

Osu Caste System In Igbo Society, Nigeria: A Sociological Evaluation

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Abstract: *This paper examined one of the Igbo traditional cultural heritage, the Osu Caste System and its ostracism in Igbo society. It hinges on discriminations of some members of the society on the avalanche of their birth rights as Osu Caste. Most of these Igbo traditions were handed down to us from one generation to the other from our fore-fathers whom we believed acted in ignorance. This study was designed to critically evaluate the consequences of the Osu caste system among the Igbo culture in the South East, Nigeria, most especially as it affects the concept of human rights and individual autonomy. The findings of this study support thesis, that modernization with its reorganization of institutions and social conditions of state has helped a great in amelioration of this problem. Considerably, in the light of this circumstance, it is no longer a public policy issue in the Igbo kingdom as it is a crime against humanity. This paper therefore, concludes that at this period of 21st Century, the Igbo leaders, Churches, and other stakeholders should come together to reverse the ugly trends of Osu Caste system in Igbo culture. To this effect, this paper recommends the immediate abolition of this obnoxious practice.*

Keywords: *Igbo, Osu, Caste System, Ostracism and Discrimination.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Igbo is the third largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Igbo people are an ethnic group native to the present-day south-central and southeastern Nigeria. The Igbo homeland geographically is divided into two unequal sections by the Niger River – an eastern (which is the larger of the two) and a western section (Slattery, 2016 & Chigere, 2000). The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa (Williams, 2008). The origin of the Igbo people is a mystery and a subject of greater controversy and speculation, more controversial than that of every other ethnic group you can think of in Nigeria. There are so many versions of Igbo origin and it is very difficult, or probably impossible to say which is the most real or most acceptable. Although, it can be said that, most ethnic groups in Nigeria has more than one historical origin of their ethnic groups, but the historical origin of the Igbo ethnic group which occupy mostly the eastern part of Nigeria is far more mystical than every other (www.willnigeria.com).

Traditionally in Igbo society, there are two classes of people the slaves and the free-born. These slaves are taken to be outcasts and are called Osu while the free-born are called dialas. This inferiority and superiority arrangement has generated conflicts. We live in a society where Osu is considered unclean and should be avoided at all costs. Even though the Osu caste system is condemned by many, the attitude still lingers in the heart of the people (Uchendu, 1965).

The people of Umuaka community in Imo State, Nigeria, categorize one of their ten villages Osu. Other minor lower caste groups found in many kindred are given the pejorative Igbo expression of ndi ejiri goro ihe, meaning those who are sacrificial lamb to the gods. They are slaves to the gods of the community and kindred. As is the case in Umuode in Oruku community, the discrimination of the Diala against the Osu in Umuaka affects marriage and relationships of love with the Osu and the rest of the community. The Diala is traditionally and socially abhorred and forbidden to marry an Osu; intermarriage with Osu is an abomination. In the late 1980s,

the Osu people in Umuaka revolted, as they could not take the humiliation from the Diala anymore.

Most of the Igbos are Christians, but some of them practice the indigenous traditional religion, whose major tenets are shared by all Igbo-speaking people of Nigeria (Uchendu 1965). The traditional religion is passed on to succeeding generations, but the advent of Christianity in Igboland around "1885" had some influence on the traditional beliefs (Talbot, 1969). The indigenous traditionalists believe in the earth goddess, deities and ancestral spirits and in a Creator-God, Chukwu, Obasi, Chi, or Chineke, the "Supreme God" (Achebe, 1959). The Igbo traditional beliefs have some positive influence on the culture and social lives of the people. For instance, the forefathers of the Igbos were known for their righteousness, honesty and challenging work. And they were opinion leaders, impartial judges and people of impeccable character (Dike, 2009).

