made remarks intended to sway APC party delegates to support his bid for the presidential nomination. However, some of these statements were perceived as contemptuous, self-serving, or even divisive. For instance, at the Presidential Lodge in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Tinubu was recorded addressing the APC party delegates in a manner that ignited controversy:

If not for me who stood behind Buhari, he wouldn't have become the President. He tried the first time, but he failed. The second time, he failed. The third, he failed...He even wept on national television and vowed never to contest again but I went to meet him in Kaduna and told him he will run again, I will stand by you and you will win, but you must not joke with Yorubas and he agreed (Bello and Egobiambu, 2002, in Agajelu & Alazor, 2024, p. 24).

He further proclaimed that it was his turn to become Nigeria's president, coining the popular phrase "Emi lokan," which translates to "My turn." This declaration sparked significant controversy among many Nigerians, with some loyalists of President Buhari finding it offensive. Garba Shehu, Buhari's

spokesperson, responded to Tinubu by stating that millions of Nigerians contributed to bringing Mr. Buhari into power, not just one individual (Iroanusi, 2022). Moreover, the "Emi lokan" remark was met with skepticism, particularly among the youth. This phrase was widely interpreted as a sense of entitlement on Tinubu's part. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo publicly condemned Tinubu's statement, asserting that the notion of "my turn" could not serve as a foundation for reinventing and revitalizing Nigeria through an All-Nigeria Government aimed at liberation and restoration (Akinlotan, 2023).

Essentially, Obasanjo argued that the "Emi lokan" mentality was inappropriate for Nigeria's leadership, given the numerous challenges the country faced. The leader of the pan-Yoruba socio-political organization, Afenifere, Pa Ayo Adebajo, further claimed that Tinubu's "Emi lokan" chant stemmed from a succession agreement with President Muhammadu Buhari and did not reflect the interests of the Yoruba people. Instead, it represented Tinubu's selfish ambitions (Chukwu, 2023). Consequently, the Yoruba phrase "Emi lokan" became a tool for taunting Tinubu and his supporters, particularly among the Obidient Movement, who often referred to Tinubu's supporters as BATists (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024).

The APC convention for the party's primary elections unfolded against serious allegations of vote buying. Rotimi Amaechi, a prominent APC and presidential aspirant claimed that some party delegates were bribed to vote in the presidential primary (Majeed, 2022). Such accusations were prevalent in the political discourse then, as similar practices were reported during the PDP primaries. In light of these perceived irregularities, which many young Nigerians viewed as emblematic of the oppressive old order represented by both major parties, Peter Obi emerged as an unexpected third force in the presidential race, significantly altering the dynamics of political competition. The emergence of this third force, represented by Peter Obi and his Obidient Movement, posed a substantial threat to the established parties and transformed the nature of election campaigns. The strategies employed to solicit votes became more dynamic, reflecting a shift in the political landscape, while reports of electoral malpractice increased.

As the evening of February 25, 2023, approached, results from the presidential election began to circulate across various social media platforms. By midnight on election day, numerous result forms from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) flooded social media, most indicating a favourable outcome for a specific candidate. Although it may be imprudent to declare an election winner based solely on unofficial results posted online before the official collation was complete, concerns arose when the official results announced by INEC differed significantly from those circulating on social media. Many cases revealed that the same results displayed on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook appeared to have been altered.

The discrepancies in the published results and the subsequent announcements by INEC ignited widespread outrage across Nigerian social media. This discontent was exacerbated by the failure of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) to upload the presidential election results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) for real-time public access, as mandated by the Commission's guidelines and repeatedly emphasized by its chairman (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). When INEC officially announced the results on the morning of March 1, 2023, declaring Bola Ahmed Tinubu as president, the atmosphere in the country was sombre, resembling collective mourning. This disillusionment stemmed from witnessing INEC violate its regulations in broad daylight, ultimately transferring the leadership of the country to Tinubu, who was controversially declared the winner.

The masses felt a deep sense of betrayal, believing that their mandate had been stolen. With this, it seemed the APC flag bearer had fulfilled his assertion: "Emi lokan," meaning "It is my turn." The outcome of the election has been widely regarded as an insult to democracy in Nigeria, serving as evidence that power does not truly lie with the people. It suggests that anyone can lay claim to the highest office in the country, regardless of their past, as long as they have the means to assert their influence. This situation leads us to examine *ofo* as a symbol of legitimacy and authority in the culture of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria.

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria.

The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, predominantly inhabiting the southeastern region of the country. Renowned for their rich cultural traditions, they celebrate vibrant festivals, excel in art, music, and dance, and uphold communal values. The Igbo language, commonly referred to as “Igbo” or “Ibo,” is part of the Niger-Congo family and is spoken by millions both within Nigeria and in the diaspora. Igbo culture is defined by a strong sense of community, reverence for elders, and a deep connection to ancestral traditions (Afigbo, 1972). Historically, the Igbo people had developed complex social and political structures long before colonialism. They actively participated in trade networks across West Africa, engaging in commerce with neighbouring ethnic groups (Njoku, 2015). Before the spread of Christianity and Islam, the Igbo adhered to a traditional belief system centered around Chukwu or Chineke, the supreme deity, and a pantheon of lesser gods and spirits. Rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies were integral to their religious practices.

The arrival of British colonialism in the late 19th century had a profound impact on Igbo society. Colonial policies, including indirect rule and the introduction of British legal and administrative systems, significantly disrupted traditional Igbo governance and social norms (Njoku, 2015). One of the most pivotal events in modern Igbo history was the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War. This conflict arose from tensions between the southeastern Igbo-dominated region and the Nigerian federal government, leading to the secession of the Republic of Biafra. The war, which resulted in heavy casualties, had long-lasting effects on the Igbo and Nigeria at large (Falola & Heaton, 2008). In contemporary times, the Igbo people continue to be key players in Nigerian politics, business, academia, and the arts. Major cities such as Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba serve as important hubs of Igbo culture and commerce. Additionally, thriving Igbo diaspora communities are found in various parts of the world, particularly in Europe and North America (Falola & Heaton, 2008).

According to Ajaebili et al. (2020), the Igbo people firmly believe that human actions must possess moral integrity to be deemed worthy of approval. This belief is encapsulated in their proverb: *Mmuo adighi egbu onye n’odighi ihe ojo omere*, which translates to “the spirits do not kill the innocent.” This idea forms the foundation of the central significance of the twin symbols or principles of *Ofo na Ogu* in Igbo cosmology, representing innocence and justice. These symbols serve as fundamental ethical guides for the actions of both humans and spirits within Igbo cosmological thought. This emphasizes the high value that the Igbo place on uprightness and innocence, both in the human realm and the spiritual world. The proverb ‘*Ogu di na mmadu di na mmuo*’, which translates to “Ogu exists both among humans and spirits,” illustrates this dual presence, highlighting the limitations placed on the actions of ancestors and spirits in accordance with justice and morality. Understanding this duality is essential in appreciating the next section of this paper, which explores the *Ofo* as a symbol of legitimacy and authority in traditional Igbo society.

Ofo is a symbol of authority and Justice in Igboland.

The *ofo* is a symbol of authority (Turner, 1968; Ortnier, 1973, in Kanu & Kanu, 2020), held by individuals entrusted with the power to lead, whether at the family or community level. Typically made from the wood of the *osisi ofo* (the *ofo* tree), usually four to six inches long, it is botanically identified as *Detarium Senegalese* (Nzekwu, 1961; Arinze, 1970; Metuh, 1991, in Kanu & Kanu, 2020). The *ofo* tree is considered mystical, but once cut for its destined use, it undergoes consecration. In some instances, the *ofo* consists of multiple sticks or is crafted from iron, brass, or bronze. The *ofo* is often adorned with the blood of sacrificial animals and bird feathers, which over time turn the wood black due to repeated applications of blood (Nwala, 1985).