The paper set out to find out why is it that the Osu caste system is still very much around in Igboland till today despite our western religion and the inroad we as a people have made in the present Nigeria. It is high-time this antiquated practice is done away with in Igboland. This is because Osu caste system is discriminatory, dehumanizing and is also against the provisions of the Universal Declaration of UN Human Rights. Different communities in Igboland refer to the Osu in different names; in Nsukka area of Enugu State, they are called, Oruma; in Augwu area, they referred to as Nwani or Ohualusi (deity's slave), and in Nzam, it is referred to as Adu-ebo. All these names, Osu, Ohu, Oru, Ume Omoni have the same connotation in Igboland. The people referred by these names are regarded as sub-humans, unclean class or slaves. It is on these the author set out to dig deep into this antiquated Igbo culture that has refused to go away in spite all the efforts made in the near past to abolish it.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF OSU CASTE SYSTEM

The Osu caste system is a social structure dating back centuries under which persons designated as Osu are forbidden from any social interaction, including marriage, with those considered as freeborn. An Osu is a person dedicated to the gods of Igbo land, either as sacrificial objects or action by the victim in the face of life-threatening circumstances. By this, the unfortunate victims become automatically untouchables, outcasts and sub-human and, therefore, deemed inferior to the normal freeborn.

According to Ezekwugo, the origin is traced to the Nri Kingdom (the acclaimed ancestral home of the Igbo man). It is believed that the Nri's possessed a hereditary power and thus do go about cleansing the various kingdoms of abomination. Any community that refuses to be cleansed are dubbed 'Osu' or 'untouchables' (1987:10). Some believed they were descendants of travelers who were merely allowed to stay in the community. Others say they are bastards from non-Osu (Diala).

The little that I know of the origin of this archaic cultural practice in our land is that these people were sold into slavery during intra ethnic wars in the past; and whenever there was

need for human sacrifice demanded by the deity of the new abode, these slaves were used. Some of them that ran into a shrine for protection were then named Osu – dedicated to the gods, or gods' property. This had been on for centuries, before colonialism and is still on. Trans-Atlantic slavery was abolished years ago in Europe and the United States, but why is it that Osu Caste system is still on.

According to Uchegbulem in his thesis titled 'the ethical implications of the Osu caste system in Igbo land' "... Osu caste system has its roots in practice of human sacrifice in Igbo Land" (1994, 27) what he meant in this view is that Osu caste system originated from the time when angry gods started demanding human beings for sacrifices in place of the usual animals for the atonement of the evil the people have committed. To buttress the point Uchegbulem continued "occasionally circumstances arose in which human sacrifices were believed to restore harmony, and so they resorted to, to pacify an enraged deity to save the community, the group or the family".

The gods according to Uchegbulem above, demanded for human sacrifice and from then it became the culture among the Igbo society to sacrifice a fellow human being. This was because they had slaves in their midst if not who will allow his own child, brother or sister to be that sacrificial lamb? Any culture inherited from our forebears can be stopped by the present generation and nothing negative is going to happen. It is just fear that is crippling the traditional rulers and other stakeholders. It is a big shame on the Igbo society that this dehumanization, stigmatisation and debasement of our fellow brothers and sisters is still on in our midst. I weep for my people Igbo of Nigeria with all the Christianity and wealth and we still live with this obnoxious and archaic culture. If this is not stopped soonest the anger of God will be upon us. Maybe this is the major reason we are been marginalized in this our country called Nigeria.

III. CRITICAL EVALUATION OF OSU CASTE SYSTEM

Due to the stigmatisation suffered by many people in the hands of their brothers and sisters over the Osu Caste system, the defunct Eastern House of Assembly, on May 10, 1956, abrogated the obnoxious practice through an act of parliament, but 60 years after, this has not done the required magic. The word Osu in Igboland means a group of people that were dedicated to the gods or deities. These were people captured during the inter-tribal wars and sold to other communities as prisoners of war and whenever there was need to offer a human sacrifice to the deities, they were used. Some of these slaves ran to deities for protection whenever they were wanted for sacrifice. Because they ran to the deities for protection, they were then seen as belonging to the deities or dedicated to the deities. They were ostracized, discriminated and segregated from the rest of the societies.