Among the Igbo, the ofo is one of the most valuable heirlooms passed down through generations, symbolizing authority, justice, and moral uprightness. In the nuclear family, which is the cornerstone of Igbo social and political life, the father, as head of the household, holds the ofo to represent his leadership and moral standing (Kanu, 2015). In the extended family, or umunna, the di-okpara the oldest male, acts as the custodian of the family's ofo. Similarly, within the maximal family (idumu), the oldest male holds the ofo. At the village level, the oldest member of the council of elders, known as the diokpa, is entrusted with the community's ofo (Kanu, 2013a, b, c, in Kanu & Kanu, 2020).

Whoever holds the ofo is endowed with powers, rights, and privileges granted by the ancestors and deities. Its holders are accorded deep respect as it sets them apart from those who do not possess one. Whatever is bound or loosed by the holder of the ofo is believed to be equally bound or loosed in the world of the ancestors. Thus, the ofo functions as a cosmic link between the visible and invisible realms, as well as between the living and the dead. The concepts of deities and ancestor spirits are crucial in this context, for the ofo symbolizes the presence of these spiritual beings (Kanu, 2014a & b, in Kanu & Kanu, 2020).

The ofo is not limited to family or political leaders in traditional Igbo society. Spiritual leaders, such as the dibia (medicine men), also possess an ofo. It is used by both dibia and heads of families to lead rituals at both family and community levels. As spiritual heads and custodians of morality, the ofo is a foundation of their legal, political, religious, and social authority, enabling them to not only make decisions but also enforce judgments. Such rituals, as noted by Hoston (1956), Boston (1959), and Edeh (1985, in Kanu & Kanu, 2020), are considered valid only when performed with the ofo. Ejizu (1986), discussing the symbolism of the ofo, elaborates that:

For our forefathers, ofo meant truth, justice, righteousness, power, authority, wholeness and moral innocence. And these are the things it means for us, and it will always mean. In the final analysis, they say it was Chukwu himself who gave ofo to mankind to serve as a medium of contact between man, and the spirit world, and to signify God's truth among man (p. 122).

Ofo is regarded as the ultimate symbol of ancestral power and authority among the Igbo people. It stands as the most important ancestral symbol, represented by a section of the branch-let of the ofo tree (Detarium Senegalese), which is believed to have been divinely designated by Chukwu as a symbol and guarantee of truth (Igbokwe, 2020). The ritual use of ofo by the Igbo is deeply rooted in ancestral tradition, where every use is considered a continuation of actions from the past. This imbues the ofo with an efficacy that remains significant in the present. Furthermore, ofo introduces a supernatural sanction. For assembled elders, the presence of their ofo symbols serves as testimony to their commitment to truth, sincerity, and the long-standing traditions of the land. As Ilogu (1974) asserts, "The ofo stick is the abode of the spirit of the dead ancestor, hence the authority and the sacredness of the ofo as well as the special place given to it by the individual or the group possessing it" (Ilogu, 1974, p. 18).

The ofo has diverse functions in traditional Igbo society. It plays roles in prayer, ritual sacrifices, communication with spirit patrons, magico-religious practices, naming ceremonies, calendar determinations, affirming moral uprightness, sealing covenants, legitimating status or office, decision-making, dispute settlement, oath-taking, law enforcement, and the promulgation of laws (Ejizu, 1986). In essence, as a symbol of truth, ofo serves a primary socio-religious function by ensuring moral conduct and harmony within the Igbo community. The declaration of one's innocence is a central aspect of the traditional morning prayers recited by lineage elders on behalf of their kin. Each time the ofo is handled, especially for formal purposes, the holder must ensure their moral uprightness. If the holder is guilty of any wrongdoing, it is believed that the ofo will counteract, turning against the guilty party and delivering immediate punishment (Uche & Okeke, 2023).