The foundations and origins of the obnoxious Osu caste system can be understood but the superstitions and myths that support its continued existence are flimsy. If the Osu was offered to the gods as sacrifice wouldn't it take a leap of stupidity to insist that their offspring who weren't party to the exchange and who in any case are not priests of some of the

now extinct deities are also living sacrifices who must remain ostracized in an age when no one can be a slave either to man or to any god? Hasn't slavery been abolished? If slavery has been abolished worldwide, why is still been practiced in Anambra State and amongst the Igbos? And when Christian parents deny discrimination against the Osu but send search parties to seek out the ancestry of their children's brides or suitors before they give their approval, you wonder how worse hypocrisy can get. And many times, you will hear, "she is very beautiful and well mannered. But she is corrupted". That's the euphemism A Christian who discriminates against the Osu, besides being a criminal, is guilty of idolatry. For that inhuman categorization is premised on the existence and placation of a god which Christianity views as manmade ineffectual idol. I am not disrespectful of African traditional religion. The Christian picture of the atrocity must be painted for the Christian. And it helps that majority of Igbos claim Christianity. And I am not disrespectful of our culture, our culture and our morality have long shifted. Morality can be relative and the morality of a cultural practice is relative to time and place. The Osu caste system may not have been barbaric a century ago but is manifestly and despicably so now and got to be stopped and abolished.

The deities in Igboland once considered the existence of twins a taboo and the people believed. And thousands of twins were slaughtered at birth in the service of the wishes of the gods. And mothers who clung to their twins were banished to the evil forest so that the land was spared the wrath of the gods. Heaven did not fall when Mary Slessor single-handedly stopped the killing of twins in the Southern Nigeria, and I believe that nothing will happen to anybody who marries an Osu.

There is some wisdom in the saying that what one cannot learn by formal education he learns by travelling and exposure. The Igbo is the most dispersed group in Africa and is therefore a group particularly well acquainted with the horrors of racism. The Igbo man suffers unbearable discrimination for being Igbo and for being black. You would think anyone so badly and chronically victimized would champion equality. Ironically many Igbos who reject marriage with the Osu are the well-travelled, well educated, roundly humiliated victims of virulent racism. But the Osu caste system is worse than racism. Racism prepares you, gives you warning. So, the black girl is socialized to understand her racial handicaps, the hatred of blacks by some whites. Osu caste system is rubbish and the only obstacle remaining is the marriage between them and the free born. I am a free-born and so are the "so-called Osu". Nobody has the right to discriminate against anybody and I feel it is high-time we do away with this obnoxious culture.

Among the affected groups, the toga of Osu is not only demeaning of the human person but leads to tragic loss of self-worth, which could have tremendous social and economic implications for the individual and his community. Moreover, some women so classified have found safe havens in prostitution, while a lot more have chosen to remain single mothers. The Osu caste system infringes the provisions of Sections 34 and 42 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Section 34 deals with respect for human dignity, while Section 42 stipulates that no

citizen should be discriminated against based on the circumstances of birth. The Constitution is an embodiment of human rights to be enjoyed by all citizens but which the Osu caste system negates. It also runs against the provisions of the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights of the United Nations General Assembly, which guarantees human rights and freedom from any form of discrimination.

The pro Osu or mainstream discourse upholds that Osu phenomenon is indispensable in the Igbo cultural heritage and forms an integral part of their existence, historicity, spirituality and worldview (Achebe,1958; Arinze,1970; Isichei,1977). The anti Osu school of thought on the other hand argues that Osu is an inglorious dehumanizing façade of ugly past and should be cast into the bin of history for the Igbos to develop and advance (Imoagene,1992; Dike,1992, & Obinna,1993).

It is an aberration and a huge shame that a system that segregates and practically promotes discrimination against people in Nigeria of the 21st century is still allowed to thrive in parts of the country. It is a societal demon that must be exorcised anywhere it exists in the country. According to Vanguard Newspaper comments (May 14, 2016), sixty-eight years after the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and banned slavery in 1948, some communities in Igbo land are still discriminating against those they still regard as slaves. Investigations by the South-East Voice revealed that in some of the communities where people discriminate against the so-called slaves, those who call themselves free-born do not allow the slaves to marry their daughters just as their sons do not marry those they regard as sub-humans.

The victims of this inhuman and sordid practice and their everyday experience are really a big shame of the society. One of them, Chinyere Olumba, a graduate of University of Nigeria Nsukka, married with three children was thrown out of her matrimonial home and the children taken away from her when the husband discovered her Osu status. Today, she is abandoned with a health challenge of partial stroke that left her incapacitated in her late father's house in Enyiogugu in Aboh-Mbaise (National Impact, May 14, 2017). Is this not worse than racism and apartheid joined together? Where is our Christianity?

IV. CONCLUSION

"The biggest problem in Africa is tradition which keeps dividing us. We speak against racism as well as apartheid in South Africa, but still discriminate against each other based on some obnoxious laws we inherited from our ancestors.

The osu caste system is Human Right violation going by the UN definition of Human Rights. The treatment meted out to the Osu flouts the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 1 of the declaration states: "All human beings are born equal in dignity and right. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood". Article 4 of the same declaration states: "No one shall be held in slavery and slavery shall be against the land". It also negates the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1806 and as well as the Magna Carta of 1215. Osu (the untouchables) still exist in Igboland but rear its ugly

head only when one tries to get married to an Osu. Osu caste system is the discrimination, segregation and dehumanization of people who are created by God in His own image. The Osu people are treated as inferior human beings and kept in a state of permanent and irreversible disability; they are subjected to various forms of abuse and discrimination.

The paper is advocating for an immediate stop to this Osu caste system still present amongst the Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria. I thought that with the level of enlightenment, awareness, Christianity among this Igbo ethnic group that this must have been stopped by now. Globally, slave trade has been stopped and we wonder why is it that Osu in Igboland still lingers and nobody is doing anything positive to stop it. Scottish Missionary Mary M. Slessor stopped the killing of twins in Nigeria and heaven did not fall and why have we not stopped this.

It is an aberration and a huge shame that a system that segregates and practically promotes discrimination against people in Nigeria of the 21st century is still allowed to thrive in parts of the country. It is a societal demon that must be exorcised anywhere it exists in the country. In Anambra State, time was when the issue of Osu caste system was common in many parts of Igbo land. In those days, those dubbed Osu were used by the free born for errand and menial jobs and they were not allowed to marry the free born. The discrimination was so much that the government of the defunct Eastern Region had to set up a committee which eventually recommended the abolition of the system. Though it met resistance as the various communities subtly discriminated against the Osu, the fact that there was a law against calling anybody Osu eventually led to its final death. As the subtle discrimination continued, many communities took the bold step to officially abolish it in their areas. For instance the official abolition of Osu Caste system was made by Igwe Kenneth Orizu III of Nnewi about 22 years ago. Some other communities merely played it down and with time, it also died a natural death (Vanguard News, May 4, 2016). In my village, Oraukwu, Idemili-North, Anambra State, there is nothing like Osu. It must have been abolished decades ago.

Also, it was learned that communities in Abatete abolished slavery shortly after the war. The leaders of thought in the area were said to have fined the so-called slaves which they paid to free themselves. It was said that after the payment of such fines, there were several days of merriment across the communities to signify the end of social stratifications occasioned by the Osu Caste system in the area and it had remained so till then. A community leader, Chief Francis Nwafor said though the Osu caste system is dead, many families still make enquiries about family background before marriage and the reason was to avoid marrying an Osu. He however observed that these days when people meet in any part of the world and fall in love, nobody goes to check the family background of the two-people involved before they get married, which has also helped to nail the Osu system.