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE “EMI LO KAN” SLOGAN, ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE IN NIGERIA’S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE OFO AS A SYMBOL OF LEGITIMIZATION AND AUTHORITY IN IGBO LAND.

A comprehensive analysis of the 2023 general elections, especially the presidential election, reveals significant flaws that call its credibility into question. The failure of INEC to fulfil its promise of conducting a free and fair election with the help of BVAS technology, coupled with the widespread electoral malpractices and manipulations confirmed by international observers, as well as the public outcry that followed, all suggest that the election fell short of being free and fair. Consequently, it can be argued that the election did not genuinely reflect the will of the majority. As Ezeador (2023) previously noted, the February 25, 2023 elections were tarnished by issues that many Nigerians believed had been overcome. Instead, they found themselves deceived, manipulated, and misled by the INEC leadership. Supporting her stance, Ezeador cites Uzoanya (2023), who emphatically observed that:

The election was marred by irregularities, ranging from voter suppression, intimidation, raw violence, sporadic shootings, snatching of ballot papers, and vote buying, among others. Both international and local observers attested to the fact that the election was grossly below standard. A key factor of uploading results from the polling units to the IREV portal looked like „the more you look, the less you see (p.25).

Agajelu and Alazor (2024) further emphasize the issues surrounding the 2023 elections, particularly when they point out that the appearance of mutilated results and the subsequent announcement of these results by INEC sparked a significant outcry across Nigerian social media platforms. This uproar was exacerbated by the failure of the BVAS to upload the presidential election results in real time to the IReV, as mandated by INEC guidelines and consistently reiterated by the Commission’s Chairman (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024).

Moreover, the candidate declared as the winner of the presidential election did not secure the majority vote, yet INEC still pronounced him president. This indicates that INEC had compromised its own rules, casting doubt on the integrity of the process. Ezeador (2023), previously referenced, strongly supports this notion, arguing that the 2023 elections went against the provisions of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, as amended in 2011. She highlights this discrepancy by referring to Section 133 of the Nigerian Constitution, which states:

A candidate for an election to the office of the president shall be deemed to have been duly elected to such office where being the only candidate nominated for the election- (a) he has a majority of YES over NO votes cast at the election; and (b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, but where the only candidate fails to be elected by this section, then there shall be fresh nominations(p.17).

In alignment with this perspective, Ezeador (2023) contends that INEC was compromised in the 2023 presidential elections. Her argument rests on two key points: first, that the candidate declared as the winner by INEC was not duly nominated, and second, that he did not secure the majority of votes due to widespread electoral rigging. These points reinforce this paper’s assertion that the 2023 presidential election was marred by malpractice, with INEC failing to uphold its promises, thus indirectly promoting electoral misconduct. A critical examination of the "Emi lokan" slogan used by the APC's 2023 presidential candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, reveals its incompatibility with the principles of true democracy. The slogan, which translates to "It is my turn," undermines the democratic ethos by

suggesting that public office is a personal entitlement rather than a privilege granted by the electorate. It distorts the democratic process, making public office seem like a personal achievement rather than a call to serve the public good. This slogan not only diminishes the spirit of democracy but also negates the fundamental power of the people to choose their leaders.

This self-serving approach to leadership, implied by the slogan, drew widespread public criticism, including strong condemnation from prominent figures like Pa Ayo Adebajo, leader of the pan-Yoruba socio-political organization Afenifere, and former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. Both leaders criticized the slogan for being antithetical to democracy, especially given the fragile state of the country. Their objections were based on the view that the slogan represented selfish ambition, disregarding the will and interests of the masses. Given Nigeria's democratic framework, this paper argues that the "Emi lokan" slogan sidesteps the democratic principle of power being vested in the people, further eroding trust in the electoral process.