The Osu situation is like what happened to the blacks in the United States in the 1960s. Some people are now advocating that America should pay restitution and render apology for the violation of the civil and human rights of the Black Race. The international community has also been called upon to recognize that there is a unique and unprecedented

moral debt owed to Africans for their humiliation and exploitation (Robinson, 2000). In the same token, the entire Igbo community should eradicate the Osu system and render an apology, if not restitution, to the ascribed Osu people for their years of humiliation in the hands of the Diala. Thus, human beings should try to differentiate right from wrong, what is permissible and what is impermissible. The discriminatory Osu culture (like other types of discrimination) should be brought to the attention of the world. It is the hope of this author that this paper serves the purpose, as the Osu caste system is a human and civil rights tragedy.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Attempts have been made by several people, both scholars and non-scholars, and religious leaders, to eliminate such practices but sadly the more they try to solve the problem, the more imposing it becomes. It is interesting to note that the enactment of laws or legislation has not been able to curb this evil caste system and has not in any way slowed down attitudes towards outcasts in these societies; for instance, the Nigerian Constitution guarantees equal rights for all Nigerians and the practice of the Osu system in Igboland is a gross violation of the fundamental human rights of those deemed to be Osu.

Despite these laws, the discrimination and oppression of people deemed to be outcasts persisted. It then follows that beyond laws and legislations, attitudes in these societies must change. The preservation of these caste systems brings about retrogression in the areas of socio-economic, socio-cultural and the socio-political growth in such societies. The segregation of people is an archaic and obnoxious practice which should be abolished because discrimination is evil and it hinders the societal proliferation and development. Many people think that the Osu beliefs can never be rooted out of the Igbo mind.

I think the problem of Osu in our Igbo society lies with the traditional rulers because they are the ones championing this antiquated custom. These traditional rulers are the custodians of our cultural heritage and have the power and authority to address any issues that affects the lives of their people. Some of them always give the flimsy excuse of Osu being part of the culture they inherited from their forefather. The traditional rulers, chiefs and elders of today are the forefathers and ancestors of tomorrow, and what they put in place today or reject remains irrespective of what our forebears put in place in the past. Therefore, if we want the Osu caste system to be done away with, the traditional rulers, governors, Church leaders and other stakeholders can come together and nullify it and it stays nullified. It is as simple as that, believe me. The deities and our forefathers cannot do anything about it. In the past, some of these outcast (Osu) were buried alongside with some traditional rulers as retainers. What happened in the past happened out of ignorance by our forefathers and we should we should not continue with some of these obnoxious laws.

It is the fear surrounding the Osu that is the major problem we have. Therefore, if this fear can be removed from the minds of the *diala*, the Osu system will die a natural death.

To eradicate the fear, the Igbo priests, elders and traditional rulers will need to come together and institute a reversal ritual which will bring the *Osu* back into the *diala* status. This is not an impossible ritual to formulate. So long as such a ritual will be aimed at ensuring cordiality, peace, and harmony within the society, the writer believes that the ancestors will welcome the idea. All that remains is the fear surrounding the *Osu*. This is what has kept the system thriving. The fear surrounding *Osu* cannot be removed by enacting laws for laws will only trigger greater remembrance of the taboos surrounding the *Osu* (Emeghara, 1994). It is not enough to promulgate laws against the practice, but also to implement such laws.

Traditional rulers, Church leaders, governors and other stakeholders, Ohanaeze and *Osu* group themselves should come together and dissolve this, hug each other and eat and drink together and this will stop. As I said earlier, heaven will not fall the day this will happen. And let the *osu* be appointed to traditional stools and cabinets. And let them take part in all rites in Igboland.

Scottish Missionary, Mary Mitchell Slessor stopped the killing of twins and our ancestors did not bring down brimstone and they will not do so when *Osu* caste system is abolished. Let the church rise to the occasion. Let offenders be named and shamed. Let the laws that already exist against discrimination be robustly enforced.

The *Osu* caste system has its roots in attitudes and behaviors that are widely shared among some of the people in Igboland. It is true that old habits are hard to break. But there is need for the campaign to be consistent and continuous. Respect for people's rights begins from the institutions that an individual is exposed to during the person's formative years (the home, school, church, etc). Planting the right ideas in the minds of the youths would help to destroy the stereotypes that surround the *Osu* (Dike, 2002).

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