The analysis of the Ofo symbol reveals its profound significance in Igbo traditional society as a representation of legitimate authority. The Ofo serves as the foundation for any position of power, validating and legitimizing the roles of individuals such as a *dibia* (a traditional healer) or the eldest male in a family or community. Notably, in Igbo culture, the position of an Ofo holder cannot be purchased; it is not subject to lobbying or competition, regardless of an individual's wealth. Those entrusted with the Ofo are expected to embody moral probity, uprightness, and justice, reinforcing the notion that they must maintain a good moral standing. The saying "he who goes to equity must go with clean hands" aptly applies to the Ofo, emphasizing its dual role as a symbol of justice and ethical behaviour. Ofo's primary socio-religious function is to ensure moral integrity and harmony within the traditional Igbo community. As Uche and Okeke (2023) noted, the declaration of innocence is a vital component of the traditional morning prayer led by the lineage elder on behalf of himself and his kin. This practice extends to all Ofo holders, who must assert their innocence each time they engage with the symbol in formal contexts. In cases of guilt, the Ofo is believed to enact immediate retribution, symbolically turning against the holder.

Translating this understanding into a democratic context, public offices mirror the positions of Ofo holders, with the Ofo itself representing the collective will of the people. The authority embodied by the Ofo is bestowed upon an individual by the community, reflecting the ancestral roots of governance in Igbo cosmology. Elections become the mechanism through which the populace determines who receives the Ofo and, by extension, the responsibility of governance. Similar to the Ofo title holders, public office should not be something one can attain through financial means or personal ambition; it is meant to serve the community. Consequently, the slogan "Emi lokan," or "It is my turn," stands in stark opposition to the foundational principles of democracy, which assert that power resides with the people. In Nigeria's multi-tribal context, the slogan could theoretically align with a zoning approach, wherein the presidency is allocated to representatives from specific tribes to ensure equitable representation. However, the prevailing political climate has undermined this framework, dismissing the notion of anyone claiming the presidency as a personal entitlement. Such an attitude is fundamentally at odds with democratic ideals, where governance is viewed as a collective responsibility rather than a personal possession.

Reflecting on the moral probity expected of Ofo title holders, questions arise regarding the suitability of the APC presidential aspirant, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, for the highest office in Nigeria. His character and qualifications have been subjected to intense scrutiny. Agajelu and Alazor (2024), as previously noted, highlighted that Tinubu, who ultimately emerged as the winner of the presidential election, has been linked to illicit drug dealings in the United States. Although his ardent supporters have attempted to reinterpret and defend his past, independent investigative journalist David Hundeyin has unearthed evidence suggesting that the presidential candidate may indeed have faced indictment. Moreover, additional controversies surrounding Tinubu's character, including ambiguities regarding his personal and educational background, have further fueled doubts about his fitness for leadership. As a result, many perceive him as ill-suited for the presidency, with instances of Nigerians being ridiculed for their apparent

choice of leader appearing in various international tabloids and social media platforms (Agajelu & Alazor, 2024). In light of these concerns, the prospect of Tinubu occupying the presidential position appears increasingly distant and problematic.

Conclusion

The preceding discourse aimed to critically examine the 2023 presidential elections, the electoral malpractices that occurred, and the implications of the “Emi lokan” slogan put forth by the APC presidential aspirant, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, highlighting their shortcomings in relation to true democratic principles. This study, reflecting on these pertinent issues through the lens of the Ofo as a symbol of legitimate authority in Igbo society, posits two key arguments: first, that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) failed to uphold its commitments, thereby facilitating electoral malpractices and undermining the elections' credibility; and second, that the “Emi lokan” slogan contradicts the essence of democracy as a government by the people, effectively marginalizing the populace's power. Ultimately, through a comprehensive analysis of the events surrounding the 2023 presidential elections and the implications of the “Emi lokan” slogan, this paper asserts that the political rhetoric employed during the elections not only misrepresents the true spirit of democracy but also stands in stark opposition to the Igbo cultural belief in the Ofo as a symbol of legitimization and authority.

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